THE ART OF
CONSTRUCTIVE
CONFRONTATION

How to Achieve More Accountability with Less Conflict

John Hoover
Roger P. DiSilvestro

THE ART OF
CONSTRUCTIVE
CONFRONTATION

How to Achieve More Accountability with Less Conflict

John Hoover
Roger P. DiSilvestro

WILEY

Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction

To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires some of the same courage that a soldier needs. Peace has its victories, but it takes brave men and women to win them.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The constructive confrontation system is a course of action that shows leaders how to use confrontation constructively to increase accountability and decrease conflict in their departments, divisions, and organizations. Confrontation is like fire or water. Properly used, it can save your life. It can also destroy. The difference emerges when confrontation is confused with conflict. Negative or conflictual confrontation is the explosion of pent-up frustration — frustration that wouldn't have existed had the course of action been followed to the end. The presence of anger and hostility in the workplace usually indicates that there has not been *enough* confrontation — specifically, *constructive* confrontation — to prevent friction and the frustration that inevitably follows. People in positions of leadership have the choice to confront constructively now or confront negatively later.

Do you have the courage to hold people accountable for the performance they agreed to deliver? If you were taught that accountability can only be enforced through conflict, there is good news ahead. Raw courage in the form of an iron fist is not what it takes to hold people account-

able. Roaring like a lion and flashing a set of brass knuckles are more likely to produce acute anxiety than actual accountability.

If you follow the circle of constructive confrontation, courage becomes less necessary as the system takes over. By definition, confrontation merely means to communicate face-to-face. Sales professionals are keenly aware that the best way to influence other human beings is with face time. Why would the people within your sphere of influence at work be any different?

Constructive confrontation is a structured, systematic approach that *decreases* conflict and *increases* accountability by connecting the dots between what people want and what organizations need. Constructive confrontation reduces conflict in the same way it increases accountability through clear and well-articulated expectations, follow-up, and recognition. Increased accountability with less conflict requires consistent, constructive confrontation that establishes the course, makes course corrections, and reaffirms the course.

Confrontation is the weakest link in executive leadership because it is frequently mistaken for the tantrums of unskilled managers who reach the end of their ropes and blow up at those around them, especially those reporting to them. The following are two of the primary reasons for this behavior:

1. Confrontation is misunderstood, avoided, and not applied as soon, or as often, as needed.
2. When it *is* applied, it's usually an expression of frustration instead of skilled leadership.

There is nothing complicated about constructive confrontation as a road map for accountability. Supervisors, managers, and executives can successfully hold their direct reports (and themselves) accountable for their performance by using this three-step cycle:

Constructive confrontation is not a practice reserved for leaders to apply to subordinates. As you can see in Figure I.1, there is nothing complicated about constructive confrontation as a road map for accountability. Anyone, at any level, can, and should be encouraged to, engage in
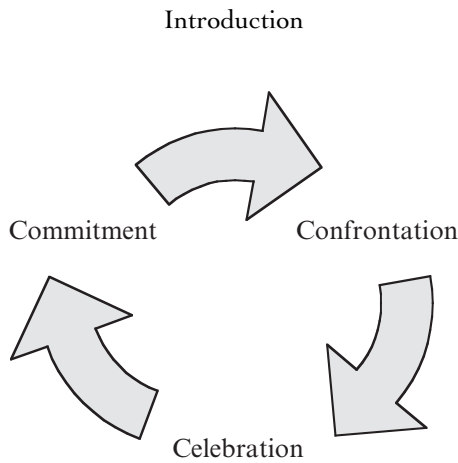
FIGURE I.1. Circle of confrontation

constructive confrontation. The conditions are simple: (1) There must be a covenant between the parties outlining the commitment, including expectations, methods, and measures; (2) All parties must confront one another to ensure that progress and performance are what they should be. This means peer-to-peer confrontation as well as team member-to-team leader confrontation. The rules and principles are the same for everybody, the only difference being range of institutional responsibility; (3) All parties to the covenant must celebrate the successful completion of each designated step in the process.

