

Is there a business value to confrontation?



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Is it a stretch of the imagination to say that confrontation is a dirty word in our society? In business situations, where an individual or organization speaks directly to an issue, do we use the term confrontation synonymously with conflict and aggression?

If our answer is yes, and this is an accurate perception or accepted cultural phenomenon, then it would not be true to say that in order to deal with issues, grievances or concerns, backdoor tactics would have to be deployed? Results would have to be achieved by getting the message across without appearing to be confrontational.

For example, consider supervisors who are unwilling to *directly* inform team members as to unsatisfactory performance, the outsourcers who cannot tell vendors that their services/products are

not required or not up to scratch, or the colleague who will never disagree. Think of the operational environment where everyone is afraid to say they are unhappy, or of people who cannot ask/state whether or not a particular contribution is effective/needed or not.

Protracted communications go on and on until the penny drops safely—and politely. How efficient is this? Apart from the inevitable breakdown in trust, and scenarios where every interaction is dissected for a hidden meaning, costly hours may be spent in futile communication with little or no result. Suggested, nuanced and vague attempts to communicate objectives will always be ambiguous and allow the passively inclined to evade direct response.

How much better to state one's case directly, asking for, or provoking, a clear measurable response. How many profitable hours would be saved?

It would make for an interesting survey/study to assess how much the refusal to confront concerns costs the average organization in time and money.

I am astounded by the number of business folk who label people as "aggressive", "emotional" or "combative" merely because they tackle issues head on. "Aggression is not part of our culture", I'm told in the course of countless conflict management seminars. Investigation nearly always leads to the discovery that confrontation is once again interpreted as aggression. Similarly, I see negotiations failing because of fudged objectives and refusal to clearly state or ascertain bottom line positions.

People who say "No" upfront are slated as "offensive" or "hostile". Surely being told "no" is better than being left to interpret unctuous politeness as a possible "yes".

The bitter irony of all this is that people know exactly what is going on anyway—how frustrating it is when passivity and timidity are confused with tact and diplomacy. A boiling pot will boil over

...or explode if the lid is welded tight. Things are as they are!

Hiding issues does not make them go away. Instead, passive aggression escalates into full-on conflict that unnecessarily damages relationships and organizations, often beyond repair. This has to impact on business profitability.

In presenting raw business intelligence or new/contentious ideas, the stakes are often more extreme. Employees, long used to resistance when presenting unwelcome information, provide such vague, watered-down reports and safe recommendations that they might as well stay silent.

The resultant loss of the competitive edge is staggering—all because of a business culture that refuses to confront unpleasant realities.

The ability to rationally communicate well-founded objectives, with relevant context and benefit/consequence, shows clear respect for people's time and intellect. It also provides the best shot at empowering decision-making and measurably achieving desired outcomes.

Speaking for myself, I have relatively little interpersonal stress because I know where I stand with most people. Sure, behind my back I am called "confrontational" "direct" and even "opinionated" at times. Sure, I have lost business from people or organizations preferring the safe "emperor has no clothes syndrome" type of consulting style. My long-standing relationships with like-minded clients, however, attest to real, solid and repeat business, underpinned with mutual respect and trust.

The human condition is imperfect. Understanding and facing the fear of being wrong, or being termed pushy or even obnoxious is the first step in being accountable to best business practice. Confronting concerns will always open the door to resolution or solution.

I am reminded of William Blake's wise adage from the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Without contraries there is no progression".