



The Art of Supportive Confrontation

An Essential Element in Creative Conflict | Flip Brown

Maria is a talented job applicant is in the final stages of the hiring process. She has impressed the team with her technical knowledge, past experience, and in-the-room presence. Salary, benefits, and workplace tools have all been successfully negotiated, and the Human Resources Director has one final topic. “Maria,” he says, “in talking to the team there’s one concern about how you might fit in to the culture here at Acme Widget.” She leans forward slightly, thinking that this will be the easy discussion about initiative, balance, or integrity. “In speaking with some of your references, it seems that you’re—shall we say—outspoken. We can’t afford to bring someone on who is going to rock the boat, make waves, or disrupt the flow.”

On the other hand, wouldn’t it be amazing if, in the initial interviews, your potential supervisor would say something like “We’re a little unusual here. We actively practice creative conflict, and in case you haven’t come across that term I’ll define how it works. We’re willing to tolerate reasonable unease in having different thoughts, opinions, or feelings because we know that if we don’t we’re going to short-circuit the best solutions. We expect everyone—from the top down and the bottom up—to practice what we call ‘appropriate professional vulnerability.’ Because we are committed to work with a shared set of values, a clear mission, and a compelling vision, we don’t make or take things personally. When we get stuck, we get coached, and when we succeed we know it is because everyone was able to move through the process without avoidance, collusion, or negativity.” Wow! Heck, I’d want to work there.

The reality is that it is far more common to find organizations that play it safe, minimize taking helpful risks, and having some sort of unclear and unspoken system for who gets to say what to whom. In [one study across nine countries](#), CPP Inc. (publishers of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of employees at all levels experience conflict to some degree. Furthermore, the study indicated that U.S. employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict.

Even when issues do not create the appearance of conflict, there are many times when we fail to take the initiative to have the conversations we truly want or need to have because of our fear—which may be conscious or subconscious—of creating unpleasant reactions in the other.

So what's a worker bee or queen bee to do? One means of truly avoiding unproductive conflict is to have the tools, practice, and permission to successfully engage in the challenging conversations that will foster deeper relationships and better outcomes.

I call this practice the “art of supportive confrontation.” Please allow me to define this phrase. “Art” is because like any creative endeavor, there is no cookie-cutter method, no rulebook, and no perfection. “Supportive” means that you are in support of shared principles, values, and mission.

“Confrontation” does not automatically have a negative meaning. According to my dictionary, one of the definitions of “confront” is to “deal with something in an honest and direct way.”

Sounds great; so why is this so difficult much of the time? My unproven theory is that this is one of the things that goes back to childhood (note: not everything does!). When we were kids, we were still working out our cognitive and emotional muscles, so to speak. Most of us were also in situations where there was a normal to significant amount of “background” tension. It may have been family finances, parents who argued too much or too loud, or being uprooted by a move.

Can you imagine what would have happened if as a kid if we would have said, “You know, everybody needs to chill out because this is not the most conducive environment for my growth and development?” It would have been highly unlikely that the grown-ups would have said, “Gee, thanks. Sorry we were causing too much stress for you.”

*“The past is gone, the future has not arrived.
All we have is the present moment.
If we are not here now, we are missing it.”*

We learned to stuff it, to blame ourselves, to take it out on a sibling—anything but increasing our ability to honestly and reasonably ask for what we need. Fast-forward into adulthood, and those old patterns persist. Why should we make anyone upset? Can't we all just get along? This works until somebody gets tired of holding the beach ball under the water and frustration erupts.

How do we get out of the bad choice of avoidance versus aggressiveness? While this is a bit like trying to explain how to do yoga in a few pages, there are some basics that will provide a way to begin your practice.

What's your emotional state? If we are unable to separate the business conversations from the emotional one, it gets all mushed together and then the receiver has to sort it out themselves, and its almost guaranteed that they will do a poor job at this task. Yeah, we may be disappointed, exasperated, confused, sad, angry—you name it. But if we can't determine our feelings we may be asking the other to take care of those as a primary part of the conversation. When we know up front that we're frustrated makes it more likely that we won't significantly dump it on the receiver, and when we take ownership for both the business need and our emotional state it can help provide clarity in terms of how to move forward.

