

CONSTRUCTION CONFRONTATION

How to talk with someone about something difficult

Dr. Burt Bertram

Seems like nearly every day we are faced with telling someone something we know they don't want to hear or talk about. What most of us would like in these situations is to be able to productively address the tense topic without making an already difficult situation worse or further straining the relationship.

Telling a person something they don't want to hear creates anxiety for everyone. Fact is, there is so much discomfort associated with these types of exchanges that many people go to great lengths to avoid or put-off delivering a confrontational message. Rather than confront, some people ignore or overlook situations and behavior that are intolerable, abusive and destructive. Other people habitually put-it-off until one day "out of the blue" they explode and "chewed-out" the other person or even terminate the relationship. All of this happens because the person is fearful or anxious about personal confrontations.

There is a responsible and constructive way to tell a person something they don't want to hear. Never an "ass chewing" or a "getting even" type of experience, **constructive confrontation** is a deliberate attempt to help another person examine the consequences of some aspect of their behavior or attitude. It is an invitation to **self-examination**.

Confrontations, constructively delivered, make a statement of caring about everyone involved. The motive for a constructive confrontation is positive. The message deliverer desires a resolution to their problem and wants to preserve the relationship. The goal is to deliver a message that will minimize defensiveness while strongly inviting another person to examine some aspect of his/her behavior or attitude. The choice to confront rather than ignore the problem or terminate the relationship is ultimately an investment in the health and viability of the relationship.

Constructive Confrontation Guidelines

1) Increased Involvement

Personal confrontation will lead to increased involvement with the person. Don't constructively confront another person if you do not intend or desire to communicate respect and increase your connection with that person.

2) Time & Place

The timing of the confrontation is essential. The confronter has the responsibility to choose a time and place that will maximize the likelihood of being heard and understood.

3) Strength

The strength and intensity of the confrontation must be geared to the seriousness of the issue and the strength of the relationship.

4) Facts – Feelings – Opinions

When constructively confronting, be certain to present,
Facts as Facts
Feelings as Feelings
Opinions as Opinions

5) Success Criteria

The ultimate measure of success of a constructive confrontation is the extent to which it encourages the person to examine their behavior and/or attitude subsequent to actual change.

The Constructive Confrontation Message

Step 1: Preface & Permission

Set the stage for your comments by honestly telling the person what is going on inside you regarding talking to them. Ask for their agreement to listen to you, without interruption, while you tell him/her something important that is on your mind.

"I have something I need to talk with you about. I see this topic as potentially (emotional – risky – difficult – etc.) So, before I jump in...I want to ask for your willingness to talk with me about this topic. Are you willing to talk with me now?"

Step 2: Your Observation or Your Understanding

In simple, non-judgmental language, tell the other person what you have noted (describe behavior), or what you understand occurred. Say it clearly and quickly.

"Let me tell you what I have observed..."

Step 3: Impact Upon You

After you have shared your observation and/or understanding, tell the other person how these circumstances are affecting you and/or your ability to accomplish your responsibilities.

"I've got to tell you how this whole situation is impacting me (and/or our team). I find myself frustrated and preoccupied thinking about it. (OR) This situation has cost me/us XX dollars, lost sleep, hours of time, productivity, customers, etc."

Step 4: Define Your Boundaries

Communicate the importance of your concern and that a resolution to this issue is imperative.

"I want you to know that it is very important to me that we honestly and thoroughly address this issue. I am fully committed to a resolution that is fair and good for both of us. But please know, I do not want this issue cluttering up my life any longer. We must resolve it!"

Step 6: Communication Confirmation

Before the other person begins to respond to your message it is imperative that you confirm from them that they heard and understood your message. Request that they summarize what they heard and then feed it back to you.

"I very much want to hear what you think and feel about what I've just said, but before you begin, would you please summarize what you heard me say so I'm sure I have communicated clearly. It is vital that you got the message I intended to send."

Step 7: Provide Clarification

Based on how accurately your message was heard, provide any needed clarification. Be careful not to get "hooked" into defending your message. The other person's agreement with your message is not the issue. At this point, your focus is to ensure that you were accurately heard and understood.

Step 8: Don't Give Up – Hang In There

When confronted, people often respond by attempting to change the subject. They may want to tell you about some problem they have with you. Confirm your willingness to talk with them about their issue but firmly restate your insistence that right now...your agenda is the concern.

"I can see that you are uncomfortable with what I've said...and I can hear you would like me to talk about a different issue. I commit to you, when we have resolved this issue, I will give your topic my priority attention, but for now, I really need us to focus our attention on the resolution of my concern. What are you willing to do?"

The extent to which this final step is pushed will depend upon the unique characteristics of relationship, the setting, and the timing of the constructive confrontation.

Constructive confrontation is not perfect and it can be risky, but is generally far better than holding things inside until you explode. The benefits of constructive confrontation, in terms of emotional freedom, increased relationship satisfaction, and work productivity cannot be over estimated.

Dr. Burt Bertram - Facilitator, consultant, trainer, coach and counselor, Burt Bertram has been in practice in the Orlando area since 1972, Burt is most professionally satisfied when he is helping individuals and organizations resolve sensitive, complex and important "people-related" issues. Burt Bertram received a Doctorate in Counseling from the University of Florida and is a licensed Mental Health Counselor and Marriage and Family Therapist.