The Confrontation Continuum

The confrontation process allows you to get at the root causes of the conflict in a productive manner. You are indirectly trying to say, "Let's exchange ideas -- pleasantly and comfortably. I will try to hear you and will take your opinion into account before I state mine. Then I want you to hear my opinions and take them into account. Once we have heard our opinions, we will decide on the best option. This is not a contest for superiority."

There are levels of confrontation — at the beginning of the continuum; there may be a simple misunderstanding or a sense by one party that the other is not hearing him. At the other end of the continuum, the conflict may be so severe that it is jeopardizing the organization's goals. At the beginning of the continuum, we are trying to achieve understanding and at the other end, we are demanding a change in behavior. As you move along the continuum, there are different confrontation strategies that can be used to resolve the conflict.

The following are confrontation strategies that can be used to resolve conflict. They are progressive, so as the conflict moves from being merely a matter of achieving understanding to more need for behavior change, the confrontation can incorporate each of the preceding strategies.

- **Reflection** — in this stage you are demonstrating your sincere desire to understand the person's feelings and needs. You are gathering data and building rapport with the person. By reflecting the feelings you hear the person expressing, you are giving him a chance to correct your impression and to elaborate on your comment. The form of this statement is generally:
  - "I understand that you feel/think ___________ because ___________."
  - Example: I understand that you feel unappreciated because you are not invited to the weekly staff meetings.

- **I-statement** — with I-statements you are revealing your feelings, asserting your own needs and objectives in a non-judgmental fashion. You want the other person to understand your feelings and reasons. These statements follow this general form:
  - "I feel _______ when you _______ because _______."
  - Example: I feel angry when you ignore the safety rules because you and others might get hurt.

- **Diplomatic Disagreement** — in the diplomatic disagreement stage you are trying to achieve understanding in a tactful gentle manner. You want the other person to understand your reasoning and you are trying to understand his. You want the person to know that you value the relationship. The format for this stage includes reflection and an I-statement.
  - "You feel/think ___________."
  - "I appreciate your position and understand that _______."
  - "I feel ___________ because ___________."
  - Example: I understand that you think we need a new computer.
• **Gentle Confrontation** -- in gentle confrontation you are actually trying to cause a change in behavior and build the relationship at the same time. You want to suggest the change in a tactful, somewhat tentative fashion. The format includes reflection, an indication that the other person is valued, an I-statement and an indication of consequences.
  - "You feel/think ___________."
  - "I appreciate your position and understand that ___________."
  - "I feel ___________ because _________________."
  - "If this continues it will cause ___________."
  - Example: *You think the accounting department should pay our vendors immediately.*
  - *I appreciate your position and understand that it helps you negotiate better prices.*
  - *I feel frustrated, however, because I am trying to manage our cash flow as well as our profits.*
  - *If you continue to pressure the accounting department, it will make it much more difficult for me to manage the cash flow and investments. That could result in vendors going unpaid and a reduction in profits that could impact our profit sharing.*

• **Firm Confrontation** -- in the firm confrontation you are trying to clear up disagreements and cause a definite change in behavior. The change in behavior is your primary objective.

The added statement is in the format:

  - "I would appreciate it in the future if you would ___________."
  - Example: *Same as Gentle Confrontation above, plus —*
  - *In the future I would appreciate it if you would come to me for any special early payment requests.*

Throughout the entire confrontation process, there are some basic guidelines that will help make the process more productive:

**Timing** -- Is the person ready to listen? If you’re trying to tell someone why showing up late for work every day isn’t in his best interests, doing it right after he checks in, probably isn’t a good time. He knows he’s late and he knows you know he’s late. He’s probably feeling defensive. Wait until you have something positive to say about his performance. Then you can tell him how his tardiness is affecting the overall perception of his commitment and performance.

