



Confrontations that Create a Win-Win-Win

What has been your recent experience with confrontations? When did you last initiate one?

Confronting someone for their behavior today is no easy feat, especially when emotions are easily triggered and opinions vary. We often become quick to challenge their logic (What were you thinking?!), credibility (Where did you learn to...?!), and personality (Who do you think you are?!).

At the other end of the spectrum, we avoid confrontations; we don't want to make matters worse. But, when we say nothing, we perpetuate the problem (and in some cases, become co-conspirators.) Great leaders and managers understand this.

When expectations are left unmet—including protocol infractions, civil disobedience, illegal behavior and everything in between—frustration, lack of accountability, and broken relationships become the norm.

What if we could make a positive difference?

Most of us are not highly skilled in win-win-win confrontation. We feel stuck between a rock and a hard place. Instead, we can learn and practice positive confrontations: address the issue in a way that supports the wellbeing of self, others, and the relationship between the two.

Calculating Risks and Rewards in Confrontations

Conflicts can range from disappointments (i.e. someone not meeting our expectations) to micro aggressions, to outright dangerous and/or illegal behavior. And yet, we are often hesitant to say anything. Why is that?

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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Our willingness to speak up changes based on what's at stake. In general, most of our daily conflicts boil down to:

1. Priority or value differences
2. Behavior or communication style differences
3. Inequality (or perceived inequality)

In [Crucial Accountability](#) (McGraw-Hill Education, 2013), authors Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler share their 30+ years study on confrontations. When they asked people why they remained (or became) silent in the presence of an injustice or violation of a social norm, the majority of responses were a version of, "It's not worth it." The perception was, they wouldn't, or couldn't, make a difference.

But here's the thing: when a **positive example** of a successful confrontation is witnessed, people speak up.

According to the authors, "Provide individuals who have been disappointed or poorly treated with something to say and a way to say it that leads to the result they want, and their mental math changes. Better yet, their behavior changes. People now believe it's in their best interest to step up to violated promises, broken commitments, and bad behavior. And they do."

Avoid the Blame Game

One of the biggest obstacles in confronting someone is the blame game. Consider the observation made by comedian George Carlin: anyone driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than you is a maniac. It usually includes the question: "What is the matter with them?!"

When we ask ourselves, "What would lead a rational, reasonable, and reliable person to do that?" we move from a stance of blame to inquiry. We create a safer space for an actual exchange of ideas: the foundation for positive confrontations. When people feel safe, you can talk about almost anything.

People feel safe when they believe that:

- They are respected as human beings; there is or could be mutual respect for the other.
- There is regard for their goals; there is or could be mutual purpose.

Even in situations when you don't know the other person, you send a message about your level of respect and regard. Positive confrontations require that you set the right tone from the offset. To proactively avoid or counter defensiveness, include the use of contrasting statements.

Let's say, for example, you encounter someone at work who is not using protective safety gear, even though it is a company policy.

Lead the conversation with a contrast, such as: "I don't want you to think that I am criticizing you, your work, or your judgment. I just want to talk about our company policy regarding protective safety gear, and how we can best support it." Then, you can state the policy, why it is important to you, and close with a sincere question, such as, "What do you think?"

Listen to their response, and re-state or re-phrase what you heard them say (in positive terms and language), and ask them to commit to following company policy. Acknowledging their perspective (their thoughts, experience, feelings, and understanding) can go a long way toward mutual support, commitment, and adherence to policy.

Positive Accountability

Positive accountability is the conversation that takes place after someone has made a commitment, and failed to keep it. Like positive confrontations, they often start with the question, "Why?" They become positive accountability confrontations when both parties are able and willing to comply to a solution, and the relationship is strengthened.

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler outlined a three-step process to address bad behavior, un-kept promises, or broken commitments that resulted in unmet expectations: CPR.

Content: identify the action or event that took place (the here and now).

- Unbundle the problem. Identify all the elements.
- Identify what is bothering you the most.
- Be concise: communicate the issue in one (simple) sentence. It could be as simple as, "When you X, I feel Y, therefore Z."
- For example: "When you don't wear a mask, I feel scared for your health and mine, therefore I would like you to wear a mask in this shared space."

Pattern: when the action or event recurs, address the pattern over time.

- Point out the number of times this event took place, what you had agreed to, and how the repeated actions/events affect predictability, respect, and trust. This is different than pointing out the action or event. It requires honesty, and respect.
- For example: “It is my understanding that we agreed you would wear a mask in this shared space, and this is the second time I have seen you not wearing one. I am concerned that I can’t count on you to keep your word.”

Relationship: how this affects your relationship.

- Explore the intentions and consequences with compassionate curiosity (for you, them, and others).
- Share your understanding (about the content or pattern), and how you feel about the other person.
- Share your objectives: what you want to happen in the future for you, them, and your relationship.
- For example: “We agreed you would wear a mask in this shared space, and this is the third time I have seen you not wearing one. This pattern is putting a strain on our relationship, and I am concerned about that. I want us to be able to trust each other, and to act with mutual respect.”

Be Aware of Your Stories

It’s easy to become hooked by our emotions, especially when the stakes are higher. That’s why it’s so important to be aware of the stories we tell ourselves before, during, and after a confrontation.

When we tell ourselves that the other person (or organization) is the villain, we often end-up telling ourselves we are the victim, and we engage our amygdala: that reptilian brain responsible for fight, flight, or freeze.

But when we recognize and address our own fears, we are better prepared for a more neutral, compassionate, curious conversation that yields a win-win-win. Curiosity is a key component that helps us find common ground.

Best Practices

Confrontation and holding others accountable is not always easy (or end with the best results!)

But if you want to grow personally and professionally, you need to be willing to engage in conflict.

- **Stay in the moment.** If you find yourself focusing on, or getting caught in emotions, breathe. Label the emotion: there is fear; there is anxiety; there is anger. If you need to, take a break. Pause the conversation, provide a neutral reason (I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I need to take a quick break; can I get you anything?) Resume the conversation as promised.
- **Listen more than you talk.** The majority of your speaking time may be best spent asking questions to gain better understanding. Get out of the way so you can hear what’s important. Pay attention to cues. Notice body language, and what is not being said.
- **Anticipate you will have a positive outcome.** There is a big difference between being liked, and being respected. Conflict is an opportunity to repair and strengthen valuable relationships. It also helps you identify malignant relationships, and when absolutely necessary, remove yourself from the relationship with minimal damage.
- **Create a sense of co-presence** when confronting someone, especially when doing so virtually. Know your technology capabilities and limits. Use video, and keep your environment free from distraction. While it may feel awkward at first, practice gazing into the camera when speaking, and alternate the camera and view of the other person when they are speaking.
- **Be specific.** Use the CPR method to outline your discussion, specific examples, and keep you on track. When initiating the invitation to meet, use a contrasting statement to set the tone. Review what you agreed to, and establish next steps.
- **Follow-up to strengthen the relationship.** After a confrontation, you may be inclined to avoid that situation or person again. But positive confrontations that create a win-win-win rely on pro-active follow-up that strengthen the relationship. Acknowledge the positive confrontation. Send a thank-you note (or email): for their time, engagement, and honesty. Summarize the conversation and individual and collective goals. If appropriate, reiterate your agreement and next steps.
- **Reach out to build the relationship.** Send an email, text, or even better, call on an unrelated matter. This reinforces the message that you care about them, and your relationship.



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