

Confrontation!

To help Christians manage and lead teams, Kent Stickler of Stickler Learning (www.stickler-learning.com), in Clearwater, Florida, United States, and Marlene LeFever of Cook Communications Ministries International, designed a Christian leadership course. Here, they tackle a topic many find difficult.

Why do we freeze when we are faced with confrontation? Perhaps it is because we are afraid of being disliked or of angering the person we wish to confront. Years ago, Marlene had to confront an employee about his shoddy work. He was furious and threatened to hit her. She told him that if he did, he would be fired immediately. He replied, "I might be fired, but you'll have no teeth." Confronting others can be dangerous.

Another reason we do not like confrontation is that we are not used to sharing our feelings. Since confrontation almost always involves feelings, we shy away from it rather than taking a chance of getting too emotional.

Perhaps the most important reason we do not confront is that we have never been taught to do it effectively.

Christian writer Richard Fowler talks about what happens in churches when leaders do not confront others as needed. The same thing happens in Christian publishing companies. He says, "This villain conflict can be the source and motivator for healthy church [and business] growth and development, whereas its supposed counterpart unity can be the mask for something more lethal. . . This often-uplifted quality, sometimes achieved through negative means, can ultimately nullify the creativity of a group. The results can destroy vibrant, interpersonal relationships between group members."

How can we avoid this in our companies? Here are a few of the confrontation tools we have found helpful.

Biblical principles

Look through the following Scriptures and record principles you can implement in conflict situations. You might record principles like these: "God's discipline toward those who cause conflict is decisive;" or, "The result of effective confrontation is growth for men and women who believe in the Lord."

- Acts 5:1-14: Dishonesty and its effects
- James 4:1-8: The source of conflicts
- John 9: The man born blind
- Galatians 2: Paul on circumcision
- James 3:1-13: The power of the tongue
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-31: Diversity leads to health
- Acts 15: Meeting in Jerusalem

The confrontational message: What? How? Why?

What follows is a mini-course in confrontation to help you address employees you want to keep. Start by sharing a three-part message with them.

1. *What is causing the problem?* Describe what the other person is doing to cause you a problem. For example, "You have been coming in 15 minutes late to work almost every day." Be specific.

2. *How does that make you feel?* "As your boss, this makes me feel frustrated." Note that you are talking about your feelings, not what you think the employee is feeling.

3. *Why is this so important to you?* "I have been stressing the need for everyone to work regular hours so I can organize schedules and team projects." This puts the problem into a business context and shows you are not just arbitrarily confronting the employee.

Practice

Here are three confrontational messages. Put one line under the "what"; two lines under the "how"; three lines under the "why."

■ You have been ridiculing and criticizing the company's decisions. This makes me feel ineffective because I am the one charged with implementing those decisions.



■ I am responsible to the board for staying within the budget and when you order supplies without clearing them with me first, I feel angry.

■ I am depressed by my inability to help you overcome your negative attitude toward not getting promoted. You are negatively affecting the entire team.

Now, take time to write your own confrontational messages for the following situations. Assume you are the supervisor of each of these employees.

Situation: A good worker refuses to participate in a team assignment. She says she works much better when she does her assignments alone.

Situation: An employee is eight weeks behind on his schedule.

Situation: A person who has been suggested by your boss for a promotion is rumored to be headed toward a messy divorce.

The final practice step is to think of three situations that you are facing, and structure a three-step confrontational message. This formula is not foolproof, but does give you a starting place.

Setting the stage for confrontation

Let the person know ahead of time that you want to talk. Choose a time and a place that will be appropriate for the conversation. In the U.S., a manager might say, "Could we set up a breakfast meeting on Wednesday? I want to make sure we both understand our mission statement the same way." While such a setting may not be the best in your culture—choose what would work best for you—the point is to inform the other person of your intent to discuss an important matter.

At the session, let the person know that he will get an opportunity to tell his side of the story. "I want to go over a problem I'm having. I'll let you know where I'm coming from, and then I'll be quiet and let you talk. Let's see if we can't talk this through until both of us are comfortable with the solution." Let the employee know this is a conversation—not a lecture.

Be realistic. If you know your confrontational message could cause an

emotional outburst—yelling, tantrums, tears—set your stage in a place where you can have privacy.

Allow enough time. What may be routine for you may be extremely important to the person you are confronting. He must be able to fully express his emotions, or the confrontational experience will not be effective.

After the confrontational message

An employee can give one of four responses to a confrontational message. The first is ideal. The employee agrees to change. The person says, "I'm sorry. I've been pretty sloppy about getting to work on time. I'll do better."

The second response is that you may change. The employee says, "I apologize. I have to drop my child off at school during a 15-minute time window. From his school, if I speed and hit all the traffic lights right, I can get here on time. Given my family situation, I don't see how I can do better." At that point you may respond, "I understand. Let's explain it to everyone and set your starting time back a half hour. It seems silly to have you break the law so you can get here to do the Lord's work."

The third response is the one to watch. The employee rejects your message. "Hey, it's only 15 minutes, and I do more work than most of the people who get here on time. If you don't like it, then fire me."

The fourth response is a combination. The person agrees she'll change. She does for a while but very soon she's back into her sloppy patterns. Nothing really changed.

When it doesn't work

You're the leader. You tried the confrontational message. It didn't work. Where do you go from here?

1. *You can issue a power play.* "You will do this or you're gone." This results in an employee leaving in anger, often bad mouthing the company.

If the employee is doing something illegal or immoral, you may start with the confrontational message, but you will usually have to follow it with a

power play. For example, "When a Christian employee steals from the company, I am embarrassed about what that says to our customers about Jesus and about the mission of this company. You will have to leave immediately."

2. *You can live with a permissive play.* Weak managers do this. They allow the person to have her way even though they do not agree. A weak manager might think, "I talked to her, and it did not do any good, so I guess that's the way it's going to be. I sure don't want to have to train someone new for her job."

3. *You can try the "everyone wins, everyone grows" approach.* You talked to the person causing the conflict. He is unwilling to change and so are you. You need to talk through your differences, admit there is a conflict and agree that together you are going to talk this through until you leave the session in harmony. This means consensus. It means compromise.

In order to follow this pattern, you must first identify the problem. You will already have done this in developing your confrontational message. You should then suggest solutions with both of you participating. If the problem involves a group, everyone should contribute. Action should be taken with everyone in full agreement. Finally, make it a point to review the solution at a later date.

Confront! If you are not confronting, you probably are not leading. Putting off confrontation only makes it harder. No one ever climbed a hill by looking at it! Do what is necessary to foster healthy, truthful relationships with your staff—and lead the ministry God has entrusted to you. ❖