

POSITIVE CONFRONTATION?

YES, it's possible, and it can be a good learning experience.

BY RONALD M. KATZ

CONFRONTATION. How do you feel about this word? If you're like most people, your first reaction is to do everything you can to avoid it. None of us needs any more aggravation in our lives, and a confrontation is almost assuredly going to add to our anxiety level. Some of the predictable outcomes of confrontation are anger, resentment, yelling, reduced performance, decreased effort, and, in some extreme cases, turnover. Yes, people leave jobs over confrontation. In fact, according to a study done in 2002 by C. Pearson at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, more than 50% of people who have had confrontations at work lost work time worrying about the incident or future interactions with that boss or co-worker. Slightly fewer than 50% had thought about changing jobs to avoid the instigator, and 12% actually left their job to get away from the unwelcome behavior. So there's a real cost to confrontation, but it keeps on happening. The question is, "What can we as managers do about it?"

One thing we can do is shuck the old definition of confrontation that most of us carry around in our heads. Confrontation is *not*, as Dictionary.com says, simply “discord or a clash of opinions and ideas.” We need to strive to make confrontations something positive. Although our first reaction *is* to avoid it, we must ask ourselves, “Can we really avoid confrontation?” The answer is “no.” We can only postpone it. And the more we postpone it, the more likely the confrontation when (not if) it happens will be as bad as we feared it would be. Therefore, we must look at confrontations differently.

CAN THEY BE GOOD?

What are the potential positive outcomes of a confrontation? First and foremost, understanding. If I avoid you and never confront the differences that exist between us, we will never bridge them. They will simply loom there, larger and larger until they are insurmountable. When we do finally have to come to some kind of accord, we will each have dug in our heels so deeply that it will be impossible to see the other person’s point of view. We will be arguing the positions we have taken and not the principles upon which they are based. We need to step back and look at the bigger picture. People who engage in confrontations believe in “Win-Lose.” But there is no “Win-Lose” in organizations because if one person loses then the organization loses. The only options are “Win-Win” or its opposite, “zero sum.” Our goal is to focus on the entire team winning, not simply one point of view.

Another positive outcome of confrontation is growth. John Russell said we have to learn to listen so that we can listen to learn. This seems so simple, yet it is frequently overlooked. If we disagree but I listen to you, I have the opportunity to learn something. Professional development is a clear outcome of confrontation when I allow myself to withhold judgment as I reflect on what you’re saying and examine it so that I can weigh your advice honestly. I need to remember that you aren’t attacking me. As Steven Covey put it in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Managers who have to give feedback to staff members need to remind themselves that it’s important to deliver the message in a way that can be received without the perception of criticism. A good way to do this is to remember to ask questions first, before telling your side of the story. When people have the opportunity to give their side first, the likelihood of a confrontation erupting into a conflagration is lessened.

CREATING POSITIVE CONFRONTATIONS

Here are some things you can do to increase the likelihood that your confrontations will be both positive and successful.

Share responsibility. It takes two to tango and also to have a confrontation. Since two people are involved, both need to agree to share the responsibility to solve the problem. But as Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” The other person isn’t going to initiate this change, particularly if there’s a history of confrontation. Trust is low, and suspicion is high. Let the other person know that you want to work with them on the issue, not simply attack their position or force them to see things your way. If one of the people is in a higher position in the organization, it’s important that the higher-level person takes the first step. But they need to do so in a way that lets the other person know they are open to compromise.

Never attack the other person. A key to positive confrontations is remaining professional at all times and remembering that the goal of a positive confrontation is a positive outcome for both parties involved. Make sure the other person knows that your goal is to address the difference in belief or opinion, not to attack their credibility, integrity, or intelligence.

If you’re a manager in a disagreement with a staff member, remember that discipline isn’t the first resort. If you flex your managerial muscle or use threats, either explicit or implied, this isn’t a positive confrontation. In an argument or confrontation with an employee, the manager will win the argument but will lose the employee, figuratively or even literally. You may lead the person to consider working in a different department or company. Discipline may end the confrontation, but at what cost?

Make sure that you are both clear about what the problem is. Share your understanding of the facts and data, and listen when they share theirs. Define the goal you’re working toward. Sometimes the confrontation isn’t a result of disagreement but of a misunderstanding about the goal. Once you are clear about what the differences are, it will be easier and less volatile to find a mutually amicable solution.

Remember to keep your emotions in check. It’s very easy when the words start flying to feel the blood throbbing in your temples and the beads of sweat trickling down your neck. When you feel yourself becoming emotional, whether it’s anger, hostility, or frustration, consider asking for a time-out. Take a breather; the other person can probably use one, too. It isn’t a sign of weak-

ness to try to step back and look at the big picture. It's actually a sign of great maturity to realize that things are getting out of hand and that nothing will be settled by shouting.

Listen and learn. Very often in a confrontation, we find ourselves in the position of trying to convince the other person of something or to make them see it our way. Confronting someone in a positive fashion is an opportunity to teach both you and the other person a new way to solve a problem. This is why it's so important to listen. One constructive way to defuse a confrontation and work toward positive resolution is to leave yourself open to learning how the other person sees it and, if possible, trying their solution. If it works, bravo! Positive confrontations aren't about showing how smart you are or how good you are at arguing your point. Positive confrontations are about finding and learning the best way to get things done.