COMMITMENT TO EMOTIONAL PURPOSE

The process of securing true commitment is based on emotional purpose. Each team member must be able to clearly articulate his or her personal and professional ambitions in real and certain terms and how his or her current employment helps fulfill those ambitions. The supervisor, manager, or executive must also disclose his or her emotional purpose and relate them to his or her role in the organization. The discussion of emotional purpose helps team members internalize the context of the job.

Job functions are not typically tailored to suit what the individual wants and needs. But aligning the team member's wants and needs as

closely as possible to what the organization needs sets the stage for enthusiastic and productive performance. Without this piece of the commitment conversation, both team leader and team member might operate from assumptions that can sabotage a working agreement.

COMMITMENT TO ONE ANOTHER

The commitment stage of the process eliminates the mind reading that so many supervisors, managers, and executives expect will fill in the gaps when their team members aren't adequately briefed. During the commitment stage, the team leader and team member discuss specific goals, the schedule for reaching the goals, and the process for achievement. The commitment consists of more than ethereal goals that sound good in motivational meetings or in the optimistic glow of goal-setting sessions or change management seminars.

The team member and team leader must commit to one another to fulfill their agreed-upon roles and responsibilities. One of the leader's responsibilities is confrontation. Team leaders must also be willing to be confronted by team members. If there is no clear, written covenant between the team leader and team member, there is no basis for confrontation by anyone, except by pulling rank.

THE TEAM LEADER/TEAM MEMBER COVENANT

Formation of a written covenant completes the commitment arc in a skilled leader's circle of confrontation. If expectations are created by one party without agreement from the other, if elements such as the time table remain ambiguous, or if the terms of the commitment are not recorded and communicated, there is no reason to expect compliance. Without a written road map of expectations for the performance of individual team members, there is no target to aim for. Nor is there a confirmed criterion or foundation for constructive confrontation.

If the commitment to action isn't cleansed of all ambiguity, the entire agenda is likely to be derailed. Tasks and objectives must be specific, con-

crete components individual team members can complete in a measurable manner. And they must be written down. The circle of confrontation begins with each team member's commitment to the required actions, in real time, to achieve real results. The covenant between the team member and team leader must be realistic, complete, and meaningful before it can be enforceable.

CONFRONTATION

Confrontation is course confirmation and, when needed, correction. In business and organizational life, as in many other aspects of human behavior, people set out to achieve predetermined goals and don't revisit the goal until it has been achieved, not been achieved, or the effort has been abandoned along the way. Any pilot or navigator knows that, although the aircraft or ship departs for a specific destination, course corrections en route are essential to reaching the destination.

Individuals and those responsible for the performance of others must check regularly for deviations from the course and make corrections as necessary. Waiting until the deadline is too late. Once-per-year performance reviews aren't nearly enough. Daily, weekly, and monthly constructive confrontation is a team leader's most fundamental responsibility to him- or herself, to team members, and to the well-being of the entire organization. Confrontation, as course correction, comes in a variety of packages, including the following:

1. *Rewriting or reaffirming goals and expectations.* As progress and performance are regularly monitored and evaluated, the original goals might need to be reevaluated. Internal or external changes to the organization might call for modification of the original goals. Other unforeseen influences might also require adjustments.

2. *Communicating what might have not been initially expressed and/or understood.* Thanks to a continuous refinement process of monitoring performance and progress, lack of adequate information or misunderstandings need not rear their ugly heads. Things can't be said once

and be expected to remain in the front of anyone's consciousness. Confrontation is reminding, reminding, and reminding again.

3. *Exposing intentional or unintentional misrepresentations.* People can innocently commit to more than they're capable of delivering. They can also *intentionally* misrepresent what they're capable of delivering, figuring that no one will confront them on it later. Windows can open for conflict to creep in when team leader or team member intentionally misrepresents him- or herself during the commitment stage. Consistent constructive confrontation deals with this issue sooner rather than later and provides everyone with an opportunity to come clean before too many opportunities are lost and too much damage is done.