What's the core principle or value at stake? Unclear expectations? Differing assumptions? Confusion over deadlines? Unhelpful patterns of communication? We need to find an anchor for our starting point otherwise we may drift all over the map. This also provides a means of assessing if there is any common ground. For example, does the other person share a value of not continuously interrupting or being interrupted during a meeting? It is usually helpful to figure out where we see a gap between our expectations and our experience. Of course, it helps greatly to be in a workplace culture where positive values are not only clearly espoused but also consistently practiced.

Will you be able to manage your own reactivity? If we didn't have any passion we simply wouldn't care. Of course when we're invested it can create strong internal dynamics that may catch us off guard. One special element of reactivity is being triggered, where our reaction in the moment either unleashes all our pent-up stress, or the situation is such that it reminds us (usually subconsciously) of times and places where we have felt similar negative feelings. This creates a response that is often out of scale to the actual interaction, and it then becomes our responsibility to understand and recalibrate our emotions. It is also true that some people appear to be "gifted" at pushing our buttons. This gives us the opportunity—admittedly not an easy task—to rewire them as those "buttons" can't be surgically removed, but only brought into awareness.

Are you able to give up your need for validation? When we need others to acknowledge and appreciate us so that we can be right, we set ourselves up for a bad outcome. Taking a clear principled stance is admirable, stubbornly insisting that our point of view must carry the day or there'll be "hell to pay" is immature. At times our need for others to give us credit is related to old insecurities. Yes, it's true that you may well deserve to be heard, to be considered, or to be correct but when it doesn't happen in the way you want or need you still need to be okay. Otherwise, you give others the "evidence" that yes, you are the problem.

Koji was disappointed and confused, and went to his supervisor, "Help me understand how this 'teamwork' thing is supposed to work. I'm coming in early and staying late to get this big Owsley Industries project delivered on time, and meanwhile I'm having to listen to the slackers in the next cubicle talk about video game strategy and office babes. What am I supposed to do?" Shemika just smiled and asked, "Which of these three choices would work best for you? Can we talk about your need for other people to magically change in order for you to continue to do your good work, would you like some coaching on how to approach your peers, or may I help you to find ways to manage your frustration?"

How will you frame the conversation? We should all know by now that starting a sentence with “You need to . . .” is an exercise in futility and a likely set-up for things going downhill from there. It is much more likely that our communication will be received with some degree of openness if we speak from our own experience. Inviting someone to understand our perspective is far preferable to telling them what they have done wrong. Since a conversation is a dynamic exchange, the words cannot be precisely scripted in advance. One mistake many of us make is to deliver our logical, rational bullet points, somehow expecting the other person to get them and accept them. When they don’t, we tend to simply repeat them in a louder voice! Find a way to talk about what’s important to both parties, not just your point of view. The challenge is to use “joining language” while still being authentic.

Are you reasonably skilled in active listening? When we’re in the heat of the moment, the first thing that gets fried is our ability to listen carefully and accurately. Active listening basically means that we are able to record and play back the gist of what the other has said with 80% or better accuracy. Usually our emotions, filters, and biases cause major distortions. This skill is one that needs to be practiced because its amazing how many times we think we heard what the other person said, only to find out that we either missed big chunks because we were preoccupied with what we were going to say next, or we put a negative spin on it that wasn’t intended. This is why e-mail and its little cousin texting are absolutely the worst mediums to try and resolve

anything with emotional content. We get no clue as to tone or non-verbals, and it's far too easy to assume a negative when it was never intended. Face time beats techno time every time when it comes to resolving relational challenges.

What happens when you practice being curious instead of judgmental? I recently had an experience where a young man contacted me, asking for assistance. There was no identifying information other than his first name—no geographic reference, name of an organization, or time zone. I began to grumble to myself about how we've lost our rooting in place, and how “mobile vagabonds” seem to think that a few bits of info will suffice for purpose of identification. Turns out this great guy had just triumphantly emerged from a serious episode of mental illness, and my whole perspective shifted. We often inadvertently distance ourselves from others when there's no reason for us to do so other than our own impatience, insecurity, or crabbiness. We may have different or incomplete information, and/or we may interpret it differently. “Seek first to understand then be understood” is wisdom indeed.

