



Dealing with Confrontation

Some Guidelines for Effectiveness

Confrontation is the toughest interpersonal art to master. With the right heart and continual practice one can improve, but perfection is always out of reach.

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Introduction

Confrontation is hard. No one enjoys being confronted. No one wants to confront others. Most of us avoid it like the plague. We would much rather talk about others than confront them directly. The discomfort we feel when we consider confrontation as an option comes from several sources. We may be so uncomfortable with our feelings about the issue that we don't want to face them. We may be fearful about how the other person will react and no conscientious leader wants to hurt or upset others. We may be concerned about what others will think. Few of us want to be viewed as troublemakers. We may believe that confrontation won't make any difference.

All these concerns notwithstanding, confrontation is frequently the best way to clarify perceptions, define expectations, clear the air and enhance relationships with others. What follows is intended to help you decide when confrontation is indicated, how to deal more appropriately with your feelings confronting others and to enable you to practice this essential interpersonal effectiveness strategy more successfully.

Every confrontation is unique. Some confrontations are just a few frank words between close friends. Others are carefully scripted exchanges on the way to someone losing his or her job. Few confrontations will utilize all the steps that follow, but all successful confrontations will employ some of them.

Clarify the issues

Most of us don't think about confronting others until the issue has been cooking for a while. By then, the issues are complex. Misperceptions abound. Feelings are running high, and facts are in short supply. Everyone thinks he or she knows what happened and what everyone else thinks and feels about it. Everyone has an opinion about what should be done and who should do it. Most of us think somebody else should deal with it. Confrontation is the leadership opportunity least sought after. Over-eager leaders often charge in without clarifying the issues. What exactly happened? Who was there? Will they take a position and stand by it? How are the players and participants "spinning" the facts to suit their own purposes? Drawing conclusions and taking actions based on one side of the story may be the most common leadership mistake in the business environment.

Specify the problem

Two things matter in the context of conflict—facts and perceptions. Of the two, perceptions are much more important. For most of us, perception is reality. Successful confrontation seeks to take both of these into account. When

leaders attempt to arrive at the facts, usually becomes clear that different perceptions are at the center of the storm. After you have identified those directly involved in the incident or issue and excluded those who have just joined the fray for the fun of it, you must try to figure out what really happened and how those involved felt about it. It is best if those who were involved will go on the record with their perceptions and reactions, but that is not always necessary. You may be forced to report others' reactions anonymously, but this is not nearly so effective. Your personal observations—presented non-judgmentally—may turn out to be the only available documentation.

Confrontation in the absence of some objective documentation is typically dismissed as unjustified criticism. The person you have chosen to confront prematurely may respond, "That's your opinion," and dismiss your overture. Worse still, you will likely be pegged as an enemy that cannot be trusted.

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Everything you say and do after that will be suspect. Your colleagues will discuss your tendency to fire from the hip behind your back, and your reputation as a leader will suffer.

Explore your options

In any situation, there are always options, and there is always a best option. That does not mean that there are any good options. Many leaders spend too much time trying to find a painless option when one does not exist. Bear in mind that doing nothing is always an option too. In fact, it is frequently the best option.

You may need help to come up with a complete list of options. When we are emotionally involved in any situation, our emotional arousal blinds us to some of the obvious possibilities. Those further removed from the issue see things more clearly. Discussing the issue with your colleagues can be very helpful. Write down the options that occur to you – even the ridiculous ones—and reflect on them a few days before you decide which one is best.

Decide whether confrontation is the best option

Confrontation is not always the best choice. If you have not taken time to make a compelling case, confrontation will make matters much worse. If you are angry, your frustration is the only message that will be received.

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If you have already confronted the person about the same issue repeatedly and unsuccessfully, there may be no point in wasting further time and energy. If you suspect that the person you plan to confront is unaware of the impact he or she is having on others, that is an excellent reason to bring the issue up. If you were in a similar situation, you would want someone to tell you. Presented respectfully and based on a carefully prepared case, confrontation is a gift that invites reciprocal intimacy.