Confrontation, based on the covenant the team leader and team member agreed to, is constructive and nonthreatening. It's not a personal attack because there is nothing personal about progress or lack of progress on a predetermined agenda. With a clear road map for progress, the discussion immediately focuses on whether the team member is on course. If not, the conversation can immediately segue into what is causing the disruption or disconnect and how it can best be addressed.

When little or no clarity exists about expectations, roles, and responsibilities, confrontation is almost always a negative and unproductive experience. The commitment stage must be fully completed before the confrontation stage can reach full value. Flexibility in course corrections or acquiring new information is always helpful. But "changing the rules as we go" is never a confidence builder in team members' minds and often results in cynicism. When supervisors, managers, and executives don't work the program, team members start bailing out.

CELEBRATION SETS THE TONE

Rewarded behavior is repeated behavior. Celebration helps keep confrontation *constructive.* If the only ongoing dialogue that team leaders offer team members deals with course correction and compensating for

shortcomings, the long-term effect will be dampening. Constant recognition of achievement, appropriate for the size of the accomplishment, helps perk up the confrontation conversation. Nevertheless, celebration is unfamiliar to many.

Armed with recognition for the team members' successes, the team leader consistently and constructively confronts each team member as he or she guides the team member's personal and professional growth — all of which were included in the original covenant with an eye toward reaching and exceeding personal and organizational goals. When it works, however, many people are surprised and don't know what to do. For many, completely meeting a challenge is a new experience. It is part of the team leader's responsibility to help team members learn to lighten up. The team leader and team member alike must become good at celebrating, through recognition and reward, and not discount celebration as frivolous or irresponsible behavior.

Celebration is the consistent and continuous reinforcement of the little things *and* big things that make goal attainment possible, *especially* the little things. Celebration starts with the smallest achievements upon which the larger accomplishments are built. Just as monitoring progress and performance are essential elements of the process, *recognizing* successful completion of tasks and other process elements outlined in the commitment stage is also critical to successful completion of the circle of confrontation as a whole.

Without celebration, commitment and confrontation are meaningless. But what should be celebrated? The circle of confrontation is based in part on the achievement and acquisition of the things team members have identified as the possessions, moments, and memories they seek most in their lives. Life achievements outside the workplace need to be celebrated as much as milestones in the internal process. The act of celebrating is an excellent opportunity to reaffirm the connection between internal and external agendas and how they compliment each other.

If commitment and constructive confrontation result in successful completion of the covenant, celebration is essential to renew the cycle. The celebration component of the constructive confrontation process

provides fuel for the continued effort. It marks the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. From celebration comes increased confidence and renewed commitment as the cycle begins again. Each new cycle of success begins with a newly energized person as a result of how well the team leader facilitated the team member's growth and development throughout the process. The ultimate cycle is fulfilled when the team member is able to step up and lead another person through the process of commitment, confrontation, and celebration. That's cause for *real* celebration.

Don't Quit Near the End

If enterprise leadership lacks a spine about anything, it's the willingness to confront. A well-crafted covenant between team leaders and team members is only as good as the team leader's commitment to support each team member through consistent and constructive confrontation and celebration. To give executives, managers, and supervisors the benefit of the doubt, no one probably taught them how badly they are cheating themselves, their direct reports, and their organizations as a whole when they fail to confront in a thoughtful, methodical, systematic, and strategic manner.

Although confrontation in the form of coaching, encouragement, and accountability is an essential tool in a team leader's skill set, the craft of constructive confrontation is so rare that few have seen enough of it to imitate. It's not taught in master of business administration (MBA) programs. Typically, once goals and objectives are set in most organizations, many team members and team leaders look the other direction, aware at some level that there will be no follow-through. If team leaders fail to confront constructively, team members not only have the opportunity to disconnect from their commitments, but they also have a person to blame — the leader.

