

ENTERPRISE

Conversing versus confronting



Negotiation strategies

■ Raphael E. Lapin

With the pace of change as fast as it is in today's business environment, yesterday's arrangements or today's agreements will likely need to be revisited. In addition, diverse work forces, globalization, cross-cultural encounters and cross-functional teams increase the risk of misunderstanding and costly conflict.

Command and authority by itself cannot assure necessary cooperation and commitment.

Executives and leaders require strong and effective negotiation skills to lead the organization to excellence. In this column, I will provide practical approaches and repeatable processes to help guide you in your negotiations and in managing corporate conflict.

Let's start with a scenario that we often face in any organizational environment in which there is a great deal of interdependency.

Consider this typical complaint: "I regularly need urgent information from a co-worker. Although this data is vital to our group's projects and our company's overall objectives, he often falls to respond to my e-mails or to return my phone calls. I am frustrated and angry. How can I get him to respond?"

Confronted with this fairly common situation we typically launch into an attack. We may fire off a hostile e-mail and/or barge into our colleague's office and say, "You really make me angry when you never

respond to my e-mails or phone calls. Your tardiness always delays our projects because you don't get us the information we need when we need it!"

Although perhaps letting off a little steam can feel liberating, this interaction is likely to degenerate into an unproductive cycle of reaction and counter-reaction as the other party becomes resistant and defensive. Furthermore, the opportunity for constructive dialogue is destroyed and our needs remain unmet.

When we need to confront a colleague in the hope of a productive outcome, it is crucial that the process that we choose encourages dialogue and guides the interaction toward joint-problem solving. To turn a confrontation into a constructive conversation we recommend opening with the Action, Feeling, Impact, Request model of communication (the AFIR model).

Using the AFIR model, you might initiate your conversation by saying: "When I do not receive the information that we need (Action) I feel frustrated and concerned (Feeling) because it could delay our project and compromise our credibility with our clients (Impact). Would you be willing to explore mutually acceptable ideas for improving the information flow (Request)?" In this statement you have elegantly articulated everything that needs to be said without attributing blame and without putting the other party on the defensive. You have also left the door open for further dialogue.

The AFIR model of communication is the first step in turning a confrontation into a constructive conversation. As the dialogue evolves, the other party will open up about his or her concerns, constraints, needs, fears and perceptions. Rather than asserting your demands at this time, it is far more valuable to listen keenly to what they are saying, to acknowledge what is being said and to

check your comprehension with them by paraphrasing what you have understood. In doing this, you will gain some useful information. This process will also ensure that the other party feels heard, validated, respected and understood. They will now be ready to engage in joint problem-solving.

Invite them to brainstorm ideas with you that would address their needs as well as yours. Optimal solutions will be reached by first generating a range of ideas and then developing and refining those that are the most promising.

Once a solution has been reached, it is helpful to e-mail the other party with your understanding of the points of agreement and to ask for correction of anything that you might have misunderstood. You may say for example, "These are the points of agreement as I have understood them. If there is anything that you feel is inaccurate, please let me know by the end of the week. If I do not hear from you I will assume that this understanding is correct." This closure will help to ensure commitment and compliance.

Having a process that can turn a confrontation into a constructive conversation is a powerful tool in any negotiation. However, as in any skill development, to become proficient requires persistent practice and conscious application. Mastering the process and skills outlined here should assist you in improving your negotiation and communication skills exponentially — and in getting your colleague to respond!

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