Prepare to confront

Collect the evidence you plan to present and make sure that it is legible and not inflammatory. Aggrieved people who document their perceptions in the heat of the moment often judge, presume or editorialize. Venting in this way has therapeutic value, but such “evidence” can’t be used

effectively until it has been emotionally sanitized. When the documentation is ready, you need to develop a plan. Outline the points you want to make in the order you want to make them. There is nothing wrong with referring to your notes during the confrontation. Feel free to inform the person that, “I’ve made some notes so I won’t forget something important.” Consider the timing and environment carefully. Make sure to inform your colleague about the issues you want to discuss beforehand. No one likes to be blindsided. Only weak leaders ambush others. You might win the battle, but you will lose the war.

Deal with your own feelings

As you anticipate confrontation, it is critical that you face your own feelings. Whatever feelings you have during the preparation stage are okay, but you must come to terms with them before initiating this frank discussion. If you can’t control your feelings during the confrontation, you should pass the ball to someone else.

Most leaders have a lot of different feelings in anticipation of a confrontation. Dread and anxiety are common. Fear is not unusual. Anger and frustration are usually in the mix. Solicitous apprehension is a typical emotion. Most leaders don’t want to hurt others; those who long to “get” others don’t deserve to be leaders.

It is when we hide our true feelings from ourselves that those feelings create the most potential for harm. Though driven from our conscious minds, painful feelings still exert powerful effects on our perceptions and interactions. These unrecognized feelings often erupt unpredictably to color the emotional tone of the confrontation. This might derail the whole process. Our feelings can only be managed effectively when we identify, express and accept them.

Ask permission to confront

If you are the boss, you may mistakenly think this important step is unnecessary. It is even more important when you are the person in charge. The goal of confrontation is change. Unless there has been some terrible misunderstanding and confrontation exposes the truth, the person being confronted is the only one who can really deal with the problem.

If that is true, then you will want to make every effort to ensure that your message is accurately perceived. Defensive people don’t hear clearly. They are not inclined to change or, if forced to, they will change grudgingly and look for every opportunity to criticize and undermine

this perceived bully and his or her program.

Asking permission to confront is the respectful thing to do. This thoughtful gesture allows your colleague to brace him or herself for what is coming. In the unlikely event that permission is denied, the confrontation should be put on hold for a time. Once the importance of the issue sinks in, folks are generally more receptive. If all else fails, you may have to reduce the issue to paper. Sometimes this is the only way to conduct a confrontation.

But be careful. There are too many memos in the world already, and this option is almost always chosen for the wrong reason. Most of us find it less stressful to send a memo and pretend to ourselves that the problem is solved. How often have the memos you've received solved your problems? Haven't memos been more likely to aggravate you and the situation further?

Confront respectfully

Confrontation is most likely to be successful if the people you are confronting believe and feel that you like and respect them. You cannot fake this. Only if your heart is full of genuine positive regard during this important discussion will this feeling come through.

How can you accomplish this? It's not as hard as it might first appear. Everyone has both assets and weaknesses, attributes that are admired and others that are reviled. Focusing on your team member's positive attributes will help to put you into the proper frame of mind.

In this context of genuine respect and good humor, every confrontation should begin and end on a positive note. As a mere management technique this will fail miserably. We all view management "techniques" as manipulative tools and we don't like them. The positive openings and closings must be genuine.

State your position

You should be able to clarify your position in one sentence. Resist the urge to explain. When we feel compelled to explain ourselves, it is usually because we want others to accept the legitimacy of our positions so we can feel better about ourselves. Explanation is best reserved for those infrequent occasions when it is invited.

When you are confronting someone, your position should be based on your personal observation or some objective evidence. Weary of complainers who refuse to take responsibility for their whining, you may be inclined to

take a hard line and insist that you will take no action unless the accuser directly confronts the accused, but this approach is not always practical. The cowardly complainer may retreat, but the problems will fester until they are properly addressed. In the absence of documentation, leaders may choose to conduct their own investigation and then confront based on the anonymous perspectives of others. If you are speaking for yourself, you should directly report what you observed and how you felt about it.

You will want to make it clear that your position is based on first-hand information. But you must also make it clear that you would be open to other perspectives or new data. For example, your position might be, "You are widely perceived as arrogant and demanding and you must deal with that perception." Unfair or not, managing perceptions is an essential leadership requirement.