In practical terms, it's universally accepted that organizational performance suffers from lost productivity. Specifically, performance is lost as it falls through the cracks between what organizations need people to do

and what actually gets done. That gap can only be bridged by constructive confrontation. The art of constructive confrontation is a commonsense cycle of individual *and* organizational success that explodes myths that would have you believe that performance can be enhanced by the following:

- Berating direct reports into submission to their leader's will
- Dangling diamond-crusted carrots in front of their faces
- Exposing them to a continuous stream of motivational propaganda
- Threatening to fire them

ACTION DRIVES THINKING

One of the core concepts supervisors, managers, and executives need to learn is that appropriate action drives right thinking, not the other way around. Training, education, hype, or fearmongering won't produce high performance over time. Even when eliminating hype, false promises, and fearmongering and staying with positive practices like training and education, the active follow-through of constructive confrontation is still vital to genuine performance enhancement. Once the three steps of constructive confrontation are understood, the necessary instruction and encouragement can be applied and measured evenly across the organization. Using constructive confrontation to map a course of action is the best assurance that you'll experience many victories in your organization's future.

PART 1
Commitment

The Case for Confrontation

We've all heard cynics say, "If you want to know how much difference you make in the grand scheme of things, put your hand in a bucket of water, pull it out, and see the impression you leave behind." That's true of water. Unless your hand is dirty enough to change the color of the water, there is no trace left behind. But the cynic's attempt to make a wet hand analogous to life in general — and your impact upon it — breaks down where the rubber meets the road: relationships.

Sure, if you back out to a wide shot of life, the impact individuals make in each other's lives and careers appears smaller. If you back out to a wide enough shot of our planet, say from the moon, Mount Saint Helens in full eruption is barely noticeable. Planet gazing won't accomplish much when professional success or failure is tied so directly to an immediate relationship. It's a matter of scale, perspective, and proportion. Although interpersonal confrontation is a factor in all relationships, *this* book deals with the scale, perspective, and proportion of *working* relationships between team members and team leaders. The relationships dealt with through the circle of confrontation involve people between whom there is a direct line of reporting.

The human psyche doesn't heal its wounds as easily and effortlessly as water does as it conforms to the shape of its container. Nor does the human psyche forget the most elevating and fulfilling moments in life. Unlike water, the human psyche *resists conforming* to the shape of its container. That makes working with human beings a trickier proposition, more unpredictable and wrought with potential peril than filling buckets with water. It also holds more promise for growth and development. When's the last time water learned a new trick?

CONFRONTATION'S BAD RAP

The term *confrontation* is considered by some to be synonymous with *conflict.* Other pejorative terms associated with confrontation include *battle, contest, crisis, dispute, showdown,* or *strife.* It's true that opposing ideas or beliefs, when trying to occupy the same space in the universe, can (and probably will) lead to a conflictual confrontation inspiring diversity advocates to plaintively plead, "Can't we all just get along?"

Perhaps we can. But people with diverse ideas and beliefs must successfully *confront* their differences, not merely deny they exist, if there is to be any hope of acceptance, inclusion, and co-existence. Despite attempts by ever-optimistic and naïve souls to wish the differences away, people with diverse ideas, beliefs, and opinions must consciously choose peaceful and productive coexistence over combative alternatives. If people of diverse ideas, beliefs, and opinions are to live and work together, they must confront their differences instead of each other. It's not unlike the old slogan: "Attack the problem, not the person."

One enormous difference between conflictual versus constructive confrontation is timing. Confrontation, as most people have come to use the term, means addressing divisive issues *after* they have caused dissonance, discord, disconnects, and disputes. Diverse ideas, beliefs, and opinions, if not confronted sooner, will surely become conflicts later. Diverse ideas, beliefs, and opinions can be so extreme and polarizing that they will never reside peacefully in the same vicinity.

