

Crucial Confrontations...

They Can Be Handled Successfully!

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Adapted from Crucial Confrontations by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler

Unless you are very different from others, one of the most dreaded situations we desperately try to avoid is engaging in a crucial confrontation with another person. We view these encounters as necessarily argumentative which can only produce a winner and a loser. Nothing could be further from the truth! Believe it or not, if conducted appropriately, crucial confrontations should create a “win-win” outcome for both parties. A confrontation results when a person has disappointed another by failing to live up to a commitment or by violating a specific expectation that he/she clearly knew was expected. The following is a condensed version of the specific ways to handle any crucial confrontations effectively without damaging the personal/professional relationship that currently exists.

As basic as it sounds, the first thing to decide is if a crucial confrontation is even necessary. Is the issue a one-time problem or has it become a recurring pattern that you feel must be addressed? If you decide that a confrontation is necessary, before ever approaching the other individual, you should try to discover the real “heart” of the problem and not just the symptoms. Usually, your first inclination when a person has failed to uphold a commitment or complete a task is to take it personally. This is when you begin creating several “ugly stories” about why the person is acting this way. You might convince yourself that (1) he intentionally is a trouble-maker, (2) he enjoys hurting others, (3) he did not think this commitment was important, (4) he likes to make you look bad in front of others, etc. To combat these “gut feelings,” take the opposite position by asking yourself “why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do this?” Once you take this approach, you can begin to consider the possible outside factors that may have affected this person’s behavior such as peer pressure, not having the true ability to complete the task, or not really understanding your expectations. It is extremely important to consider all of these factors before you ever approach the person for a crucial confrontation. Now, instead of being “hot under the collar” and convinced that the person’s failure was purposely done because he is inherently a mean or selfish, you can begin the encounter with a much more pleasant and “non-threatening” demeanor.

Now that you are in the right frame of mind to initiate the confrontation, you must create a “safe” environment for the other person to respond. To do this, imagine the worst things this person might think when you confront him and put him at ease with your opening statement. For example, “I do not want you to think that I am unhappy with your work, effort, and contributions to the team. You have been an outstanding motivator and have shown many leadership qualities. The only issue is your tardiness to practice. There must be something else involved besides just oversleeping. Are there other things that are making it difficult for you to be on time?”

In addition to providing a safe environment for the dialogue, you must also explain the “natural consequences” that will likely result from a failure to meet the expectation desired. One of these real consequences may become the motivating force for the individual to change his behavior. Many times a result of their failure may actually affect another individual/s seemingly removed from the situation that the person would not hurt for the world. For example, you are constantly late to class practice causing the director to hold her attendance sheets until late in the class period before sending them to the office. The principal has been told that the director is the only teacher who seems to be disregarding his order of having the attendance rolls in the main office 10 minutes after class begins. He has placed letters documenting this failure to comply with school policy in your director’s file. Your director has become in jeopardy of losing her job. You obviously had no idea that your tardiness could so drastically affect the job security of your director. When explaining the “natural consequences” of a failed act, it is essential not to over-dramatize or invent consequences that



really are untrue. On the contrary, you must be honest, trustful, and respectful during a crucial confrontation. There is no room for histrionics.

At this point, the devil's advocates are saying "but what if you have tried everything including using all of the natural consequences as motivators and the person still refuses to change his behavior?" There are two possible answers to this question—use disciplinary action or jointly devise a "work around" strategy. If discipline is necessary be sure to (1) define the problem clearly and the policies in place to deal with that problem, (2) if possible, use supportive help from others in authority, (3) be serious in your language and tone but never threatening or sarcastic, and (4) make sure discipline is consistent for everyone, and (5) don't back down under pressure. In some cases, you might decide that you can cope with this behavior by working around it rather than using discipline. For example, if someone always waits until the last minute to finish a project and seldom meets deadline, maybe you cope by not assigning him any more important tasks that are time sensitive. It is very important to communicate this decision to the person so he realizes why you now assign key projects to others and do not include him.

During a crucial confrontation it is extremely important to determine if motivation or ability is the real issue causing a person's failure. Sometimes people cover up their lack of ability to complete a task by saying they ran out of time or more pressing issues took precedence. Or, if the task is tedious or something they really do not want to do, they may pretend to lack the ability or tools to finish the job. The key is to unmask the real cause/s and deal with them directly. If it really is an ability issue, try to make it easy by removing the barriers causing the problem. Are these ability problems caused from a lack of skills or from not receiving necessary help and materials from others?

