



WHITEPAPER

Confronting our fear of confronting.

BY SANDRA STARK



There are many issues, some large, some small, that arise in the workplace and life where a well-placed challenge to the current behaviour of an individual would make a big difference. Yet mostly these confrontations go undelivered or, when they are delivered, the delivery is unintelligible, often subversive, in nature.

What are these situations? And why is it so hard for us to intervene?

In our workshops we have heard of a wide variety of challenging situations that people deal with on a regular basis. These situations impede productivity, positive relationships and job satisfaction. Avoiding these situations or conversely proceeding without a clear plan can be frustrating and on occasion disastrous.

I've included a long list of examples from our clients. You may find one or two that resonate with you. Read them all or skip to the bottom. But the list reminds us just how common this phenomenon is.

EXAMPLES OF CONFRONTING SITUATIONS

- A direct report who has an abrasive style
- A direct report who loses credibility or undermines his position in sensitive negotiations by talking too much
- An individual from North America who wants to have a talk with colleagues from Latin America who defer to her and treat her as a superior rather than work collaboratively
- A direct report two levels removed who did not get a promotion, wants to know why and their immediate supervisor is not giving them the feedback they need to improve
- Folks in sales who push through sales to questionable clients thereby exposing the company to an unwise level of risk to the company's reputation
- Someone whose performance has slipped significantly due to marriage failure
- Sales person who is only servicing those referred clients on high margin products and ignoring other clients.
- A direct report who is trying to do too much and therefore not doing a good job of anything.



- A boss who comes up with a plan of attack and then regularly comes in at the last minute, changes the expectations thereby invoking herculean efforts to meet the new expectations
- A colleague who under pressure starts micro managing, checking and rechecking rather than trusting people to follow through
- A colleague who is supposed to take over the management of an account and refuses to take the ball and run with it—preferring to deal with issues as they come to him
- A direct report who will not ask for help when lacking the skills thereby sabotaging results.

The variety of difficult situations is as varied as the people on the planet. The fears around confronting are always variations of one underlying fear; that we will somehow hurt the other person or get hurt ourselves by doing a bad job. The paradox is that whether we confront or we don't confront the risk for harm to the relationship is equal.

Unfortunately, the risk for opportunity is often completely ignored or dismissed. Rarely do we focus on the opportunity for improved relationships, greater trust and respect, and the amazing opportunity to truly help another person improve and move ahead; to coach them. It's a good thing the same fear doesn't exist in sport or we would have very few Olympic athletes to look up to and no elite sport. Coaches in elite sport have no fear of helping someone get better. Instead they concentrate on perfecting their communications, their delivery, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the assist.

I am not talking here about professional sport where people are paid big salaries and fear is the main tool of control and motivation. I am talking about elite amateur sport where an athlete has nothing to gain but the glory of doing their very best on any given day after slogging through hours and years of pay-less training. What has helped them do that is a coach who has made sure their efforts and small successes are recognized on a daily basis and their weaknesses are gradually exposed and corrected. It is the second one that makes many of us a little squeamish.

I am reading a book called Switch right now. It's a great book. I recommend it to anyone who manages, teaches, coaches from a developmental bias. Their model for helping someone change is very similar to our coaching model. They just use different words. The authors use the metaphor of



someone riding an elephant: the rider is the mind; the elephant is emotion; and the path is the environment, the current situation. They say if you want someone to be successful at changing you have to give clear direction to the rider—so clear they call it a script. You have to engage the elephant, the feelings, and motivate the person to want to get better. We do this through our relationship with the person. And you have to clear the path; remove obstacles, make it easier to change. It's a great metaphor and they use many examples that inspire us to be better ourselves at managing other people. We always need to be surrounding ourselves with inspiration if we are to continue to improve as coaches.

LET'S APPLY THIS METAPHOR TO CHANGING OUR OWN BEHAVIOUR—OUR ABILITY TO CONFRONT COMPETENTLY

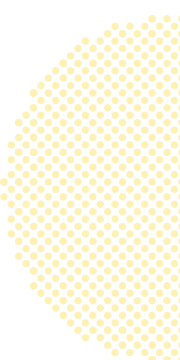
We need a clear script for what to say and do, particularly for the opening and the resistance that always surfaces when we ask someone to change.

We need to believe—to feel—that we are doing a good thing. We need to clearly understand our motivation, our intention and feel good about it. This is particularly hard sometimes because our good intention is hidden beneath the negative feelings we are experiencing as we watch this person continuously mess up, so we may be feeling irritated or impatient on the surface. The desire to help this person change is often sitting just underneath our frustration and nervousness about confronting them. We need to connect with that intention.


We need to make sure that correcting the situation is as easy as possible. We need to help them come up with a clear plan and remove organizational obstacles for achieving that plan.

Part of our mandate as a coach/manager is to create an environment where giving staff the feedback they need to get better is seen as normal behaviour; whether the feedback is good or bad. This clears the path for people to hear the feedback within the context in which it is intended. So that means noticing them, commenting on their work, suggesting better methods, listening to their plans, being present to their ongoing development—whether that is comfortable or uncomfortable. We send a clear and inspiring message that we expect you to get better but not without our help.

In our Coaching for Challenging Conversations program we lay out a very clear structure for how to script your assist. You need to word the opening statement clearly and rehearse it. You need to anticipate the resistance and prepare yourself to respond to it and manage it (see previous newsletter).



And of course you need to help the person being confronted script the change they want to make.



It is also very important to explore your motivation. We use a series of questions that allow you to get under your current concerns and get to the facts that are really relevant for this person's ongoing development. Questions such as: "What is the overarching purpose of this conversation?", "How do I want to be?" These questions help you get in touch with your best intentions which is exactly where you want to be coming from when you speak to this person.

It takes some time, and a structure, to uncover these things. But once you have the structure you will need less and less time and your confidence will improve as the benefits will occupy more of your mind than the concerns, and procrastination will become less desirable than confronting.

So grab the bull by the horns and get out there and coach. You will be doing the people who work with you and for you a big favour.

Copyright © 2013 Third Factor. All rights reserved. We welcome your comments on this article. Please send them to info@thirdfactor.com. Learn more at www.thirdfactor.com.