



Crucial Confrontations

Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations,
and Bad Behavior

by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler
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Take-Aways

- Crucial confrontations are about accountability when the stakes are high.
- Confrontations are difficult when people differ in rank – especially when a subordinate must confront a superior.
- Failure to confront leads to misunderstandings, breaks down relationships and damages families, teams and organizations.
- Begin a confrontation by examining your motives, assumptions and expectations.
- Avoid the fundamental attribution error – do not assume that people deliberately do the wrong thing just to be contrary.
- When confronting someone, be calm and focus on the facts of the problem.
- Do not assume that you know others' motivations.
- Motivation is about expectations. When expectations change, motivation and behavior also change.
- Hard cases may require discipline. If so, do not retreat and do not play favorites.
- Confrontations may be difficult, but when handled well they are productive and healthy for relationships.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
9	10	8	8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to confront others calmly and fruitfully; 2) How to handle high stakes confrontations; 3) How to motivate others; and 4) How to use discipline.

Recommendation

Although confrontation is difficult for many people, it is often necessary. Failure to confront someone over bad behavior may be misinterpreted as approval. Confrontations can help bring people back to a better, more productive course. However, confrontations also can go off track and become shouting matches (or worse). Authors Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler outline a method for approaching confrontations when the stakes are particularly high; those are the crucial confrontations. Boiled down to its essentials, the methodology consists of focusing on facts, remaining calm, listening to the other person with respect and working to motivate the other person and to enable a change in behavior. The book is light, anecdotal and easy to read. Yet, *getAbstract.com* finds that it offers so much sound advice that any manager, parent or spouse could find something useful.

Abstract

Speak Up

What is a crucial confrontation?

- Crucial means that the stakes are high – For example, in 1982 a jumbo jet crashed, killing 74 people. Tapes of the cockpit conversation indicated that the copilot was attempting to warn the pilot about ice buildup on the wings, but did not muster the courage to confront him directly.
- Confrontations are about accountability – To confront means to demand accountability. Confrontation seems to suggest conflict, but when done well a confrontation can be a way of resolving problems and improving relationships.

Confrontations are particularly difficult when the people involved are not of the same rank or status. Many people are reluctant to question those of higher status or authority, but that very fear of speaking up or rocking the boat has led to disasters large and small. In one case, a middle-aged man entered a medical clinic to be treated for an earache, but he was given a vasectomy. Although he was awake while the staff readied him for surgery, he did not ask why they were working so far from his ear.

People mishandle crucial confrontations two ways, either due to meekness or due to anger. Instead of engaging in direct conversation, many people opt to talk around the problem, change the subject or just keep silent out of timidity. At the other extreme (sometimes because they have stifled it so long) people may erupt in violence out of rage. Remember these things about crucial confrontations:

- A crucial confrontation is a direct, open discussion of a problem.
- Inability to deal with confrontation lies at the root of most problems in organizations, teams and families.

“People can learn how to respond in healthier, more effective ways.”

“It takes only a moment to send a crucial confrontation down the wrong track, and it all takes place inside our heads.”

“When people repeatedly make the same mistake, those who are the best at identifying and then confronting problems redefine each problem with each new infraction.”

“When you move from silence to violence, you no longer keep crucial confrontations professional, under control and on track to achieve a satisfactory ending.”

“When another person has let you down, start the confrontation by simply describing the gap between what was expected and what was observed: ‘You said you were going to have your room cleaned before dinner. It’s nine o’clock and it’s still not done.’”

“Share the facts. Describe the observable details of what’s happening. Cut out the guesswork.”

- Mastering crucial confrontations can have a lasting, important impact on your ability to solve problems.

How to Decide What Confrontations to Have

When a problem first occurs, discuss what went wrong. If the problem occurs again or continues, talk about the pattern. If the problem has a personal dimension, discuss the relationship. Finally, discuss consequences and intentions.

