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Confrontational Communication

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Abstract: Communicating with an angry person should not be a competition or verbal volley that gathers momentum until someone “wins.” Effective communicators shift the exchange from the emotional to the rational. A person’s power to disarm the emotions of an antagonist lies in his or her initial ability to understand the nature and causes of anger. The effective person then connects on a visceral level, as a person, not as a corporate functionary. Next, effective communicators ask permission to provide information, which gives the angry person perceived control over the situation. Finally, by explaining or offering choices, the effective communicator lays out options and further reduces emotion, replacing it with agreements.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating with an angry person is one of the most difficult business challenges a manager can face. Whether the angry person is a fellow employee, a client, or an outside third party, being on the receiving end of heightened emotions is stressful. The challenge of someone pounding a fist, shouting, or

making strong vocal demands forces the recipient to gather all his or her skills in order to respond.

When face-to-face with a hostile person, the natural human response is to respond in kind—to match the level of agitation in order to “stay even.” In most professional situations, however, this is not an effective strategy. If you match hostility with hostility, the cycle will only perpetuate itself. The key to breaking this cycle is to establish *mutual understanding*. By finding a common ground of understanding, you can unlock the conflict and begin to build communication step by step.

In most meetings that managers attend, the content and subject matter are usually neutral in nature. Attendees typically establish a conversational rhythm that proceeds in a “give-and-take” pattern. Issues are brought up, discussed, and resolved. But when individuals come to meetings with private grievances or groups of people ban together with lists of grievances, we consider these individuals or groups as “needy.” When faced with such a situation, the manager must communicate both an understanding of the grievances and a willingness to collaborate to address them.

The most extreme and challenging situation is when individuals or groups are not only needy, but also highly emotional. These situations call for a show of humanity. You must be willing to hear the other person’s concerns. Once an emotionally charged person sees that you are listening and concerned, the anger will likely begin to dissipate. With the anger out of the way, you can shift the discussion to collaboration and a resolution of the issues.

To calm a hostile person and create understanding between divergent thinkers, the following four-step process is useful:

1. Inquire
2. Empathize
3. Ask permission
4. Explain or offer choices

INQUIRE

During the “inquire” phase, employ active listening skills. Focus and fully concentrate on the other person’s issues and concerns. Ask open-ended questions, nod, take brief notes, and maintain eye contact as much as possible. The goal during this stage is to let the other person talk. Trying to interrupt

before the person has gotten it all out is counterproductive and will only delay a resolution of the conflict.

If you are in a larger group, be sure to solicit representative opinions from as many others as possible. Although there is no way you can always poll everyone, being attuned to different points of view will build your credibility as someone committed to knowing the full extent of the issues.

EMPATHIZE

To “empathize” means to connect with someone on his or her emotional level. Empathy is not typically shown in our day-to-day business conversations; however, empathy is essential to success in an emotionally charged situation. It can best be communicated by employing a two-step process:

1. “I” to “You”: This first step toward empathy simply communicates that “I” relate to how “you” feel. To do this effectively, name the emotion the person is feeling. For example:

Relate to the Person	Name of the Emotion
I appreciate	your frustration
I understand	your doubt
I share	your concern

2. “I, Too”: The second step is empathizing with the person to let him or her know that you, too, feel or have in the past felt the same way. Key phrases that accomplish this are:

- “I also felt the way you do.”
- “I, too, have felt that way.”
- “I, too, would want to know the same thing if I were in your position.”

Managing the other person’s emotions at this point is about continuing to let the person calm down. Respond to high pitched or loud remarks quietly and calmly. The contrast in volume and tone will dissipate the intensity and emotionality of the situation. In the same way, if the angry person is gesturing wildly or pacing up and down, remain still and composed. Consistently applied calm responses are a powerful means of calming an antagonist down.

It may take some time to establish empathy with an angry person. He or she may at first reject what you say as “lip service.” Only when you have sincerely communicated that you really see how he or she feels can you move to the next step.

ASK PERMISSION

The natural inclination when someone has verbally attacked you is to retaliate with a quick and self-protective response. Resist this “knee jerk” reaction; instead, ask whether or not the other person would like to hear some information. By specifically requesting permission, you are putting the angry person in control—hence decreasing his or her tension. Here are some examples of appropriate language to use:

- “Would it be helpful for you to know what we have done in this area thus far?”
- “What information can I provide you?”
- “Would it be helpful to you if we . . . ?”

If your listener says “no” to all of these questions, you can then ask: “What, then, would be helpful?” All of these permission questions communicate that you are a reasonable person doing your best to reach a common ground of understanding. Once your listener says “yes,” you can proceed to the final step.

EXPLAIN OR OFFER CHOICES

When you have permission to explain something, keep the explanation short and simple. You may also ask other questions to confirm your understanding. If an explanation of some sort is not appropriate, you may want to offer the angry person choices. For example:

- “Do you want to see our analysis of the situation next Tuesday or next Thursday?”
- “Would seeing the plans or the actual figures help you?”

The more choices you give the other person, the greater his or her sense of control will be. Knowing that there really are ways to resolve the issue will lessen the angry person's hostility. When he or she is in a more neutral and rational state, you can start to solve the problem together.

Note that this model for defusing anger does not always move in a simple and linear fashion. You may find yourself in a situation in which some residual anger surfaces just when you thought the problem had been solved. You may have to cycle through the model again or spend a longer time on an individual step. It is likely, for example, that the angry person may take quite a long time to vent his or her initial anger. Remembering that anger is essentially fear turned inside out, you must let the other person express the anger before you can move forward. In the same way, you may succeed in laying out options—but none will be acceptable. The other person's frustration may mount again, so be prepared to let him or her talk about it before attempting to lay out other options.

CONCLUSION

Remember that your success in dealing with an angry person lies in your ability to communicate with sincerity, consistency, and flexibility. He or she should know that what you are saying and how you say it are coming from the heart, not the head. Establishing a consistent pattern of responses—clear, focused, and simple—will give the angry person more security. Remember that being flexible means not being so structured or verbally disciplined that you are not prepared to address new issues that come up.

Originally published in The 2001 Annual, Volume 2, Consulting.

