

## **Constructive Confrontation in the Workplace: Three Things to Keep in Mind**

By Tomás Garza

To successfully navigate workplace conflict, managers must be able to confront team members in a positive, productive manner. Whatever the situation, whether two people are actively quarreling, or whether one person's behavior is impacting the entire work culture, a manager must be able to step in, take charge and do so in a way that does not contribute to the drama.

How, then, do you constructively confront team members? How do you both get your point across *and* preserve team chemistry?

For any manager, these conversations can be crucial. Ongoing conflict and drama can, of course, have a ripple effect on everyone, and the last thing any organization needs is a dip in morale. Assuming this is not a situation that calls for firing, there is a great deal a manager can do to help resolve the problem, be firm and preserve group harmony.

In having these conversations, here are three things to keep in mind:

### **1) Use non-accusatory language.**

For many of us, it is tempting to place blame and pin an entire problem directly on someone else. After all, aren't they the ones causing the disturbance in the first place? A constructive solution, despite our first impressions, involves shelving the urge to blame and taking a step back.

How you phrase things here makes all the difference. You can make the conversation productive by **focusing the language on you**. For example, you can say, "I notice you missed the last two staff meetings," or "The other day, I overheard your comments about the director." The alternative would look like this: "You missed the last two staff meetings," or "You made those comments about the director." One statement talks about your observations, what **you** saw, noticed, or heard. The other puts everything squarely on them.

This may seem subtle, just a matter of semantics, but in constructive confrontation your word choice matters. When you talk about your observations, people naturally feel less defensive. When people do not have their guard up, you will be able to get more accomplished.

### **2) Be clear.**

As a manager attempting to put a stop to harmful behavior, you must be clear in this conversation. Your group cannot afford any mixed messages. Therefore, be as clear as you can about the following:

- What you heard or saw.**

Make sure there are no ambiguities here. If you didn't experience any of the events first-hand, be sure you have gathered sufficient information. The person you are talking to needs to know exactly what it is they are doing that damages your group chemistry.

- How this impacts the group.**

Be very clear on this. Often, people do not intend any sabotage, but their behavior may, nonetheless, have a detrimental impact. It is perfectly fine to be direct about this impact; often the person really needs to hear it.

- **Your expectations.**

If you don't clearly state your expectations for future behavior, this conversation will be a waste of your time. Unclear expectations create needless confusion and can lead to future problems. As a manager, you must say what you expect. Luckily, this can be done in a non-accusatory manner that strengthens the group rather than pulls it apart.

### 3) Listen.

A conversation—even one you must have with an employee about their behavior—is just that, a conversation. This means it involves two people. Though you will need to come into the dialogue with an agenda and get your point across, the process will be infinitely more productive if you give the other person a chance to speak and, more importantly, to be heard. This means you must take the opportunity to listen.

When the other person speaks and feels you have heard them, their tension level goes down. Defensive posturing that might otherwise stand in your way will disappear. The person may even feel grateful for your hearing them out, and appreciated. This can be crucial to maintaining group harmony. Provided you take the opportunity to clearly state your expectations, there is absolutely nothing to lose in taking a moment and listening.

Also, if you listen attentively enough, the other person may offer suggestions or solutions you hadn't considered. You will never know unless they get an opportunity to speak, too.

Consider these three suggestions the next time you have to confront somebody in the workplace. In most situations, you can preserve group harmony, show respect and appreciation for the other person, and be sure you have clearly stated your expectations. It is indeed possible to become a pro at constructive confrontation. Do it, and your organization will benefit.

### About the Author

Tomás Garza is a conflict resolution and personal development expert with over 12 years of experience helping people erase pain, turmoil, and doubt from their lives. Tomás has served on the faculty of Portland State University, and is a former President of the Oregon Mediation Association. He has worked with thousands of people as a presenter, facilitator, and mediator, and believes that people CAN move beyond habitual patterns and fear and connect with their deepest selves and purpose. For more information on Tomás' programs, please visit [www.garzainitiative.com](http://www.garzainitiative.com), email him at [tomas@garzainitiative.com](mailto:tomas@garzainitiative.com), or call 541-230-4477.