

# Daniel Robin & Associates

*Making Workplaces Work Better*

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## **The Gentle Art of Confrontation**

When you have a difficult message to convey to someone, how do you get them to listen non-defensively? This article explores methods of delivering so-called "bad news" with maximum effectiveness and minimum offensiveness.

Consider the following situation at the office: a co-worker consistently deflects, resists, or lashes back each time you initiate an open and honest discussion of an issue. You've become frustrated or upset with this person's attitude and inability to hear your message. You'd like to express how it is for you, get to an understanding or agreement, and move on.

Have you thought about why they would be resisting? Just to be difficult? Fear? Self-preservation? Perhaps you just haven't found a way to fly in "under their radar."

If the other person's behavior is bothering you then you own the decision about how to handle it. Your options are: avoid, accommodate, defer to someone else, or confront. Don't expect the other person to notice you are bothered. If you tend to avoid confrontations, an important question to ask yourself is "Will the situation change if I do nothing?" If you confront, you might arrive at a win-win (negotiated) solution, a compromise, or no deal.

Given a typical situation in your work or everyday life, what would you normally do?

The best move depends on two factors: (1) your ultimate goal or agenda with this person, and (2) their natural communication style (relative to your own style).

### ***Gaining Leverage***

Let's assume you have to work together, or perhaps you're in a relationship you value for some other reason. If you are holding a negative opinion about the other person, you could just go directly for what you want: for them to hear you, see it your way, and perhaps to change their behavior. Directly confronting the issue by telling them what you think will clear it for you, but might not get your true message across. Why? Because there are two components; there's the content of your message ("You missed another deadline") and your feelings about that message ("... and I'm sick and tired of it."). What's your true intention in making the other person aware of your view? Being overly assertive can get you "resolution" at the expense of the relationship.

Assuming you want to preserve or strengthen your relationship with this person *and* simultaneously get your point across, you need leverage. Have you noticed that people always — yes, always — operate out of their needs, wants, and desires? If you knew their interests (to get a raise, to get you off their back) or their intentions (to get

along better with people), you'd have a way to reach your goal without manipulating, controlling, badgering, or otherwise upsetting them. Knowing their agenda would empower you to make a request or to offer a potential solution in terms they will value.

So how do you find out?

### ***Ask It Like It Is***

What's more likely to get you on track toward your goal: asking or telling? Telling it like it is may be satisfying for you in the moment, but will it get you the response you want? Asking direct, powerful questions — rather than making a strong assertion — will reveal lots about their agenda. That awareness allows you to move with and find ways to blend with their desired outcome, so you can reach your ultimate goal.

Asking questions and listening creates "psychological air" for them to hear you. In short, avoid explaining your viewpoint or making requests until *after* you've discovered theirs.

### ***Flex Over to Their Style***

You'll get more leverage if you acknowledge and match their natural communication style. Style reflects values, which points to their likely outcome, providing a good platform for negotiation and agreement. For example, if they are a particularly task-oriented person, they might forget to include the team in key decisions. By knowing they care more about getting the job done than about chit-chat, you'll be better able to couch things in terms they will understand.

Consumer protection warning: unless you have permission to dig and do process problem-solving, avoid asking "Why" questions. It puts people on the defensive and tends to talk about the past. Instead, use questions that start with "What" or "How." When you ask questions, to avoid sounding like an interrogator, carry the intent to learn, be genuinely curious and interested. It's far less threatening. Being in a state of childlike curiosity is quite "disarming."

### ***Now It's Your Turn***

So, if your goal is to influence the other person's behavior, the next step is to get them to hear and value how the situation personally affects you. When you have rapport, the classic "I" message is probably your best "tell" alternative. An "I" message uses the template "*I feel* [name the feeling] *when you* [describe the behavior] *because* [state the consequences or reasons for your feelings]" and is clear and direct. The sequence is key: state your feeling first, then their part described in behavioral terms, then what it means to you. If you begin with "You ..." everything after that will be deflected and they'll probably say "You..." also.

There are two ways that even carefully constructed "I" messages can backfire: (1) They often provoke defensiveness or resistance, perching the listener at the edge of what we call the "blame frame." (2) The person might not be inspired to care about your feelings nor about their role in producing your feelings. In business, some "I"

messages will get you a chilly "That's your problem, isn't it?" For instance, how would Rambo respond to "I feel scared when you ..."?

If you can assert your view with no attachment to being heard (in other words, the message sent is for you, not for them), then an "I" message will help you be responsible, be candid in the moment, to clear your feelings. After delivering your "I" message, double-check to see if the person is still available to hear the *message* (informational) part of your "I" message.

Another "tell" approach is called the "sandwich technique" and will often buy you the joy of being heard: first acknowledge their positive intentions or behavior, drop the bombshell (try "In the future, I suggest...", or "You might consider..."), then conclude with more positive reinforcement.

This velvet glove approach must be brief and sincere, or you'll get interrupted with "Get to the point!" or "Okay, what's the bad news?" This technique not only softens the blow when you have difficult news to deliver, but it also keeps you from blurting out your feelings in ways that might not fit for the other person.

Lastly, and probably the most effective, is to make a request. Rather than saying "I'm sick and tired of you always arriving late for our meetings!" try "I request that you to recommit to our agreement about being on time. Does that work for you?" Or "Will you pay me \$10 every time you are more than 10 minutes late to a meeting?" Even if your request is not accepted, at least you'll make your point without verbal abuse. Who knows, you might even acquire some supplementary income.