But first, know whether to talk at all. Sometimes it is good to confront, and sometimes it is not. What happens in your mind before a confrontation ever begins can make the difference between success and failure during the confrontation. At the moment you make up your mind that someone has wronged you, your anger wells up. Beware of the fundamental attribution error – do not assume that someone deliberately did something you find disagreeable, inconvenient or harmful. Consider the apparent culprit’s sources of motivation and ability:

- Self – Pleasure or pain serve as motivations, while personal strengths and weaknesses enable or disable action.
- Others – Praise and pressure from others can motivate action, while various forms of help or hindrance can either enable or disable it.
- Things – Attractive or repellent things can motivate actions, but things can also serve either as bridges or as fences to enable or disable action.

The first step in dealing with a crucial confrontation is to understand what is happening. Do not make assumptions about other people’s motives. Calm down and think about whether a reasonable person might have good justification for the action that has offended you. What might make it desirable or possible for others to keep or break their promises? What reward systems or incentives are in place? What penalties and disincentives?

The Crucial Confrontation in Action

People who are good at confrontation have several characteristics:

- They begin by describing the problem calmly and without hostility.
- They help the offender establish priorities (and they know how to use discipline).
- They remove disincentives or barriers that make compliance difficult.
- They are able to cope with the unexpected.

Don’t use tricks like sandwiching (that is, inserting a line of criticism between two lines of praise). Do not ambush the offender by starting with chummy small talk and then suddenly broaching the problem. Do not use entrapment. Do not simply drop hints and expect people to understand what you mean without explanation. Do not blame others for your need to confront and do not play good cop, bad cop.

Instead, approach confrontations honestly and straightforwardly. When there is a difference between your expectations and your observations, describe that difference. Make it clear that you respect the offender and believe in his or her good will. For a confrontation to be constructive, strive for a sense of shared purpose, a mutuality of values. Try to think of the situation from the other person’s perspective. State what you think the other person might have been thinking reasonably and in good faith. Assume that the other person will react badly to confrontation. Anticipate what kind of wrong conclusions the other person may reach. Deal with those ideas proactively. Explain immediately that you don’t mean the one thing that you know will most offend the other,

“Motivation, it turns out, is actually rather boring. It has little to do with clout, *chutzpah* or even charisma. In fact, motivation is about expectations, information and communication.”

“The best leaders don’t simply inspire people to continue to do the gut wrenching, mind boggling and noxious. They help people find ways to ease the gut wrenching, simplify the mind boggling and nullify the noxious.”

“Every organization has its own discipline steps and policies. Study them carefully. If you fail to follow procedure, your efforts may be thrown out when they are reviewed, undermining your credibility.”

“Families should create their own clear disciplinary steps as well. If they do not, everything comes as a surprise.”

and clarify what you do mean. For example: "I didn't mean to imply that you were doing it on purpose. I believe you were unaware of the impact you were having. That's why I want to bring this up in the first place."

Establish common ground. If you are addressing a topic that is sensitive, ask the other person for permission to discuss it. Asking permission conveys respect and helps build an impression of mutuality. Always talk about difficult subjects in private. Do not criticize or confront anyone in public.

Begin the confrontation by addressing the objective facts. Merely describe them. Do not impute motives. Similarly, when third parties report an infraction or complain about someone, always ask for the facts.

Motivating that Matters

Motivation is not simple, but it is not magic either. Fundamentally, motivation depends on expectations. When people change their expectations about the consequence of a behavior, they are apt to change the behavior. Therefore, you do not have to be charismatic to motivate, nor do you have to be powerful. In fact, power can de-motivate. Force disrupts relationships and inspires resistance. Force does not get lasting results – once the threat of force is gone, typically, any changes in behavior go too. Bribes, perks and special rewards may elicit temporary compliance, but – as with force – the effect is apt to be transient. You want people to gain satisfaction purely from doing the right thing, not from the ancillary treat. These techniques can help change expectations and, thus, motivate changed behavior:

- Explain the consequences of the bad action. These consequences may be invisible to the perpetrator.
- Explain how the offending behavior conflicts with values that you share.
- Explain the long-term disadvantage of the bad behavior, and how it outweighs the fleeting, short-term convenience or benefit.
- Show how the bad behavior hurts others.
- Show how the bad behavior creates a negative impression of the offender. Hold up a mirror so the offender can see himself or herself through the eyes of others.