It will strengthen your position if you readily admit that not everyone shares the perception that the person being confronted is "arrogant and demanding." If you fall into the trap of saying, "Everyone thinks..." one exception to your pronouncement will destroy your whole argument. Try to describe the situation exactly as it is without exaggeration or minimization.

Seek to understand

After you have reviewed the objective documentation of the problem or reported the results of your own investigation and stated your position succinctly, you should invite your confronted colleague to respond. This may take some time. Most people will want to reflect on the issues that you have brought to their attention before they respond. Except in extraordinary situations, you should not take any punitive action until your colleague has enjoyed the opportunity to respond fully.

Your colleague's response to your confrontation will put your listening skills to the test. Don't make up your mind about the next steps before you understand his or her position. You will often find it helpful to say, "Let me make sure I understand what you are saying." Then restate his or her position, as you understand it. Encourage corrections of any misperceptions before you proceed.

When confronted, most of us will eventually take one of three positions. The allegations are entirely inaccurate and others' perceptions are mistaken, the allegations are partially true but others have overreacted or the allegations are accurate and we propose to take full responsibility and proceed with appropriate

action. Can you guess which position is least common? What happens next usually depends on which of these positions is embraced. That is why it is so important to take time to understand before committing to some course of action.

Know when to abort the mission

The purpose of confrontation is growth. Effective confrontation is not punishment. It is not an end but a beginning. Although it is usually challenging and often painful, confrontation is intended to be productive. When it becomes clear that the process is off track and unlikely to produce the desired result, it is best to stop before making matters worse. When feelings are so high that respectful and considerate conversation lapses into defensive accusation and unproductive tangents or abusive language, it is best to suspend the confrontation and arrange to continue at another time.

The person you are attempting to confront may be emotionally devastated by your approach for reasons you do not completely understand. Thus stricken, your colleague may ask you to stop and continue another time. This request should be honored unless it is clear that this plea is just a way to avoid the issue. When you observe extraordinary distress such as uncontrolled crying, hyperventilation or a pronounced tremor, ask if it would be better to finish your conversation at another time. Agree on a specific date and time within the next day or so. Some people will view confrontation as a joke. When you see that the person you are attempting to engage is not respectful of your effort, it is probably best to suspend your efforts and proceed to the next administrative step. Bear in mind that the process of firing someone is not a confrontation. It is an announcement.

Invite suggestions

This is a step in the process that all of us are inclined to skip. We are usually in a hurry to get through this painful process, and we are disinclined to slow down, invite feedback and endure the silence that we fear will follow. The person being confronted may not be thinking clearly, but he or she will appreciate the opportunity to suggest alternatives and next steps.

When your colleagues offer some ideas in response to this invitation, it is important to accept their suggestions non-judgmentally. No one enjoys being asked what he or she thinks only to have his or her ideas dismissed out of hand. Put in that situation, we all fume, "If you didn't want to hear what I have to say, why did you ask me in the first place?" The more possibilities you put on the table at this point, the better. One or more of the alternatives suggested might turn out to be the best next steps.

Be prepared to suggest some solutions

In the heat of the moment, we may rush to confront others about what is wrong before we have identified potential solutions to the problem. Few of us wake up in the mornings, thinking, "I hope someone brings me a problem without a solution today." When you think about it, we are all more open to hearing about a problem when it is accompanied by several suggested solutions.

Those being confronted usually don't think very clearly and they are often eager to hear your ideas about how to proceed.

After you have laid out your concerns, it is usually helpful to say, "I have some ideas about how this situation can be resolved. Before I suggest some solutions though, I want to make sure that you understand my position and that I understand your perspective about this matter." This respectful pause permits your colleague to challenge your perspective or to readily admit that there is a problem and to move quickly to the less painful phase of working together to find a remedy. Whenever possible, make a number of options available. Mention every option that has occurred to you, even those that are clearly unrealistic or unacceptable. Quickly eliminating those options will allow the colleague under fire to take charge, save face and to embrace those actions that will permit both of you to move beyond this unpleasant situation.

Specify next steps

Uncertainty makes everyone uncomfortable. Be clear about what you will do next and when you will do it. Be specific about what you expect in return. Depending on how the confrontation process has gone so far, next steps may range from a commitment to ongoing dialog to specific behavioral changes by a certain date.

