
HOW TO CONFRONT?

SUGGESTIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL CONFRONTATION

Very few people enjoy confronting someone else. Even fewer relish being confronted. A primary reason is that our experiences in confrontations have often been very painful. For that reason, most people tend to avoid confrontation at all costs. The result is that unresolved issues fester because no one is willing to deal with them. These "suggestions" are intended to offer guidance in knowing when and how to confront.

When to Confront

Not every issue on which you disagree with someone else merits confrontation, but some do. Not every relationship matters enough to you to justify the emotional energy of confrontation, but some do. A good rule of thumb: When you care a lot about both the issue and the person, it may merit confrontation.

Plan the Confrontation

Effective confrontation requires planning. Think through how you will approach the person, what you will say, how the person might respond. The goal is to prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for the confrontation, not to become obsessed with all the possible nuances.

Seek a Safe Environment

The confrontation will more likely result in a positive outcome if the environment feels "safe" to the person you are confronting. Examples of "unsafe" environments: in front of a large group of people, or across from your desk if you are the person's superior. Try to find more informal, neutral or "home" turf for the person you are confronting.

Ask Permission

Most people will respond better to confrontation if you allow them the opportunity to help schedule it. Some personality styles insist on this, and will respond negatively with a demand to "talk about this issue now." A better approach: Inform the person that there is an important issue that you would like to discuss with him or her. Ask when would be a good time to get together and talk about it. The person may respond, "Let's do it right now," but will nonetheless appreciate the opportunity to have declined.

Be "Hard on the Issues. Soft on the Person"

When confronting, it is important to be open about the issues which concern you. "Beating around the bush" is often perceived as manipulative and confusing. But dealing clearly with the issues does not mean you also have to be hard on the person. It is often helpful to (honestly) affirm things you appreciate about the person even while you are identifying issues that concern you. If you are in a long-term relationship with that person, affirm your ongoing commitment to that relationship.

Own Your Feelings and Beliefs

During the confrontation, speak for yourself, not for others who aren't there. It is particularly unhelpful to say things like, "Everybody else feels this way about you but doesn't have the courage to tell you." Instead, own your own concerns through the use of "I-Statements." An

example: "I felt angry and confused last Thursday evening when you said that no one in our group cared about you. I care a lot about you and it hurt me to hear you say that I don't."

Be Honest About Your Own Preferences

The general reason for confronting is that we are hoping for a change of behavior in the person we are confronting. Thus, it is generally helpful to be honest about your own preferences, rather than to leave the person guessing as to what you are hoping to see. An example of a preference statement: "I would prefer that in the future you come to me personally when I do something that concerns you. I've found that I respond best when I'm confronted one-on-one, rather than in front of a group."

Be Prepared to Listen

Anytime we confront someone we are asking them to take seriously our concerns. Often these concerns are issues of a personal nature about which the person may feel very strongly. Thus, it is essential that we be prepared to listen to the person after we have shared our concerns. A possible way of helping this to happen: "Thanks for listening so carefully when I shared my concerns with you. I don't expect you to instantly agree with everything I said, and really want to hear your perspective. How do you think and feel about the things I've said?"

Accept Confrontation as a Normal Part of Life

While few relationships need daily confrontation, it is inevitable that in most caring relationships confrontation will occasionally need to occur. Once it has, accept it as part of life. It would be unhelpful to try to pretend that it never occurred, or refuse to talk about it later. In fact, the person confronted may need ongoing opportunities to talk about the issues that were identified in the initial confrontation. At a later meeting, you may wish to offer this opportunity. "Thanks again for the way you listened to me the other day when we talked about X. Have you had any further thoughts since then that you'd want to share with me?"

Be Willing to Be Confronted, as Well as Confront

When someone else confronts you, concentrate first on understanding their concerns. This is best done with paraphrasing, or "active listening." Before responding to the person's concerns, state something like: "Before I respond to that I want to make sure I understand what your concerns are. If I understood correctly, you're concerned about X, Y and Z. Is that right?"

Of course, these considerations will not guarantee a "painless" confrontation. When we identify issues of personal concern we are risking our own vulnerabilities by asking another person to be vulnerable with us. Such a process is not without risk, and there is no assurance that we will maintain control of it. But people who have confronted with these considerations in mind report that the experience was generally more positive than they expected. When we deal clearly with issues which divide us, rather than attacking the person who disagrees with us, we often develop new insights and even a deeper relationship with the person with whom we disagreed.

Dom Helder Camara, the retired archbishop of Recife and Olinda, Brazil, once quipped that he prefers to talk with someone with whom he disagrees rather than with someone with whom he agrees. The reason: we can learn much more from someone with whom we disagree than from someone who will simply reinforce our existing beliefs. Caring confrontation offers the same hope.