



# Leadership Living

the MasterPoint™ Series for the ascendant professional

by Tim Herd, CPRE

## How to confront someone without making things worse



Which makes you cringe more?

- Fingernails scraping a blackboard. (Aarrgh!)*
- Biting into aluminum foil. (E-youch!)*
- Confronting someone. (Nooooo!)*

I'm going to be blunt here: The purpose of confrontation is to effect a positive resolution.

But to most people, that's not the immediate implication. Many will declare they do not like confrontation, they don't do well with confrontation, or they avoid confrontation whenever they can. The

mere thought of it provokes a very strong adverse reaction. *(Let's not and say we did!)*

Why? Because what we often fear is the terrible conflict and angst a confrontation can generate.

Yet strife need not be a part of an effective confrontation. As leaders, it's our job to shepherd our most valuable resources—our people—to attain the goals we've set together. But let's face it, people are people, and conflicting differences in attitudes and behaviors happen. And when things go off-kilter, we need to fix them.

From the Tried-And-True Department of Learning-By-Doing, here are six sequential steps to create a better future through constructive confrontation:

### 1. Give Grace

If you could glimpse what's going on in someone's life, would you treat him differently? Perhaps—and that's enough of a reason to start by extending the benefit of the doubt. By intentionally putting yourself in the other person's shoes you gain another view to complement your own. Such stereoscopic vision creates a better perspective, which in turn produces a greater understanding. You may discover a very valid explanation for the behavior in question. If so, you may avoid a needless confrontation. Even if not, extending a little empathy never hurts!

### 2. Deal Directly

Discussing the individual's problem with other people is nothing more than detrimental workplace gossip, which sets a poor example to those you lead. Would you appreciate them discussing your faults and failures outside of your presence? Airing your own opinion of others' shortcomings can also create a poisonous culture of cynicism. If this is your tendency, post a guard on your mouth with strict orders to shut down (shut up?) those words from ever forming. Determine to speak only to the responsible person.

### 3. Confirm Commitment

Recalling that your purpose is to bring about a positive resolution, determine never to speak out of hurt, anger, malice or vengefulness. Such volatile emotions are very easily reflected by the very ones they're directed toward—and that kind of exchange simply won't take you where you want to go. Even if you truly think the other person is being malicious, choose to believe the best. Why? Because when you do all that's in your power to bring peace, that's healthier for you. Reaffirm your commitment to the other person and lead from there. Leadership blogger Michael Hyatt recommends approaching the conversation from personal incompetence: "I really value this relationship and I'm committed to improving it, but what am I missing? Help me understand."

### 4. Identify Issues

Identify and state the specific issues clearly and objectively and come right to the point. Without a firm hold on the conversational compass, many confrontations have been hijacked to chase useless rabbit trails of excuses, blame, criticisms or complaints: they only lead back on themselves and confuse and conceal the root issues. Steer away from such pointless pitfalls and stay the course. It may help clarify the issues if you write them down ahead of time.

*Strife need not be part of an effective confrontation.*

### 5. Explain Expectations

Once the issues are objectively understood, move right on to what the expectations are, also as specifically as possible. State realistic goals: "I need you to be on time every morning;" "Your budget is due no later than Thursday at noon;" or "You will demonstrate proper respect to our customers no matter how poorly they may act." Clearly explain the preferred actions and results.

### 6. Communicate Consequences

Because behaviors bring consequences—good or bad—explain how the expected changes in the other's actions will bring about positive consequences for the good of your relationship, the office, or the organization. But be equally clear about the negative consequences of not meeting the expectations—whether they're disciplinary, punitive, or separating—and be willing to follow through on them.

Because every person is unique, and we can never predict an individual's exact response, these steps are not guaranteed to produce a positive resolution. However, like navigating a cringe-free day with a teacher with long fingernails and a propensity to scratch slate, they do establish a proven framework to facilitate and affirm the most constructive outcome. Good luck!

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*A constructive confrontation preserves a relationship and yields a positive resolution.*

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