

Are You Confrontable?

Are you safe to confront? When I'm asked to coach executives who've been accused of not welcoming new ideas, abuse, harassment, discrimination, poor conflict management skills or general "poor people management" skills, they frequently lament: "But I didn't know he or she objected to my behavior. Why didn't they tell me?"

To this popular excuse I always respond: "What have *you* done to make it safe for them to come to you and challenge your ideas or complain about your behavior?"

This question is usually followed by silence. The executive views *confrontaphobia* as the other person's problem. But if you feast on conflict like a pit bull *and* if you're viewed as a person who has power in the organization (these two frequently go hand-in-hand), then you're probably difficult for others to confront. You'll need to take specific steps to make it safer for people to confront you.

One of the best ways to overcome your previous reputation is to be honest about your style. At the next staff meeting, mention that your own awareness has been raised about this issue and you've realized you may not have been the easiest person to approach with a new idea or conflict. Announce that you've changed your attitude and ask for suggestions about what would make it easier for people to come to you. You might try something like this:

I'm becoming increasingly aware of how much I need the feedback of each and every one of you to make this organization a success. I want us to be more innovative and productive. But because I've had a reputation in the past as a pit bull who approaches every conflict or new idea as a personal attack or as an opportunity to debate, I'm realizing that some of you may not have found me approachable. What could I do to make it easier for each of you to come to me with conflicts, feedback or suggestions?

Be prepared for resounding silence.

Your reputation as a pit bull will not be easy to overcome. As one of the high-powered attorney I coached complained about the associates in his firm: "*They won't talk to me; they think I'm the prince of f----- darkness.*"

If you continue to ask for suggestions about your approachability, however, hints will eventually arrive at your doorstep.

You may ask, "Why do I care?" Many people with an abrasive style have been successful and even gained power in the workplace. As Vick, one VP of Finance complained when I gave him feedback about his brutal style that had generated a score of employee complaints, "In other organizations, my style would be viewed as an advantage. In fact, I used to receive compliments here for being a tough boss and a hard charger. People today are just too sensitive."

The reality is, the workplace *has* changed. An abrasive style may have been successful yesterday; it will not be successful in the future.

The intrusion of the law into people management in the workplace is one obvious reason for the change. The likelihood of an employee charging you with harassment, discrimination or a violation of the Americans' With Disabilities Act (which now may cover psychological as well as physical disabilities) skyrockets if you have a pit bull reputation. You may protest you're not discriminating against any particular person, you treat everyone this way. In my experience, that argument won't fly with courts or juries. They assume that if you're abusive to everyone, you're even more abusive to people who have less power in the organization, usually women and people of color. Even if you do succeed, you will be stuck with the embarrassing defense of presenting a parade of witnesses to attest to how abusive you were to *them* also.

And these groups will make up more of the workplace as our labor force becomes more diverse. According to the Hudson Institute in their *Workforce 2000 Report*, by the year 2000, only 15% of new workers will be white males. In their updated version, *Workforce 2020*, the 21st century will bring a huge increase in older workers, adding new diversity management issues. A recent survey reports that almost two-thirds of these workers will have elder care responsibilities. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the U.S. population will swell from its current 288 million to over 400 million in the next 50 years. The majority of new immigrants will be non-English speakers. The addition of young people – the so-called generation Y -- who have been raised in a world of technology with different values than their managers requires new skills. Most experts find that these young workers need closer ties to their immediate supervisors, a high degree of stimulation and also need to understand why they're being asked to perform any task in order to stay motivated and engaged. In addition, many executives today manage teams flung throughout the globe: a call center in India, a team of developers in Scotland, or an army of telecommuters. These diverse workforces require entirely new skills and a high degree of awareness about cultural differences and mores.

The second reason is that with the change in the economy, the unpredictable labor market and the interdependent way most organizations are managed, no one can succeed alone. You'll need the suggestions, dedication and brainpower of all your people in order to prosper in the future. To elicit the best ideas from your troops, you need to encourage honest feedback.

Many organizations now evaluate both leaders and co-workers based upon how well they address issues such as diversity, consensus and team building. You can't survive in most organizations without these kinds of skills.

If you're the boss, after announcing at your next meeting your change in your own *modus operandi*, I'd also suggest you start having weekly 15-minute one-on-one meetings with your direct reports. In those meetings, there should be one item on your agenda—keep asking the questions: *What do you need from me or others to be successful here? What behaviors do I or others engage in that limit your success?*

Again, when you first ask these questions, be prepared for silence. If you continue to ask these questions week after week, month after month, however, eventually your colleagues will tell you what they need from you. They'll be more willing to bring you new ideas. More importantly, you will start to see patterns in how others in the organization perceive you and what you must do to change.

You need to keep asking these kinds of questions—not because you're automatically going to change your behavior to suit others—but because you need to be able to skillfully manage their expectations about your behavior. Once you know how they want you to treat them, you can begin to have an honest dialogue about what you can both do differently in the future to make your relationship succeed.