“Just because technology enables us to be “always-on” does not mean it is healthy for us to be ...

Are you able to model the empathy and compassion you would like to receive? Wouldn't it be great if the person you need to find the middle ground with was able to reflect back on what you've said, acknowledge your complex feelings on the matter, and offer reasonable solutions that you both agreed had value? Well, you can certainly start the process from your end which will greatly increase the chances that you'll get what you would like.

Jamal was initially unable to figure out why his people seemed so distant when he offered his suggestions and opinions and we wondered why they weren't considered or accepted more often. He was trying to craft his conversations in a way that demonstrated his technical knowledge and creative thinking. His teammate Jennifer asked him to take a break and go for a walk. Once they had left the building, she said, "Hey Jamal, mind if I share some feedback with you? I see you trying too hard to impress, and I know what that's like. As a female engineer, I used to be so concerned about whether or not people would take me seriously. However, I discovered that while we all deserve respect, no one but me could understand how my insecurities sometimes got the best of me. I do think your ideas have value, and I wonder if others would find them easier to hear if you first asked them about their work and gave them some interest and attention."

Can you find the courage to take the risk? We often talk ourselves out of stepping into a challenging conversation. It will get better, we think. Maybe I'm making this into too big a deal. In reality, we're creating excuses to keep ourselves from dealing with the situation at hand. It took me years to learn that the best way to strengthen a valued relationship was to move as clearly and quickly through a conflict as possible. Now, while I still get those old feelings of being uncomfortable, I can reflect on how things have almost always turned out better when I use the tools that I picked up along the way.

Can you be unattached to a specific outcome? *What do you mean?*, you may be thinking, *give up the fight?* No, it's just that when we can't be okay unless things go our way then we may create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Think of the good folks who work in the emergency room of your local hospital. They never know for certain whether or not they can "save" a seriously ill or injured person, so they know that all they can do is the best they can do. By being present to the best of our ability, by accepting that there may be positive unknowns, and by practicing a bit of Zen we may actually end up in a place far different and potentially better than we imagined.

Are you willing to make an investment over a reasonable period of time? Bringing forth an issue can be daunting, and often we prepare well in advance only to find ourselves bummed out that it didn't turn out the way we had hoped. In many situations we're addressing patterns, and one or two conversations, no matter how skilled, will not turn the situation around completely. True, at times we need to set limits and boundaries, and/or realize that we're working way harder than the other person to obtain clarity. Taking the long view is hard when we're looking for short-term gratification, but sometimes it's the only path.

How can you incorporate and integrate the learning you receive from each difficult conversation? Although we don't have to like it at the time, we learn when we squirm. As one of my mentors—James Hillman—said, “If you lived your life backwards it would make total sense.” Over time you too may actually use the formally ominous dark clouds of conflict on the horizon as simply signals that a natural thunderstorm will wash the landscape clean. We can move to a place where disagreements are seen as dialogues, instability as invitation, and opposition as opportunity.

Heather knew that she was going to be taking a big risk at the staff meeting, but she took a silent deep breath and began, “I have an observation I want to share with the group, even though this may be hard for me to say, and difficult for some of you to take in. I’m aware that our group seems to be putting off some challenging decisions around the budget because

any choice we make is going to involve some short-term organizational pain. In addition, I think we need to look at how we make decisions as a group, because it seems like we often talk about a topic until we run out of steam and then move on without clarity. You have probably been able to guess that I've been frustrated, but I need to find a better way to take an active role in the process. I hope you'll hear this not as criticism, but as an investment in the good work that I know this amazing team is capable of.

In the archetypal saga we know as *Star Wars*, Obi-Wan Kenobi is teaching a blindfolded Luke Skywalker to use a light saber. The task at hand is for Luke to sense and then deflect the bolts of energy that the floating orb that is zapping him with. The wise elder advises him that frustration would keep him from accessing the Force, since the purpose is not to inflict injury or seek revenge. The Force is represented as the universal guiding principal of integrity, courage, and compassion.

It's not easy to step into a potentially difficult conversation with a clear mind, open heart, and centered energy, but as we find the ways and means to practice over time we experience more meaning, fulfillment, and results. 🌱