If there is any hope of "getting along," it will only be made possible by the sooner-rather-than-later confrontation of the issues. This book is not about avoiding confrontation; it's about using confrontation constructively.

NEGATIVE CONFRONTATIONS NO MORE

The best way to avoid negative confrontations is to confront. More accurately, the best way to avoid negative confrontations is to purposefully and skillfully engage in constructive confrontation. Conversely, the best way to *guarantee* negative confrontations is to avoid confrontation and hope the negativity will just go away. Sorry. Sooner or later, confrontation will become inevitable. All of the energy and resources used up by avoiding confrontation will more than likely ensure confrontation. The art of constructive confrontation will either work *for* you, or you'll be doomed to the type of negative confrontations that most human beings will do anything to avoid.

Confrontation, the way the term is used here, is neutral. Confrontation, in and of itself, is not positive *or* negative. It becomes positive or negative depending on whether it's used proactively and preemptively or whether it becomes a consequence of neglect. Almost any unfortunate, unpleasant, after-the-fact confrontation could be described as "something that should have been confronted a long time ago."

In light of the negative synonyms for confrontation already listed, there are positive terms associated with confrontation, words that include *meeting, encounter, face down, face up to, stand up to, meet eyeball-to-eyeball,* or *withstand.* Problems in organizational life are dealt with faster, cheaper, and better when they are anticipated and prepared for. The best use of meetings also includes planning and preparing to meet what lies ahead. Every great plan has at least one contingency, so problems that will potentially be encountered won't derail the plan.

Negative influences need to be *faced down,* or neutralized. Realities of the internal and external marketplace need to be *faced up to,* or recognized.

Undue criticisms must be *stood up to,* lest they become debilitating. Any influence that threatens or contradicts the health and well-being of the organization and its internal and external stakeholders must be *faced eyeball-to-eyeball.* Shouldn't anything that needs facing be *faced straight on?* Doesn't any worthwhile task, assignment, project, or initiative potentially encounter hazards and challenges that need to be *withstood?*

That's what constructive confrontation is all about. It doesn't mean chatting about something, shooting the breeze, kibitzing, or navel-gazing. Constructive confrontation means premeditated, methodical, systematic, and well-orchestrated efforts to do the following:

- Get after something before it gets after you.
- Position yourself and your team members for maximum productivity and performance with minimal margin for error.
- Minimize exposure by confronting contingencies in advance.
- Shed excess baggage and burden before the seas get stormy.
- Decrease conflict while increasing accountability.

There are a wide variety of benefits the circle of confrontation will afford you. As conversations lead to commitment, commitment leads to covenant, and covenant becomes the basis for constructive confrontation, the stage is set to get the most from what you have. That beats the heck out of paying more and getting less. Your team members are *begging* for responsible, organized, and effective leadership. They won't come right out and ask for it. But when you ask what went wrong or why their performance tanked, you can bet your bottom dollar that they'll blame the failure on the absence of responsible, organized, and effective leadership.

Don't hold your breath waiting for them to blame themselves. To do so would be painful and possibly even humiliating; except for the masochist, who wants to beat him- or herself up. Despite the fact that they'll accept responsibility for any bad thing that happens, whether or not they have anything to do with it, who really wants to work with masochists? Even small children have a natural tendency to avoid self-indictment.

When provided complete indemnification and assurances that there will be no punishment, youngsters will still answer the question, "Who did this?" with, "I dunno," "The dog," "The monster," "My sister," "A burglar," or "President (fill in the blank)."

Constructive confrontation will focus and inspire your team members like nothing else, whoever is on your bus. When people bemoan a lack of leadership, this is what they're truly asking for:

- Someone to listen and understand their issues, even help them identify issues they might not know they have
- Someone who will stand beside them and fight the good fight shoulder-to-shoulder
- Someone who has their personal and professional growth and development at heart
- Someone who will provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement whenever needed
- Someone who will provide support and backup when others question the team member's motives and methods
- Someone to set boundaries, blow through barriers, and commit to staying the course alongside the team member, beginning to end

What If?

