



The **MANAGER'S**
Communication
TOOLKIT

CONFRONTATION GUIDE

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Confrontation

If we lived in a perfect world, we could always identify problems with coworkers, bosses, and customers before they became critical, employ the perfect techniques to defuse the situation, and keep things moving along productively. However, since we live in the real world, we can count on conflict occasionally arising. We will encounter situations where we will need to know how and when to confront someone who obstructs the path of progress.

Contrary to popular belief, however, confrontation isn't a dirty word. It doesn't have to be nasty, and it doesn't have to come with unpleasant aftereffects . . . but only if you do the work to make confrontation constructive.

Communication sometimes requires confrontation. It is not a popular means of workplace communication, but sometimes confrontation must happen. Why does confrontation have such a negative connotation? Why is it uncomfortable to many people? Why do some people avoid it at all costs? Why does it often seem easier to handle problems via email instead of face-to-face? Sometimes it demands tackling difficult or unpleasant issues head-on. Other times it involves discussing a topic with the expectation that the other party will respond badly or act out. Fortunately, it can be made less painful if you understand how to do it in a positive and effective manner.

Confrontation is needed to resolve issues, but it does not have to be a negative experience.

One of the primary issues in communication is a misuse of confrontation: either it is completely avoided, attempted through indirect, back-channel means, or performed in a harsh and negative manner. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising; the very word "confrontation" brings up all sorts of strong thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. So, let's talk about a way to confront that defuses much of the negativity and unpleasantness we often associate with the process.

COMPASSIONATE CONFRONTATION: IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU

The type of confrontation you have depends on how much of your own ego you project into the situation. Once you understand the process of compassionate confrontation, much of the negativity can be removed, allowing the lines of communication to resume flowing much sooner. First, let's define what is meant by compassion.

Compassion is:

- Seeing the bigger picture
- Releasing your own ego, fear, and judgment while communicating with others

Compassion is not:

- Acceptance
- Sympathy
- Empathy
- Pity

Compassionate confrontation creates a common vision for going forward by presenting the issues in a way that the other person can hear. The goal of compassionate confrontation is not to produce separation but rather to create unity. Despite the negative response many of us have to the word "confronta-

tion,” when employed correctly, compassionate confrontation actually helps strengthen relationships.

Confronting someone from a place of anger, of course, is one of the worst and least productive ways to work through an issue. Anger is very disruptive and is usually born out of fear. A manager who confronts in anger may see short-term benefits, but negative lasting effects almost always ensue. When you are angry, step back; take the time to think through what needs to be said. Be sure to place your own focus on the issue at hand, not your emotions, those of the other person, and especially not your ego needs. In other words, you must diffuse your feelings of stress before your communication can be effective. Six practical steps can help you set up the calm, detached approach that fosters compassion and productive confrontation.

Compassionate Confrontation: Steps toward Success

1. Find common ground and determine a common goal for the meeting. Make sure the meeting is only about this goal.
2. Do not make a play for others’ emotions, including those of the person you are confronting. Most people don’t care what you feel, think, or believe—especially when they feel uneasy and stressed themselves. Focus the discussion on the issue—not personalities.
3. Make sure you understand your own reactions. What are you invested in? What are you reacting to, being right? Being perfect? Doing things your way? Doing the least work you can? Making everyone on the team happy? Remember that in the vast majority of cases, people are not out to get you; they are simply protecting themselves from perceived negative circumstances.
4. During the confrontation, do not blame. Find a way to help the person save face. This doesn’t mean you should not make your point, but you should be willing to give the other person a respectful way to renegotiate his or her position.
5. Do not project your feelings onto others. For example, avoid asserting that you “understand” them or their position on the issue. You almost never have the whole picture—especially from another person’s perspective.
6. Present constructive options to the individual you are confronting. Creating a respectful way out of confrontation is an act of great maturity and enlightened leadership. Be careful, however, to avoid providing choices you don’t have the authority to offer, that you don’t really agree with, or that you know the other person won’t agree to.

It’s important to understand that compassion is not always warm and fluffy. Compassionate confrontation results from a leader having balance and a high degree of self-understanding. It is hard to confront in a productive manner when you are afraid, angry, or anxious.

It is extremely important to focus the discussion on the facts rather than venting or satisfying personal ego needs. Remember, compassionate confrontation isn’t about you, the initiator; it’s about the facts and the communication situation. Once you realize this, you can remove much of the negative emotion from the equation and focus on what you really want: communicating effectively to remove the roadblocks to success. When you can do that, you’ll be well on your way to becoming the type of high-performing manager and leader that you aspire to be.