Besides "ability versus motivation" becoming an issue during a crucial confrontation, other factors may arise which, if not handled properly, could derail any chances of a good resolution. These include: (1) becoming side tracked by the emergence of another issue and/or (2) becoming angry or strongly emotional during the crucial confrontation. If a new problem surfaces during the encounter, you must decide if that issue is worth addressing immediately or if it can be handled at a later time. Sometimes, the new problem is more serious than the one which caused the confrontation. For example, to a parent, lying might take precedence over the initial problem of getting home after curfew. If you decide to address the new problem immediately, be clear to announce this "change of topic" and whether you plan to return to the original issue during this encounter or at a later time. When strong emotions or anger arises, you must deal with it intelligently by assessing your physical safety. If you believe such emotions will not lead to physical violence, remain calm and try to diffuse the person's anger through the AMPP technique—ask, mirror, paraphrase and prime. Employing the AMPP approach helps you understand why the other person has become so emotional. Simply asking "why" may open the discussion. If not, try mirroring by showing the person that what he is saying and the tone of his voice or the body language he is exhibiting contradict one another. Paraphrasing (not parroting) the person's comments about why he is upset accomplishes two purposes: (1) it shows that you are listening and care and (2) may bring to light the difference in how you view the issue compared to the other person's perspective. If these techniques do not completely work, try priming. Priming in a confrontation can best be compared to priming a pump. Basically, you add words to the conversation hoping the other person will do the same. This is done by trying to guess what the other person is thinking and skillfully crafting your words to make it safe for the person to elaborate. For example, "Are you upset because you think I did something unfair"? You might add, "Don't worry; I'll be okay with this discussion and not become defensive or angry."

The final step of a crucial confrontation must be to have an action plan and follow up procedures in place. This plan must be free from all assumptions. This can be accomplished by clearly designating the (1) **who** (2) **does what** (3) **by when** (4) **follow up** model. Someone must be named as ultimately accountable for the task. Responsibilities or tasks must be clearly defined and specifically designated to people. Nebulous time lines such as we will meet sometime next week to check our progress or as soon as possible are not acceptable. Time becomes specific with names and numbers. It must be quantifiable and exact if you expect to hold people to a deadline. Follow up procedures may be of two types, scheduled check ups on progress, or check



ups following critical event stages of a big project. The nature of the task should determine which follow up procedure to use. The most important thing is that you do not forget to follow up as planned. Failure to follow up as promised conveys the idea that the matter is not important or that you do not care enough about the people involved. This will only create a need for further crucial confrontations. An example illustrating the WWWF procedure might be the following scenario: The team's Spring Awards and Recognition Banquet is the highlight of the year. A committee is selected in January to plan and coordinate this event. The best plan to ensure this event's success would be: (1) Select a committee chairman to oversee the entire project and then a specific number of co-chairmen in charge of the various aspects of the event (securing hotel, designing menu, planning entertainment, ordering awards, securing guest speaker, table and banquet decorations, fund-raising, publicity, etc.) It is the job of each co-chairman to meet with his group and clearly outline all of the tasks his group must fulfill. All of these co-chairmen must then present their proposals to the primary chairperson for approval. Once the "who and the what" have been determined, it is time to set a deadline for the completion of each of the committee's work. For example, if the banquet is May 15th, the deadline for each committee might be May 1st. Since this is a very important task, an effective follow up policy needs to be implemented. Since each sub-committee's area of responsibility is independent from each other, the "check up on progress" follow up plan should work well. The co-chairmen might schedule weekly meetings with their committee members to receive progress reports. Again, be specific such as every Friday at 4:00 PM in the band hall, cafeteria, gymnasium, etc. Then, every two weeks, the co-chairmen should have regularly scheduled meetings with the primary chairperson. If any problems arise within the various committees, should be quickly noted and resolved before major stumbling blocks threaten the success of the event.

The paradigm of a crucial conversation is now complete. Every step has been thoroughly identified and explained. However, it is natural for some people to learn these tactics and still feel insecure about implementing them. Without question, completely understanding and utilizing these tools for a crucial confrontation takes hours of practice and commitment. People who are insecure about changing the way they deal with people are likely to raise what are called the "Yeah, But" arguments. In other words, these techniques are great for everyone else but won't work in their situations. They might point to the following as situations outside the boundaries of conducting a crucial conversation: (1) Confronting your boss without fear of reprisal, (2) Confronting a person who will be devastated with my feedback, (3) Confronting a person when it involves changing the rules in the middle of the game, (4) Confronting problems dealing with borderline incompetence, (5) Confronting recurring problems without becoming a nag and many others. Actually, all of these scenarios lend themselves to resolution through crucial confrontations. As an exercise, it might be beneficial for you, the reader, to take each of these situations and plan out a crucial conversation that might resolve them.

Above all, you must always remain honest and respectful during a crucial confrontation. If you can find a mutual purpose that benefits both parties, the chances of resolution are significantly increased. Think of making statements that create a safe environment for the other person to respond and ones that will assist in removing as many barriers as possible. Never allow strong emotions to take over the confrontation. Remain focused and flexible during the encounter so that if other issues arise, you can intelligently decide whether to switch topics or handle them at a later time. Once a resolution has been reached, make sure an action plan and follow up procedures are in place so that this does not become a recurring problem. On a closing note, remember the importance of the (who, does what, by when, and follow up) technique also referred to as the WWWF Principle. Just following this simple guideline will greatly reduce the number of crucial confrontations you must encounter and significantly increase your chances for success in those you must initiate.