To avoid creating an adversarial situation, confront the issue, not the person. To create a solution, we need to support the other person and face the issue together. To positively confront an issue, we need the support of others just as they may need our support in order to grow and develop. If we aren't working together with

others, then we're simply imposing our solutions on a situation. This may not lead to a confrontation, particularly if the other person chooses not to engage, but it could lead to low morale or apathy. Colleagues may not confront you, but they also may not "buy-in" to the solution and only work at it halfheartedly. This could trigger resentment on your part if you feel like you're "coming up with all the ideas and doing all the work." By not seeking the other person's support and involvement, you may be sowing the seeds of future confrontations.

If you employ these methods, either as a manager or co-worker, you are going to find yourself in a more respectful and productive workplace. And managers may profit another way. An additional benefit of positive confrontation for managers is the opportunity to acquire a reputation as a good, supportive manager who develops people. There's no greater distinction for a manager than to be known as someone who develops good people for the organization. They are seen as assets to the organization who develop even greater assets. In addition, managers who become the "managers of choice" among employees will never have to worry about finding good people for their teams. The best employees will be lining up to work for a supportive manager who develops their

Dos and Don'ts for Positive Confrontations in the Workplace

DO	DON'T
Speak directly with the person with whom you have a concern. Very often the person doesn't realize that what they are doing is annoying or offensive in any way.	Don't be confrontational. They are not trying to annoy you.
Speak with their or your manager about your concern. They may provide a perspective you hadn't considered.	Don't be afraid to escalate the issue. If you don't bring something up, how will managers know?
Involve Human Resources. If you are uncomfortable bringing something up, they may have suggestions or experience in the matter.	Don't ignore the issue, hoping it will right itself. It won't.
Use "I" language. Tell the person how you feel. ("I get upset when people raise their voices.")	Don't assign blame. They are not trying to upset you. ("You shouldn't yell at me!")
Be open and honest about the situation.	Don't play games or leave hints.
Ask questions to expand your understanding.	Don't assume you know what the situation is.
Show respect when inquiring about something you may not understand (religious practices, disabilities, etc.)	Don't be sarcastic when speaking with the person.

skills and creates a positive and respectful atmosphere in which to get the job done.

MANAGING DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS

Although we strive for positive confrontations, they may not happen every time. When we're faced with the prospect of engaging another employee in what may become a difficult or contentious interaction, there are many steps that we can take to be better prepared to control the situation and keep it from becoming a confrontation.

Document the plan for the meeting in writing, including details of the other person's behavior that you find difficult. Do this well before the meeting and certainly before tempers flare and voices are raised. Try to find a time to do this when you are calm instead of agonizing over the potential confrontation. I like to say, "Don't 'pre-pay' on pain." What I mean is, don't start getting upset before anything upsetting has happened. All too often we sow the seeds of a confrontation long before the other person has entered the room. Simply by worrying so much about what may happen and anticipating what might be said, when we actually sit down to meet with the other person we're all too ready to jump on the first slightly contentious thing they may say as proof that a confrontation is about to start. Visualize a positive outcome, not a negative one.

What has triggered confrontations in the past? Recall and categorize your own reactions to this person's behavior. Are there times when your interactions with this person were better or worse? What made the difference? Are there things that you can do to increase the likelihood of a positive confrontation? How can you approach this person differently to achieve more consistently positive results? Since you only control your own behavior, what can you do about you?

What will you do to maintain a calm and professional demeanor? We know that the potential for an adversarial confrontation is frequently lurking just below the surface of any interaction, particularly when there has been a history of confrontations. Different solutions will work for different people, but you need to be prepared if things start to get heated. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Think about which coping mechanisms you need to learn, practice, and utilize to achieve your goal.

Is there some information that you need to know before you approach this person next? Some people react well to volumes of data. Others prefer to look at the big picture rather than get bogged down in details. Make sure you have all the facts you need and can present them in a

way that the message can be received.

Finally, document an action plan based on this process. Be as specific as you can be, even including dates and deliverables. If you are the manager, be clear about your expectations for this person's performance or behavior, and ensure that they understand as well. Use all of your communication skills of active listening, paraphrasing, and reflecting to minimize the likelihood of a misunderstanding that can become antagonistic.

IMPROVE THROUGH PRACTICE

William Ellery Channing, a 19th Century American abolitionist and clergyman, said, "Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict." Don't be discouraged if the next time you find yourself in a confrontation you sense that the situation is deteriorating despite your best intentions. Positive confrontation is a skill. Like any other skill, it will improve only through practice. I'm not suggesting that you go out looking for confrontations. The good news is, you don't have to. In the workplace, they tend to find you. But don't run from them, either. We can't avoid confrontations—we can only postpone them. Since they are inevitable, the goal is to make them positive and productive, not painful. If you enter into a confrontation believing that the outcome can be positive, you have taken the first step to ensuring that it will be. ■

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