Of course, some circumstances are particularly difficult. Sometimes the perpetrator already knows the consequences of the bad behavior and is only forgetful – then, a reminder may be helpful. Sometimes, though, the offender is determined and resistant. In such cases, discipline may be your only recourse. In such cases, remember:

- Know how the disciplinary system works, so that you stay within the rules.
- Double-check with those in authority before you begin to discipline.
- Approach discipline with appropriate gravity and seriousness.
- Explain step by step what will happen if the infraction occurs again.
- Apply discipline consistently. Be fair and egalitarian.
- Don't retreat. Once you have begun the disciplinary process, carry it through.

Be an Enabler

Remember that motivation is nothing without ability. Motivating people to do unpleasant or undesirable jobs will always be difficult. If the job is impossible, motivation won't matter. Sometimes people do not want to admit that they can't do a job – they would

“If we don’t end a crucial conversation well, we’ll have wasted our time and, worse still, are very likely to disappoint people and create unnecessary anxiety.”

“Make praise such a common part of your personal style that when you do enter into a crucial confrontation, you’ll have built a safe, trusting and respectful relationship. Balance confrontations with confirmations.”

rather seem unwilling. For example, an illiterate person may be unwilling to admit that he can’t read, and may claim that he just doesn’t want to do a task – like sorting labeled packages – that, in fact, he can’t do. In other circumstances people may claim an inability, when the real problem is a lack of motivation. Those who master the art of influence motivate others by making the job itself easier. Try these approaches:

- Talk to the offender about the barriers to performance; join forces to remove them.
- Don’t give off-the-cuff advice. Listen and check the facts first.
- Ask questions to get ideas from others. Do not predetermine their response by how you ask the question. Make sure that your invitation is not only sincere, but also is perceived to be sincere. The fact that you are in charge does not mean that you have all the answers. A leader does not lose status by honestly admitting ignorance and asking for suggestions.
- Ask people outright if they are willing to do the job. Probe for motivation.
- Make it possible for others to brainstorm solutions. If you don’t have the authority to do so, request permission.

How to be Focused and Flexible in a Confrontation

Keep the confrontation on the right track. Stay focused. If the offender attempts to take the conversation off on a tangent, bring it gently but firmly back to the matter at hand. Be sensitive to the feelings and motivations of the person you are confronting. If other people feel threatened or at risk, interrupt the conversation to reestablish mutual trust, mutual respect and an atmosphere of security. If the other party offers an excuse for failing to keep a commitment by saying, “something came up” or by pointing to a problem even more serious than the one you are addressing, deal with it. But always come back to the issue at stake in the confrontation. If the other party gets emotional, calmly follow the chain of action and consequence back to the original root cause of the undesirable behavior. After the confrontation, plan your follow-up actions. Include the answers to these questions:

- Who is going to take action?
- What will the action be?
- When will the action occur?
- How will you follow up?

Crucial confrontations may not be pleasant, but they are necessary. The cost of not confronting someone you should far outweighs the benefits of dodging a tough conversation. When confrontations do not occur, misunderstandings fester, anger stews, communication becomes more difficult and, eventually, relationships founder. By addressing the facts, remaining calm and respecting the other person, you can make crucial confrontations productive and rewarding.

About The Authors

[Kerry Patterson](#) writes training programs and is an executive coach. [Joseph Grenny](#), a keynote speaker and consultant, co-founded the California Computer Corporation and the nonprofit organization, Unitus. [Ron McMillan](#) co-founded the Covey Leadership Center. [Al Switzler](#) is on the faculty of the Executive Development center at the University of Michigan.