

Business Journal # 6: The Art of "Positive Confrontation"

By Mary E. Rauch

Let's talk reality. First, work would be easy if it weren't for the people. Second reality: Unless you work in a vault in Nevada 50 feet below ground as a lone operative for the CIA, people will always be a part of your work world,

And people will be irritating: the coworker who always starts a sidebar conversation during your meetings. The office mate who stands wa-a-a-y too close during a hallway conversation. The colleague whose laugh screeches like a banshee and slices repeatedly through your cubicle walls.

Most of the time we simply endure, but it's a tight-lipped endurance. Why do we not address these irritations as they arise? Is it our discomfort with conflict? Our fear of affecting the status quo? Or our memories of a confrontation that went bad-- re-e-e-eally bad and haunts us to this day?

Our tight-lipped endurance can come with physical, mental, and emotional costs: stress, frustration, anger, resentment, and inefficiency, even job loss.

How then can we communicate through conflict—without creating a scene, causing hard feelings, kicking ourselves for bringing the issue up in the first place? Communication consultant Barbara Pachter believes we can learn "positive confrontation" by preparing ourselves for the interaction.

In her book The Power of Positive Confrontation, Pachter lists a series of steps we can take before addressing difficult people and situations. Three of the series I've successfully used are:

1. Know our own hot buttons—words, situations, and ideas that trigger a knee-jerk emotional response. This step is of particular use when we feel "insulted," when we become defensive and react with pure, instinctive, and spontaneous emotion.

Knowing our emotional "sore points," as I call them, requires truthful and consistent self awareness and much experience at "standing watch" over ourselves. I borrow the phrase "The Third Eye" from the world of theatre to describe this level of self-awareness. The Third Eye floats around us, seeing the interaction objectively, assessing and analyzing how and why we are responding.

2. Recognize that "techno-etiquette" annoyances usually arise out of ignorance, not malicious intent.

If we give the offender the benefit of the doubt—it was unintentional—we can address it as such: "I'm sure you were unaware-- (softening statement)—that using your speaker-phone in a cubicle environment is almost like standing and talking in my cube. If you could use your speaker-phone only when absolutely necessary and speak in a softer tone, it would really help me concentrate more.....what do you think?"

3. Pave the way to a positive outcome by doing what Pachter calls “advance relationship building.”

Get to know her over lunch. Make comment on his children’s pictures on his desk. In other words, search for connections and similarities in your background and experiences before you dive in and confront co-workers about irritating habits they have. Prepare the soil with fertilizer before you plant the seed!

Of course, Pachter’s steps to a “positive confrontation” are no more than the script for a play. Just as the actor must learn to “deliver” the lines of the script with convincing nonverbal expression and tonal inflection, we, too, must learn to communicate our thoughts with the “proper” voice and face.

To train a “neutral voice”—devoid of sarcasm, hostility, self-pity, accusation, and disapproval-- I use an exercise that helps our ears learn to “go to neutral.”

I call this preferred voice tone the “Today Is Friday Voice,” (or whatever the day of week it is!). For us to train our tone-deaf ears to “speak neutral,” answer the question “What is today?”—aloud, with plenty of volume. “Today is Friday”—a factual, indisputable, and emotionless answer. Now, keep saying it till your ear “learns the music.”

Now let’s add words to the music. Say something like, “Please don’t interrupt me while I’m speaking” in your “Today Is Friday” Voice. Be honest. Did anger seep in? Did you emphasize one word over the others and thus imply an extra (irritated) meaning? Try again....till you have perfect pitch with the neutral tone.

Another powerful nonverbal signal that advertises tone is what I call the “Angry Eyebrow V.” If our voice is “Today Is Friday,” but our eyebrows form the “angry V”, the receiver of your message is “listening” to the eyebrows, not the voice. Where are your eyebrows right now? Pulled together in a pinch above your nose? Consciously relax that space and “let them go.” Now take a slow, deep breath. Add your “Today Is Friday” voice.....now you are ready for “positive confrontation”—by phone or in person.

After I helped a client achieve this “eyebrow awareness” through the mirror of videotape, the client asked, “Are you telling me that in order to be more persuasive—and less intimidating—all I have to do is relax my eyebrows?!”

My simple answer was, “Yes.” Thereafter, he rubbed the spot between his eyebrows before he went in for a meeting!

The need to confront irritating behaviors and individuals in the work place is simply a necessary part of working with other human beings. Remaining silent can become a silent killer: of your spirit, your relationships, your desire to go to work in the morning. So take some positive steps. Prepare yourself-- face and voice-- for the exchange. And relax those eyebrows!

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