**Focus on current specifics** -- Talk about behavior that is happening today, not something that happened last week or last month.
State your feelings — when you tell someone how you feel, you are keeping the conversation open rather than focusing it only on the other person. "When you come to work late, I feel really angry because the rest of us have to wait for you before we can start on the project."

Confrontation is a powerful conflict resolution strategy that requires a great deal of skill and practice. Most of us are relatively unfamiliar with the process and it may take training and role-play practice before everyone in the organization acquires the skills necessary to use the individual strategies included on the confrontation continuum. However, once everyone in the organization learns to be more sensitive to timing, to focusing on current specific behaviors and to state their own feelings about the behaviors, a large percentage of conflicts can be resolved more productively.

It's also important to remember that people only change when it is in their best interest to do so. You cannot make another person change, no matter how persuasive your argument, but you can increase his motivation to do so by appealing to his self-interest.

If you are irritated by a co-worker's behavior, for instance, focus less on how he affects you and more on how your reaction affects him. Tell John that you are less motivated to work with him on his project because of the way his put-downs make you feel. Let John look at himself in the mirror, so to speak, so he can consider what his behavior is costing himself.

In essence, you are saying: "John when you put me down, it makes me angry and I don't feel like working with you on your project." You are telling him how his behavior makes you feel and what that behavior costs him.

Often people are afraid to be confrontational and assertive because they are unsure of the reaction they will get. Most of us try to avoid confrontations that might create anger, defensiveness, or rejection. You can avoid this reaction and still be assertive, through the sensitivity with which you express your concerns. The confrontation continuum gives you a series of strategies to help you assert yourself in a way that reduces conflict rather than accelerating it.

For instance, only someone completely ignorant of the conflict resolution strategies we've discussed would accuse another person based on personality (i.e. "You are lazy, ignorant and mean!") This is labeling and it is hazardous not only because it can be wrong but also because it puts the other person on the defensive. Most of us do not have the expertise to know or understand another's intentions. When we attack a perceived attribute of a personality, we are hitting the core of that person. A very normal response is to reacting defensively or to deny the accusation. The conflict resolution guidelines and the confrontation continuum strategies help us achieve understanding or a change in behavior without destroying the other person's morale.

**Strategies to Avoid**

Sometimes it's not enough to know what we should do. We need to be able to recognize what we shouldn't do. In a conflict situation, emotions may be extremely sensitive and we may offend without intending to. Here are some strategies that generally escalate a conflict rather than resolving it:
• **Minimization** -- sometimes we do not recognize the seriousness of an action or perception and we make light of it through humor or sarcasm. When this happens the other person feels unvalued or belittled. Often the person takes your minimization as a personal attack. When someone brings a problem to our attention, the first thing we need to do is acknowledge it. Which of the following responses is more effective?
  - Situation: Engineer -- *I'm afraid the o-ring might fail at low temperatures.*
  - Manager 1 -- *That's not your problem. Worry about how we're going to meet our next deadline.*
  - Manager 2 -- *I appreciate your concern, what makes you think that?*

• **Blame** -- while blame can often be attached to the last person who touched a situation, most problems are too complex to be totally caused by one person or one factor. The focus should be on preventing future problems rather than placing blame.
  - Situation: Salesperson -- *We didn't get the Smith account.*
  - Manager 1 -- *What did you do wrong?*
  - Manager 2 -- *What could we have done better?*

• **Unloading** -- when people have worked together for a long time, there are often numerous small grievances that have gone unmentioned. When a larger problem sparks a conflict, the temptation to unload that past baggage is often overwhelming. While it might make the person unloading feel better, this is not a productive conflict resolution strategy. The other person might legitimately complain that you should have brought those problems up when they occurred.

