APPENDIX A

POWER TALK: A HANDS-ON GUIDE TO SUPPORTIVE CONFRONTATION

When people work together and depend on one another for success as they create shared leadership, disagreements and disputes about task issues or work style are inevitable. As these arise, colleagues, direct reports, and the leader must be prepared to change their views, decisions or behavior. To create a shared leadership system each person—leaders and team members alike—must be willing to state their views fully and be open to the influence of those who disagree with them. In order to make it possible to settle contentious issues, resolve inevitable interpersonal tensions, and stimulate continuous learning of personal skills, post heroic leadership requires a level of openness and honesty rarely found in traditional organizations.

The term supportive confrontation describes the *power talk* that enables leaders and team members to influence others and to resolve interpersonal disputes. Power talk is potent and direct, not diplomatic or sugar-coated. This Appendix explains supportive confrontation and shows how to use it to address task differences without creating battles for dominance, to make disagreements explicit without increasing defensiveness or resistance, and to raise concerns about colleagues without inflicting personal harm or damaging the relationship.

Focus on Behavior

The most difficult and potentially divisive disagreements involve the pattern of *behavior* of some other person, either a colleague or boss. These conflicts about operating styles can

come from ways of doing work or interpersonal habits; whatever the source, they can be annoying and disruptive of work. Jen focuses on the big picture but Jon relishes the details; Michael focuses on problems while Michelle revels in accomplishments; Chris is laid back, but Christine is a go-getter. There is nothing inherently superior about one style of behavior or the other; in fact, diversity is required for high performance in a complex, interdependent world. One style can be useful for some problems and limiting for others. Nevertheless, it often drives a worker to distraction when colleagues don't behave "the way that I do—the right way."

How can team members address differences that reduce performance without making matters worse? Can they do it without causing defensiveness, denial, or retaliation? It is difficult because many people can't distinguish between criticism of specific *performance* and general disapproval or dislike of the *person*. Well-intentioned comments can tap feelings about being devalued or rejected, especially when the comments are delivered by someone unskilled at making the distinctions.

The Problem of Avoidance

Just about everyone who has moved through the supervisory ranks has studied the rules for giving and receiving feedback, but casual observation in almost any organization reveals that many interpersonal problems are neither directly discussed nor resolved. Fearing an explosion, people hold back their true feelings or beliefs and leave these relationship problems to fester, in the vain hope that they will go away. They may toss out hints, but so indirectly that the true depth of the impasse remains hidden. Yet, when team members fail to confront problematic behaviors early and directly, resentment at the colleague simply grows, and pent-up irritation puts a trip wire on the situation that may sabotage even innocuous events. Before long, annoyance with someone's behavior takes the form of disdain and of attributions about that person's malignant motives, incompetencies, or poor character. And once defective character becomes an issue, future interactions are likely to be adversarial. In this context, the sensitive trip wire can trigger explosions. This is what happened to Andy, who lost control and erupted at his boss. Here's how he explained the situation.

Andy's Investment Banking Explosion

As a third-year analyst in the New York office of a major investment banking firm, my work was exciting and challenging, and I was doing well. I reported to Jack, a senior partner, who thought highly of me. I was pleased when he asked me to work on a new

Eastern Europe venture. If successful, this would be a significant stepping-stone for my career. The project would operate out, of London. Unfortunately, Sam—another senior manager—had primary responsibility for the project; Jack would be in New York and only tangentially involved.

Sam had the reputation of being a nightmare boss. He was abrasive and would embarrass people in public. On the other hand, if he liked you, he could be your best champion. But no one knew the code for winning him over, and you didn't want to be on his bad side. I sensed that I would be strongly tested when I heard that Sam had asked Jack, "And who is this fair-haired boy you're sending me?" Sam had served in Vietnam and had a dagger on his wall; that said it all to me. He used military terms in conversation, like "nuke the enemy," and "out-flank them." This wasn't my style, but I minded it less than his way of putting people down in a public setting. When this happened it was usually over something petty. He really knew how to damage a person's self-confidence. And lie often set people up. Here's an example. Sam and I discussed how we should analyze the data for a meeting of the general partners. We agreed on one approach, then he casually speculated, "I wonder what would happen if we analyzed it in a different way?" But he added, "Oh, never mind, probably it wouldn't make any difference." Then at the meeting, he turned to me and said, "Of course you've run the other analysis, haven't you?"

I felt caught in a trap. In investment banking, hierarchy is respected. It seemed inappropriate to take him on publicly. I think he would have denied our previous conversation. But I was concerned that the other partners would view me as superficial, something you cannot be in this business.

