

Tactfully Confronting Conflict



In a Nutshell

How often have we seen people approach conflict situations with an aggressive, confrontational style that exacerbates the problem? I've sure done it. I've attacked people who I thought owed me an apology to later find out that there was a misunderstanding or that the other party would have been happy to have accommodated me. I end up being the one who apologizes in those cases.

To avoid problems such as these, we need to tactfully confront conflict we have with others and work toward a mutually agreeable resolution. First we need to clarify for ourselves exactly what it is that the other party is doing and how it creates a problem for us. Then, we need to explain the problem to the other party in a way that reduces their defensiveness, and **collaborate** with them to find a solution.

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Bill Cowher's Blow Up and Apology

Pittsburgh Steelers coach, Bill Cowher (in the photo above), pulled a stunt on Sunday that few managers could get away with. His team was beaten in overtime by the Tennessee Titans, and he wasn't happy about the way in which the last few moments of the game were handled by the officials. When the game ended, he chased down an official on the field and yelled at him. Cowher wasn't looking for a "win-win" solution to the problem. He wanted to voice his frustration because he thought his team had been treated unfairly. Cowher wanted to fight and win, and that attitude wasn't constructive. He'll be fine over the long-run, but he definitely didn't gain anything by confronting conflict in that way. It was Cowher who had to apologize on Tuesday.¹

Don't Be a Conflict Avoider Either

Are you a conflict avoider? Do you hope that unspoken conflict will go away if you just ignore it? Do you convince yourself that the conflict that's causing problems for you can't be resolved, so there's no point in confronting it? I would really encourage you to tactfully confront unspoken conflict rather than avoid it.

Most of us appreciate and have more respect for people who tactfully confront the problems that we create for them. Admittedly, we sometimes get defensive when confronted, but you can help us avoid being defensive (see below). We really don't want to create frustration and stress for you, and if you would just let us know how

we could help, we'd like to try. Besides, the problems that we create for you might also affect other people now or in the future, so making a change could actually help us.

Tactfully confronting conflict tends to strengthen relationships. Harmony achieved through conflict avoidance is artificial and dishonest. Confronting conflict increases the openness and, therefore, the closeness in a relationship.

How long can you keep your frustration bottled up anyway, and what happens when you let it out? If you avoid confronting conflict for too long, you risk health problems and a blow up with the other party. I once spoke to a local personnel manager who wanted team building training for her staff. Conflict was poorly handled in her organization. She told my colleague and me about one young staffer who was loathe to confront the conflict she had with a coworker, and the stress ultimately made her physically ill and unable to work for weeks! Obviously, one option for getting it off your chest is talking to a third party about the problem. But, where's the integrity in that? How would you feel if you found out that a coworker was complaining about something that you did behind your back? Furthermore, you don't want to wait until you're fed up with the other party and then unload on them. When that happens, you've become the problem.

Finally, if you are a manager or any other person in authority, resolving conflicts is part of your role. The responsibility to resolve conflicts and promote harmonious interactions among group members coincides with the authority and privilege of being a leader.

Conflict: A Puzzle to Solve, Not a Battle to Fight

One definition of interpersonal conflict says that it results when the goal-directed behavior of one party interferes with the goal-directed behavior of another. To make that definition fit every conflict situation, the term "goal" has to be interpreted very broadly to mean anything that people would like to have occur. For instance, goals in this context must include things like having a pleasant working environment, receiving a certain perk, being treated with respect, getting a particular task completed, etc.

Notice that the definition of interpersonal conflict makes no reference to fighting or losing. When we reflect on conflicts that we've observed in the workplace, we readily recall fights, winners and losers. However, not all conflict results in fights.

To build harmonious relationships and improve organizational functioning, it's much more useful for parties in conflict to view their conflict as a puzzle to be solved collaboratively rather than a fight to be won.

