

The No-FEAR Confrontation

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In my career, I've dealt with innumerable workplace conflicts, including relationships that started out positive yet ended up toxic. In my employment law litigator days, I made a living from these toxic workplace relationships. Now as a coach and consultant, I do my best at prevention and remediation.

To prevent a relationship from taking a toxic turn, here's my vaccine: The No-FEAR Confrontation. Here are the four steps—pay particular attention to the order of the steps, because that's important:

1. **Frame** the issue in succinct, matter-of-fact terms: "Jim, so far, I don't think things are working out for you at our company; we're not getting the performance we need in your position." "Sarah, we're supposed to work together yet I sense hostility and a lack of trust." "Bill, treating everyone with respect at all times is a core value of our organization. If we can't have that with you, we need to discuss your transition from the company."

Note that in each of these sentences, you go quickly and directly to the heart of the matter; no beating around the bush. Yet no characterizations or generalizations are made, for example: "You're a jerk." "You're a bully." "Your performance is unsatisfactory." You simply frame the issue before pivoting to Step Two.

2. Having framed the issue, jump into **Explore**. This means asking open-ended, non-opinionated, curiosity-based questions. "Jim, what do you think?" "Sarah, what's your perspective?" "Bill, how would you like to proceed?"

Now is the time for active listening as you dig into what the other person thinks. Use questions that begin with words like "what" or "how," as well as follow-up phrases such as, "Tell me more." "Please explain." Once you've thoroughly explored the other person's position, you're ready to move to Step Three.

3. Have the other person **Acknowledge** that you understand them, *not* the other way around. Make sure the other person has confirmed with you that yes, indeed, you have accurately summarized their position. "So Jim, if I understand you correctly, you would like to work out a plan to address the issues I raised?" "Sarah, do I understand you correctly that you feel the following has led to a lack of trust between us ... ?" "Bill, if I understand you correctly, you're saying your command and control style of management is something you're not willing to change and that you would prefer to work in an organization that values this leadership approach. Is that correct?"

What if Jim, Sarah or Bill say, "No, that isn't correct." Are you stuck? Of course not. You simply go back to the "explore" step. "Sorry, what did I miss?" Once you receive acknowledgement that you understand the situation, you're ready for Step Four.

4. Now it's your turn to **Respond**. Your response may be contrary to the position you confirmed in Step Three. That's OK, so long as your response comes *after* the first three steps.

Why is the sequence important? Typically, when I observe conflict, the only step employed is No. 4. With each party, it's R!, R!, R!, R! like boxers trading blows. By contrast, in No-FEAR confrontation, you've created clarity. You've given the other person the opportunity to explain their position. You've shown attention and respect. With acknowledgement that you understand, you're in prime position to respond. There

will be no erroneous assumptions, which is a bedrock of toxic relationships. The person will have felt listened to, which gives you useful information and the ability to customize your response. It also has made the other person feel better about you.

Having taught, coached and applied this method countless times, I can't promise perfection in every attempt. I can say, however, many people have been astonished when what they thought would be a horrible encounter turned out positive. They were able to reset the relationship in a constructive way.

Observations

"This framework makes a lot of sense to me," said Douglas Conant, former Campbell Soup Co. CEO and author of *The Blueprint* (Wiley, 2020). "Many leaders leap to address issues without adequately understanding them. ... Framing one's understanding of the issue is foundational to all that follows."

"In my experience as a congregational rabbi, I have found that avoiding conflict due to fear is an easy trap to fall into," said Rabbi Kenneth Brodtkin, Congregation Kesser Israel. "It's also a pattern that has real and negative impacts on a community, even if those impacts are below the surface." Brodtkin has found the No-FEAR approach "not only empowering, but also healing when toxicity has already entered the environment. Through this approach, we create a straightforward framework to put the issue on the table, enable all parties to speak candidly and ultimately find the best path forward for the benefit of the congregation."

"Dramatic or emotional employees are one of the biggest reasons people avoid these types of conversations," said Karin Dunn, president of property management company PRD Management. "The No-FEAR acronym offers a succinct, people-focused approach to alleviate dramatic tendencies by giving employees space. I not only see this approach helping us in our management roles, it will also help in parenting teenagers!"

"To be constructive in problem-solving in the workplace is certainly one of our challenges," said Kay Toran, president and CEO of Volunteers of America Oregon, a social services organization. "We are more likely to achieve this if we use the No-FEAR framework. In doing so, we will master the art of communication."

More Tips

If you are motivated to use this approach, here are a few additional tips based on experiences with people whose initial attempts didn't work as well as they could have.

1. Don't overdo the "F." *Frame* the issue without making a case for it. The sooner you pivot to Step Two, the better.
2. Don't shortchange the "E." Simply asking, "What do you think?" and then moving to Step Three won't cut it. Explore means *explore*.
3. The step most often missed is Step 3, the "A." If you don't get their *acknowledgement* that you understand them, the "A" will become *assumption*—rocket fuel for acrimonious conflict. Suggestion: If you're afraid that in the heat of the moment you'll skip this step, put a little sticky note in the palm of your hand. Write the letter "A" on it.
4. While your "R" can be anything you wish, your *response* is more likely to be effective if you couch it with what you just learned from the other person and remain solution-oriented—whether the solution is hitting the relationship reset button or ending the relationship amicably. If others want to assign fault or blame, don't join them. "Sarah, I'm not here to find fault or determine which of us is more to blame for the lack of trust between us. I'm here to see if we can figure out a new path that works for both of us. I' about you?"
5. If the other party responds negatively, don't get defensive or be intimidated. It's simply time for Verbal Aikido (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/verbal-aikido-takes-the-fight-out-of-confrontations.aspx).

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