If you're a leader in your organization, consider the model Robert Rodin, President and CEO of Marshall Industries, uses:

The more you insist on hearing the truth, and the more often you act on what you've heard, the more often people will give it to you. But most leaders do precisely the opposite. Their companies systematically distort the truth—by design It's human nature to avoid conflict If you want to hear criticism, you have to invite it. At least once a month, I convene a forum called "Marshall Live." I gather people at one of our sites: no managers are allowed. I start every meeting by saying something like "This is your company. Tell me what's wrong with it." I get amazing feedback. And then I promise to deal with the feedback in two weeks or less. We don't always do what people want: Companies aren't democracies. But people know that we haven't just heard their criticisms—we've dealt with them.

If someone does summon the nerve to complain directly to you about your behavior: stop. Do not immediately respond. Listen to the suggestion of Jerry Hirshberg:

Even people who don't mind telling the truth have mixed feelings about hearing the truth. It's like a chemical reaction: Your face goes red, your temperature rises, you want to strike back. Those are signs of the "two D's": defending and debating. Try to fight back with the "two L's": listening and learning So the next time you feel yourself defending and debating, stop—and start listening and learning instead. You'll be amazed by what you hear.

A Step-by-Step Approach

When someone comes to you with a conflict, a new idea or a criticism about your behavior, follow these steps:

1. *Stop what you're doing and listen.* Give the person your complete attention. If you cannot do that, schedule an appointment as soon as possible.

2. *Do not get defensive.* First restate what the person said to make sure you understood. Say, for example, “Let me make sure I understand what you said. I heard you say you don’t want me to yell at you when I give you feedback. Is that correct?” or “It sounds as if you have a new idea about how to speed up our production schedule.”

3. *Apologize if appropriate.* If you’re convinced you did nothing wrong, at least say you’re sorry your behavior offended them. A good boss or co-worker should be sorry someone else is upset even if they’re convinced the other person over reacted. If you really did do something very wrong, grovel.

4. *Ask what specific behavior the person needs from you in order to work effectively with you in the future or what their specific idea or request is.* Be certain you focus on *behavior*, not *attitudes* or their *feelings*. You can change your own behavior, but you may never be able to change how they feel. Also try to get them to focus on what their specific idea or request is rather than complaints.

5. *Thank them for bringing the matter to your attention and for their courage and honesty.* Let them know you respect and appreciate them for talking with you directly. Unless it’s impossible or outrageous, tell them you’ll consider their new idea or suggestion.

6. *Follow-up.* Make sure you schedule another meeting with them to see if your change in behavior or your response to their idea has met their needs.

7. *Keep talking and keep meeting until your working relationship improves.* If the two of you cannot make it work together, seek an experienced mediator to help you manage your differences.

Does this all sound like too much effort? Unfortunately, there’s no quick and easy way to change a pit bull’s reputation. You do it by changing your own behavior—inch-by-inch, day-by-day. You also do it by assuming leadership in conflict management in your organization and by encouraging feedback as learning.

How to Manage Your Own Anger

The biggest challenge for most pit bulls in becoming *confrontable* may be managing their own anger. *Understanding* your anger is the first step.

The practical, popular psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, in an interview, summarized the current research about anger management. Understand, she stressed, that your own anger is all about fear, especially the fear of exposing something about yourself and the fear of losing control.

When you feel anger, before exploding, ask yourself of what or whom you are afraid. What might you lose in the encounter? How might you be hurt? Knowing the real, underlying reason may help you control your anger.

Next, suggests Dr. Brothers, don't ignore your anger, but don't express rage inappropriately. There was a time when people thought it healthy to immediately express their anger. More recent research, however, suggests that constant ventilating actually makes us more angry rather than less. The most accepted theory is to assume a middle ground between exploding and suppressing anger. Follow these tips, Dr. Brothers suggests:

- don't ignore your anger, but don't immediately blow up
- count to ten
- direct your anger at the proper person
- deal with the issue at hand; don't bring up old issues
- confront the person in private
- stay calm; act calm
- don't smile—smiling can be viewed as mocking and can increase anger
- use “I” statements, i.e., “I don't want you to throw away my papers without asking,” rather than “You have no respect for my things.”
- wait for their explanation
- offer understanding (let them save face)

If counting to 10 doesn't work, Dr. Brothers suggests you count to 100!

If you can manage your anger so that you're *confrontable*, and if you encourage skillful confrontation in your own organization, you can move from defending and debating to listening and learning. You can evolve from debate to dialogue. You will have taken another giant step on the road to unleashing the power of a good fight.

Learning to Value the Confrontable Organization

It may be helpful to you and others in your organization as you do the hard work of learning to welcome a different opinion if you understand just how critical this essential skill is for the future of your organization. Sally Helgesen, author of *The Web of Inclusion: A New Architecture for Building Great Organizations* found in her study that the ability to create open communication where people felt comfortable giving and receiving feedback at all levels of the organization was one of the key predictors of organizational success.