  - Situation: *Employee arrives at work late.*
  - Manager 1 -- *Not only are you late but last week there was an addition error in the report you submitted and you never have turned in the Murphy proposal that was due over a month ago.*
  - Manager 2 -- *Is everything ok? I know you were only a few minutes late but you normally seem so committed and recently you've seemed to be distracted. Is there anything I can do?*

• **Low Blows** -- as we work with people, we begin to understand their sensitivities. Hitting one of those emotionally touchy areas can escalate a conflict out of control and make it very difficult to regain the lost ground.
  - Situation: *Employee misses a meeting.*
  - Co-worker 1 -- *No wonder you were fired from your last job. Obviously you're incapable of managing your time.*
  - Co-worker 2 -- *I really needed your support in this morning's meeting. You know I took a time management course that really seemed to help me get organized. Maybe you should take it next time it's offered.*

• **Manipulation** -- using personal charm or approval to get someone to do something you want done without regard to the other person's needs or objectives. This also includes withholding approval or rewards in order to get the desired action.
  - Situation: *Manager wants an employee to work overtime.*
  - Manager 1 -- *If you'll work overtime tonight, I'll remember it when review time comes up.*
Manager 2 – I’m sorry to ask at the last minute, but we have a crisis with the ABC project. If we don’t get it finished tonight, the company may lose the whole project. Could you possibly work tonight?

- Force – this is the "I don’t care what you want, do it my way, now!" approach. If all you want is to get an immediate action, it works. And, if it’s only used on extremely rare occasions, it’s an effective way to get something done immediately. But, it’s demoralizing to the other person because it does not acknowledge their worth or their ideas.
  - Situation: Manager wants to change the work schedule.
  - Manager 1 – From now on our hours are 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
  - Manager 2 – Studies show that the prime hours for our customers are 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. We need to develop a system that will allow us to give the best possible service to our customers during those hours. Do you have any suggestions?

**Conflict Resolution Behaviors**

There are five basic behaviors that will help you resolve conflict in almost any situation you encounter. They will allow you to benefit from positive disagreement without having those disagreements escalate into out-of-control personality conflicts that damage the morale and productivity of the organization. These basics are:

- **Openness** -- state your feelings and thoughts openly, directly, and honestly without trying to hide or disguise the real object of your disagreement. Don’t attribute negative statements about the other person to unknown others. Use I-statements and talk about how you feel and what you want. Focus on current specifics and on identifying the problem.

- **Empathy** – listen with empathy. Try to understand and feel what the other person is feeling and to see the situation from her point of view. Demonstrate your understanding and validate the other person’s feelings. Comments such as I appreciate how you feel ... I understand your feelings ... I’m sorry I made you feel that way ... let the other person know that you are sincere in understanding her views.

- **Supportiveness** – describe the behaviors you have difficulty with rather than evaluating them. Express your concern for and support of the other person. Let him know you want to find a solution that benefits both of you. State your position tentatively with a willingness to change your opinion if appropriate reasons are given. Be willing to support the other person’s position if it makes sense to do so.

- **Positiveness** – try to identify areas of agreements and emphasize those. Look at the conflict as a way to better understand the entire situation and to possibly find a new and better solution. Be positive about the other person and your relationship. Express your commitment to finding a resolution that works for everyone.

- **Equality** – treat the other person and his ideas and opinions as equal. Give the person the time and space to completely express his ideas. Evaluate all ideas and positions logically and without regard to ownership.

Conflicts offer many benefits if we can resolve them productively. Healthy disagreement can have a positive, generating effect. As people are forced to work through a problem to its solution, they get a chance to better understand the point of view of others. Successful resolution of small
conflicts can diffuse the possibility of more serious conflicts and result in better working relationships.

The process of exploring problems collaboratively can lead us to acquire more information, new perceptions, and new ideas. Issues can be clarified. Sometimes it's only through the conflict resolution process that organizations identify and highlight key issues that were rumbling under the surface and needed a healthy debate to become apparent. How well we manage conflict resolution can be a critical skill in effective communications.

Tony Alessandra’s Audio and Video Learning Resources
Resolving Conflict
by Tony Alessandra and Phil Hunsaker
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