Everyone is entitled to know exactly what is expected. And everyone deserves a chance to perform up to these expectations. Because we are uncomfortable with conflict, we may ignore problems until resentment has built to the boiling point. Meanwhile, the employee may be clueless that there is a problem. No one should be criticized until expectations have been clarified and opportunities to conform have been extended.

This is why it is so important to be crystal clear at this stage. If one's job is in jeopardy if expectations are not met, make that clear. If these issues are being offered for the associate's consideration and he or she is free to do with them what he or she will, that should be made clear too. Document these important expectations and agreements in writing, and make sure that the appropriate people, including the confronted colleague, get copies.

Document the confrontation

Deciding whether to document a confrontational discussion is an art. There is no hard and fast rule. If expectations are being clarified or if substantial consequences will occur unless some specific changes are made, careful documentation is definitely in order. If the frank exchange is intended to get things back on track before a more serious problem develops, formal documentation is usually not helpful.

Deciding whether to document a confrontational discussion is an art.

The most successful confrontations occur between peers who are committed to common goals and looking out for each other's backs. These mutual exchanges are part of the fabric of our everyday lives. They are the gifts we offer and accept every day. Documentation only makes sense in these situations if we conclude we are not getting through our everyday lives. They are the gifts we offer and accept every day. Documentation only makes sense in these situations if we conclude we are not getting through. Most other confrontations should be recorded in some fashion. The initiator should keep a copy of his or her notes in a personal file. If documentation is going into a personnel file or is going to be shown to others, it is imperative that the person involved receives a copy and knows where else the documentation lives. "Blind" copies of correspondence are not honorable. Don't send them.

Follow through as promised

If you say you will revisit these issues in 90 days to document improvement or failure to progress, do it. If you indicate that you will send a letter documenting the confrontation, deliver on that commitment promptly. Sometimes you will assign tasks at the time of the confrontation. If you do, make sure to outline what will happen if these are not produced on time.

The best organizational leaders don't let things fester. If someone has a problem with us, most of us would want to know about it before things get out of hand.

During confrontations, managers may be asked to bring up similar issues directly in the future. Most leaders will readily agree. But faced with the discomfort of anticipating confrontation and the investment of energy required

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to deliver on this promise, you may be tempted to let things build up again. This serves everyone poorly.

Accept the consequences

We all dream of an organizational environment in which those we confront recognize the purity of our motives, the accuracy of our perceptions, the logic of our arguments and the wisdom of our suggestions. They appreciate the risk we are taking in bringing these matters to their attention, and they respond with renewed commitment and a deepened appreciation for our relationship. Then we wake up. People who react positively to confrontation don't often need to be confronted in a formal way. They know that perceptions vary widely, and they are continually scanning the environment for clues about how they are perceived by others. They encourage continuous feedback from colleagues they can trust, and they return the favor. The consequences of this personal and organizational maturity are growth, a sense of meaning and an energizing job satisfaction.

No matter how skilled and well-meaning the confrontation, most on the receiving end don't like it. Outrage and sulking are common. Most of their resentful energy is spent on the perceived unfairness of the situation with little willingness to accept responsibility for their contributions to the problem. Those willing to confront are invaluable corporate assets. They are widely respected but rarely loved. Leaders who need to be loved by everyone usually don't confront others effectively. No one enjoys making others uncomfortable, but real leaders understand that effectiveness exacts a price.

Conclusion

Confrontation is the toughest interpersonal art to master. With the right heart and continual practice one can improve,

but perfection is always out of reach. Ignoring some things, hinting broadly and working the system all have their place in organizational life, but effective leaders cannot avoid confrontation altogether. Those who confront badly make an awful mess of things. Those best at it make it look easy. Persons confronted by these masters often don't realize they've been confronted. Instead, they conclude

that the new direction they have chosen was their idea. As you develop confrontational skills, make yourself available to mentor others. It is when we teach others that we learn the most ourselves. And give yourself a break. In spite of good intentions and extensive experience, you will be better at this some days than you are on others. When confrontation is called for, even a flawed effort is better than ignoring the issue.

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