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Get a Head Start: Build Rapport

When it comes time to approach another party to discuss a conflict, having already developed a relationship with that party that is characterized by mutual trust and rapport is extremely helpful. Indeed, the single greatest determinant of whether the conflict will be resolved constructively is probably the nature of the relationship between the parties prior to the confrontation. Once I was asked to coach an executive in how to confront conflict in a more constructive manner. However, because his relationships with others had deteriorated so severely, his biggest problem wasn't learning what to say when raising issues--it was [repairing the relationships](#). Until the relationships were repaired, anything he said would raise defensiveness and resistance because his co-workers had a grudge against him.

This is not to say that as a manager you will never have trouble dealing with conflict if you pursue the strategy of becoming everyone's friend. In fact, some of those "friends" will take you for granted or take advantage of you--especially if you aren't very assertive in conflict situations.

My point is that it helps to have a good relationship with the people who you might find yourself in conflict with before that conflict occurs. Get to know the people whose work affects your own, and the people who work physically near you. That's a big group of people. But you'll probably need to approach a few of them and ask them to reconsider something they're doing someday, and the conversation will tend to go over better if they know and trust you than if you are a stranger.

Use Language That Reduces Defensiveness

When confronting a conflict you have with another party, constructive communication and "owning the problem" reduces their defensiveness. The August 29 [LeaderLetter](#) summarized the principles of constructive communication. For instance, constructive communication addresses problems rather than attacking people,

describes actions and situations rather than judging them, notes specific occurrences and situations rather than general patterns, follows a consistent line of discussion rather than jumping around, and involves two-way discussion. The primary advantage of such communication is that it focuses attention on a problem to be solved rather than the party who is causing the problem, which reduces that party's defensiveness.

In addition, "owning the problem" reduces defensiveness. When you need to confront a party that has done something that causes frustration, disappointment or any kind of displeasure for you, you can think of that displeasure as your problem because you are the one experiencing it. That's what owning the problem means. Naturally, you can just as easily say that the actions of the other party are *their problem*. However, if you use the language of owning the problem when you confront conflict, you will improve your chances of resolving it in a mutually agreeable way. The other party will be less inclined to react defensively if you draw attention to yourself and the problem rather than putting them on the spot. When there's goodwill between you and the other party, they will be happy to help you solve your problem.

Use All of Your Collaborative, Creative Problem Solving Skills

Viewing conflict as a puzzle or a problem to be solved collaboratively should help the parties in conflict find creative solutions. Accordingly a creative, collaborative problem-solving process should be used.

- **Define the problem.** Prior to confronting the conflict, you've already defined the problem. However, remain open to redefinition of the problem. Poor problem definition makes effective solutions hard to find.
- **Search for many and diverse alternative solutions.** Often each of the two parties in conflict insists that the conflict be resolved in one particular way. Unless they're willing to consider other alternatives, there's nothing left for them to do but decide which one of them will lose. However, if the parties can remain open to creative alternatives for solving the problem, they might find an alternative that allows both parties to be completely satisfied. It helps when parties in conflict brainstorm together.
- **Evaluate the alternatives.**
- **Implement the best alternative.**
- **See whether it was effective.**
- **Make changes if necessary.**

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Note

1. Bouchette, E. (2003, January). Notebook. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. January 15, Pg.D-3.

Sources

Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Photo

Pittsburgh Steelers coach Bill Cowher yells at the officials during their AFC Divisional Playoff game against the Tennessee Titans in Nashville, Tennessee January 11, 2003. The Titans won 34-31 in overtime. (REUTERS/Jim Bourg: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com.)

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Lame Joke--Who's Kidding Who?

It was a stifling hot day and a man fainted in the middle of a busy intersection. Traffic quickly piled up in all directions while a woman rushed to help him. When she knelt down to loosen his collar, a man emerged from the crowd, pushed her aside, and said, "It's all right honey, I just finished a course in first aid."

The woman stood up and watched as he took the ill man's pulse and prepared to administer artificial respiration. At this point she tapped him on the shoulder and said,

"When you get to the part about calling a doctor, I'm already here."

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