Constructive confrontation differs from conventional confrontation in that it's anticipatory, or pro-active, rather than reactive. It can spell the difference between coming off as a hero or an idiot. When problems arise, the hero says, "Have no fear, we've planned for this contingency." The idiot says, "Gee, I never thought *that* would happen." The truth is that the idiot never gave *any* thought to potential hazards and obstacles. He *assumed,* and we all know the story about the donkey.

More than any other distinguishing feature, constructive confrontation is grounded in careful planning and preparation, considering all options and anticipating as many potential problems as possible. Socially, a

lot of hip folks make fun of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, preferring instead to party with their idiot friends. Why not? Idiots are predictably unpredictable and largely spontaneous, always looking for a good time. Meanwhile the scouts are carefully planning — always prepared.

Next time you get stuck in a blizzard on the turnpike, with whom would you rather be carpooling — idiots or scouts? Next time you veer off the ski slope into the woods and twist your ankle, who do you want to rescue you — a ski patrol person who was a scout or a ski patrol person still hung over from last night's idiot-fest at the lodge? We all ride trains or drive our cars over dozens of bridges, large and small, every day. Do you want to drive or ride over bridges built by architects, engineers, and construction contractors who anticipate potential problems and design solutions into the structures, or do you want to have the bridge collapse beneath you?

This isn't a far-fetched analogy. If a bridge collapses beneath a train or automobile traffic or if the wings fall off of a commercial jetliner, confrontation will follow. But by then, it's conventional, conflict-oriented, accusatory, negative, blame-placing, find-a-scapegoat, search-for-the-guilty, and punish-the-innocent confrontation. No thanks.

Wouldn't you prefer the confrontation to have taken place *before* things started to fall apart . . . literally? Like granny used to say, "A stitch in time saves nine." As the old industrial maxim teaches us, "There never seems to be enough time or money to do it right the first time, but there's always enough time and money to do it *over again.*" Proper planning almost always makes things turn out more pleasantly, and proper planning always includes constructive confrontation.

Some use the term *constructive confrontation* to describe a positive approach to after-the-fact confrontation. No matter when confrontation takes place, you should attempt to go through positive steps, like defining the problem, expressing how you feel about the situation, reflect to the other party what you understand his or her position to be, and find a compromise, if possible. None of this removes or diminishes the fact that postponing or neglecting regular, conscious, constructive confrontation

allowed things to tank in the first place. None of the aforementioned positive behaviors, if applied after the fact, will make up for the time, productivity, resources, and money lost by not staying on top of the game.

Given what you've learned so far about constructive confrontation, you can begin considering a wide range of *what ifs:*

- What if structural and aeronautical architects, engineers, and construction contractors didn't anticipate problems? What if they didn't preemptively confront the challenges and potential perils of construction from conception through completion?
- What if teachers and coaches didn't make lesson plans and game plans before class or the big game? How valued would you feel if your teacher passed out a test before giving an assignment or teaching?
- What if teachers didn't confront students who are not performing up to their capabilities? Who's getting cheated? The student and the society that will be forced to subsidize what the student is unable to contribute later in life.
- What if your athletic coach expected you to show up for the game without holding any practices or running you through any drills or exercises? What if athletic coaches didn't confront athletes who settle for performance below their capabilities? What if vocal coaches, acting coaches, or executive coaches didn't confront the people who are counting on them to confront lackluster performance?
- What if executives committed enormous physical, financial, and human resources to projects without a well-thought-out strategic plan? What if they flew strictly by the seat of their wardrobe? That's simply some peoples' style. But the risks they take jeopardize more than their own success. The more that rides on your decisions and execution, the more you owe it to the organization you work for and the people (internal and external) who are affected by your actions to take well-thought-out strategic actions.
- What if project managers, supervisors, managers, and executives