

Confront Issues Responsibly

Issues and problems arise when people work together. We're different; we expect and want different things. Misunderstandings and conflicts are inevitable. When they happen, don't be surprised—be responsible.

Leaders don't wait for others to act, and don't sit around complaining about issues or blaming others for them. They take 100% responsibility for what's happening, owning their own behaviour, allowing themselves 0 excuses for inaction.

Here are some ideas for confronting issues responsibly, having constructive conversations with others so that...

- Commitments are made to act together for change; and,
- Your relationships with others involved remain positive.

Step Up—Choose the Right Time and Place

Think about the right time and setting for the conversation. Should it be formal or informal? And when will you do it? Immediately after a difficult event, when emotions are still high, is seldom the right time. But sooner is better than later.

Procrastination and avoidance do not solve problems. Hoping for improvement is not leadership. Hesitate, and bad situations take root. When you eventually have to deal with them—and you will— they are more difficult to undo.

And not speaking up risks damaging your relationships with others who will rightly ask, "Why didn't you say something sooner?" Conversations about issues can be challenging and uncomfortable. But, better a little discomfort than leaving yourself and others to suffer what's happening now, and potentially more severe consequences down the road.

Beware the "sucker's choice", a trap in which you see a way to what you want, but fear a risk that makes the path unacceptable. For example, you may fear that confronting an issue will damage your relationship with others involved. The sucker's choice: fix the problem or maintain a positive relationship. Feeling 'stuck' frustrates everyone involved.

To avoid the sucker's choice, believe you can have what you want and avoid what you don't want. It might take some creativity, hard work, and a risk. With an open mind though, you can turn an either/or dilemma into a both/and request.

Make It Safe—Pay Attention to the Relationship

When a conversation doesn't feel safe, some people hold back or withdraw—they flee. Others fight—pushing back, actively resisting what you have to say, even attacking. When a conversation is safe, people feel they can say

anything. They share what they know, believe, want, or suggest for moving forward. And, the more you know, the better your solution. If they feel safe, others will hear you out, more fully engaged in working with you on the problem.

To make a conversation safe, demonstrate...

- You respect them, even if you disagree;
- They can trust you to work with them on the issue; and,
- You want a mutually satisfying resolution—a win win that addresses their interests as well as your own.

Start Well—30 Seconds of Clarity

Get off on the right foot, positioning the conversation for success. Prepare to say the following, in 30 seconds or less...

- "*Here's what's happening...*" Share the situation as you see it, the results not being achieved, and behaviours that are problematic. Describe, specifically and without judgement.
- "*Which matters because...*" Explain the impact of what's happening, the importance or value being missed and/or likely consequences of failing to deal with it. In particular, help them see what is in it for them. To work with you
- "*So here's my request...*" Explain what you want to accomplish with them, the outcome you hope will result from your mutual efforts. If the problem is resolved, what will be different, improved, completed, resolved, etc.?
- "*And here's what I'm prepared to do...*" Be ready to offer what you are willing to do or deliver in aid of a solution. Show your intent through action, not just words.
- Then ask: "*What can we do together to make this happen?*" Ask an open-ended question to engage them, drawing out their reaction to what you said, and their perspective on the issue. Get them involved, then listen.

Help Them Choose Change—Problem Solve Together

Help others see their responsibility for resolving problems, while you demonstrate your intention to act responsibly.

- *Focus on solutions, not the problem*—Look back on problems and energy drains away in blame and defensiveness. Look forward to solutions, and energy goes toward understanding, creating options, and helping each other.
- *Ask, don't tell*—Questions encourage others to think for themselves. Think for them, giving them answers, and you can expect resistance and dependency. Demanding they do as you say gets you compliance but not commitment.

Prepare to Confront Responsibly

AVOID THE “SUCKER’S CHOICE”

What consequence have you tried to avoid by not confronting so far?

MAKE IT “SAFE”

How can you help the other person feel safe in this conversation?

CLARIFY YOUR PATH

Distill an issue you should confront into a concise, 30 second statement by clarifying...

Impact: *Which matters because...*

Request: *So here’s my request...*

Situation: *Here’s what’s happening...*

Offer: *And, here’s what I’m prepared to do...*

ENGAGE THEM

What question will you ask to draw out their perspective and suggestions?

USE THE E.A.R. STRATEGY TO MOVE THINGS FORWARD

Conversations sometimes get stuck. Others might become emotional, rehash points already addressed, debate with you, or try to withdraw. When they do, they may be feeling unsafe. To get things back on track, disarm their anxieties and tense behaviour using the E.A.R. strategy...

EMPATHIZE...

When you empathize, others feel heard and understood. As a result, they relax, are more open to your input and willing to hear you out.

Avoid your autobiography. When we listen to others, we often filter what they say through our own experiences, beliefs and feelings.

We hear ourselves—not them. Avoid...

- Advising—telling them what to do.
- Probing—asking closed questions.
- Interpreting—explaining why they think or feel as they do.
- Evaluating—judging what they have to say.

Listen with your eyes, as well as your ears. Seek to understand...

- Content—The verbal stuff, what they believe, want or expect.
- Feeling—Their emotions, often expressed non-verbally.

Show you have listened by...

- Restating or Rephrasing—their content. Repeat back what you hear, in your own words, to assure them you understand.
- Reflecting—their feelings. Confirm your awareness of their emotions by telling them what you see.

AGREE...

It is hard to attack someone who is doing their best to agree with you. Don’t concede key points. Simply find common ground or small points you can agree with to disarm their emotion.

THEN RE-FOCUS...

Once you’ve heard their concern, focus on what needs to happen next. There is little to be gained rehashing—you need to move on.

These are the most common focusing options...

- *“Okay. Here’s what we’ll do.”* When the path forward is clear, offer a win-win solution based on understanding them and careful consideration of what you need.
- *“What do you think we should do?”* When you are open to their input, because it doesn’t matter, or, you trust their competence.
- *“Actually, it is not as bad as you believe.”* When the other person is missing a key point, or can’t see the bigger picture.
- *“I apologize. How can I help?”* When you are wrong, and excuses or explanations will sound defensive.
- *“That’s the way it is.”* When no change or choice is available.