One of my clients, Jane, started her own successful telecommunications company based on this very premise. A long-distance service “re-seller,” Jane’s company was one of a score of such companies that made their business on the idea of buying long-distance services from the larger telecommunications companies, bundling them in unique ways, and reselling them to individuals. Both Jane and her staff came from various members of the old Bell system.

Accustomed to large, hierarchical organizations, Jane and her staff wanted a change. “We wanted to look like the telecommunications network we were selling. We devised a complex web—like a matrix, really—of interlocking people and departments. We wanted everyone to have access to anyone they needed in the organization. We wanted everyone’s thoughts and ideas so that we would up with the best solutions to our problems.”

One of Jane’s first problems was how to design the offices. Breaking with years of Bell tradition, she put her own office out in the open with the other staffers. She toiled at a desk, no walls or even a cube to separate her from her employees. Anyone could talk to her anytime about any concerns. Jane had no secretary and no set schedule. Although this sometimes resulted in a line surrounding her desk, she welcomed the open atmosphere the design created.

“Spontaneous meetings erupted around my desk,” Jane told me. “We finally put a couch next to it so that people could participate without fainting from fatigue.”

The informal system had another benefit: rumors were nipped in the bud because anyone who wanted to participate in the initial discussion could. There were no secret meetings behind closed doors. Jane’s power as a leader came from the extraordinary openness she was able to demonstrate. Creative solutions flowed out of the chaos surrounding Jane’s desk.

Jane also instituted an electronic bulletin board where anyone could post questions about what the company was doing and why. No queries were off limits. Postings ranged from “Why don’t we have a better brand of coffee?” to “Why is our stock down this morning?” Jane, or one of her assistants, answered these queries within forty-eight hours or let the questioner know when the information would be available.

Perhaps most important, Jane shaped her successful company by listening and asking the right questions. When anyone would come to her with an issue, her response was always, “What do you think we should do?” Or, “What are your team’s ideas for solving that problem?” No one doubted that Jane was anxious to seek out their opinion or to be confronted about any issue.

In part, because of the depth of inclusion and confrontability Jane was able to create, her company survived the recent telecommunications shake down that plunged many other companies into bankruptcy. When the market tightened, Jane simply solicited the best ideas of all of her employees. Instead of the lay-offs other companies had to stomach, Jane asked her people what they should do. When someone suggested offering voluntary three-month sabbaticals to those who wanted them, Jane agreed. Around 15% of her employees took advantage of her offer over the next two years; enough to get the company over its financial hump.

Similarly, Southwest Airlines has always created an inclusive culture where everyone from a vice president to a baggage handler knew they could offer suggestions and feedback. Everyone refers to president, chairman, and CEO Herb Kelleher as “Herb,” and he seems to know all the employees by their first names. Once, after I gave a speech to their executives, I attempted to walk across the crowded hall with Herb to the buffet table. He stopped so often to ask how someone’s divorce was going or to inquire after a new baby, that I gave up in starvation and fetched lunch by myself. The new head of Southwest, Coleen Barrett, is well known for her own encyclopedic knowledge of employee birthdays, anniversaries, and work preferences.

When new employees start at Southwest, they’re given a list of one hundred questions to answer about the company. Everyone’s door—right up to Herb’s—is open to these new questioners. From an employee’s first moment at Southwest, they know that they can approach anyone with questions or concerns.

What is the benefit of such extraordinary access? When other airlines were forced to lay off employees after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the United States Pentagon, Southwest instead assured employees that they would stand firm and asked employees to suggest any cost saving ideas they might have. The strategy worked and Southwest flew through the storm.

Another one of my clients, a manufacturing company, has always avoided unions in an industry that’s largely unionized. “How do they manage this feat?”, I once asked the vice president of employee relations. “If you don’t want a union,” he responded, “act as if you already have one.”

Indeed, the company recently fought off an attempted organizing effort by stepping up its normally frenetic schedule of town meetings, management/labor baseball games, and CEO informal lunches with employees, emphasizing access, access, access. The would-be union lost again, gaining only 10% of the workers’ votes. In addition, profits were up for the third year in a row, running against the industry norm.

Likewise, a large school district in our state was fraught with dissent from teacher unrest, parent unhappiness, and student agitation. When the new superintendent took over, she announced that she was delegating most of her day-to-day duties to one of her deputies. Instead, she would spend her first year “listening and learning.” She got an earful.

Teachers wanted more pay and more support. Students wanted open campuses and smoking lounges; parents wanted higher educational standards; and voters wanted better

administration accountability. She realized that there was only one way to achieve everyone's objectives: a new bond issue to raise money. The only problem? The past three bond issues had failed miserably.

Continuing to listen to the suggestions from the various stakeholders, she told the voters that she had adopted one citizens group's gutsy idea: the district would receive new money from voters only if they managed to achieve specific educational objectives. No gains, no money. The bond issue passed.