Sam was tough to take on. He is very tall, towering about a foot over me. He had, a strong temper and would intimidate by screaming and cursing. It was so distasteful to confront him that people let him get away with these games. He also sent mixed signals. He could be charming, especially with clients, in our private meetings, he would be very positive, so I always kept guessing about where I stood with him. If (were to complain about how he treated me in public, I was afraid that he would put me down and make me feel like an idiot. I could imagine him saying, "Lighten up, Andy. You're just too sensitive. You have to be tough to be an I-banker."

About a month into the project, I encountered the straw that broke this camel's back. We were planning a conference call with New York, Hamburg, and Moscow. The meeting hadn't started, but everyone was on the line. I was the most junior person there. Sam turned to me and said, "I told you to invite Michael to this meeting; why isn't he here?" The truth is that he had mentioned "It would be kind of nice if Michael

attended this session." But since this was a closed meeting and Michael wasn't one of the inner team, and not crucial, I never made the invitation.

I didn't know what to do. I bit my tongue and said, "Sorry, I guess I forgot." I offered no excuse, but took the blame hoping that it would go away as fast as possible. I was livid during the entire meeting, bitter and resentful. I thought, "I am damn good; how dare you do this to me in public!"

After the session, Sam was walking ahead of me. I followed him into his office and slammed the door so hard that the walls shook. Everyone nearby heard it. Sam's back was to me and he turned around with a surprised look. Before he could say anything, I slammed my notebook on his desk and shouted: "Sam, this is absolutely bullshit! You know that you didn't explicitly ask me to invite Michael to the meeting. So why did you embarrass me in front of everyone? You've been twisting the facts ever since I got here. I don't have to take this crap from you anymore."

Before he could respond, I picked up my notebook and left, slamming the door behind me. Back at my desk, it hit me: "I can't believe that I just yelled at a senior partner." I had lost my cool in an environment where calm is rewarded. But I felt a great sense of relief—as if a giant weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

A few minutes later, Sam came into my cubicle. Can we talk?" It was a request, not an order, and I nodded agreement. "What's going on?" he asked. I said, "Sam, you know what you have been doing, and I don't appreciate it." Sam was apologetic: "I didn't mean to put you down Andy," he said. "I'm sorry that you took it that way." He sounded sincere. I didn't think that an apology from me was appropriate, so we just shook hands and he left.

After that Incident, and to my surprise, we became the best of buddies. I became closer to him than to Jack. And Sam never pulled another embarrassing stunt again; he supported me to others and we had a great time on the project.

In this instance, an explosive attack worked. But door slamming and shouting at one's boss is a high-risk strategy. Perhaps Andy was lucky or had picked up some signal that Sam would respect person who could fight back. And Andy was a strong performer; if he weren't, his explosion could have propelled him from the firm.

Supportive Confrontation

Though there are times to let frustrating issues pass, and times for explosive outbursts, these two options are too extreme—too weak or too strong to enable joint problem-

solving. They restrict the influence needed to make shared leadership work. There is a positive third alternative. We call it *supportive confrontation*. It is a process of giving strong feedback by talking only about what one knows, the impact of the other person's behavior. Although it is powerful because it allows a person to raise issues early in a way that minimizes defensiveness, and can be linked to the other person's interests, too few people know how to do it well. In the conversational volley, people run into trouble when they "cross over the net," and move from their area of expertise (their own reactions) into an area of blindness (the other's motives or intentions). It is difficult to be influential when operating from ignorance. This is not about sugarcoating comments, or using the insincere sandwich technique, where any negative feedback is deliberately sandwiched between positive statements. It is about becoming more honest by staying with your reality instead of turning to what you can only infer.

To understand the concepts underlying supportive confrontation, here is a brief overview of the inference process by which people make sense of others' confusing or disturbing behavior. After the initial reaction, they interpret as best they can. They try to figure out just what kind of person the other is. This interpretive process, called *attribution*, often gets in the way of effective feedback. People observe behavior, then make inferences based on their own experiences, in the attempt to understand the motives and intentions of another person. The difficulty is that their own experiences may not be a reliable guide to someone else's motives and intentions, which are never directly observable. In addition, the observer's needs and motives can become a perceptual screen and distort the attribution process. The only thing that people can see is the other person's ensuing behavior. (See Figure A—1.) To illustrate this, we will use a common situation involving a manager and direct reports.

Hal is running a meeting of his team. Tony and Meg are arguing about how best to market an important new product both have been working on. As the tension between them begins to rise, Hal fears that the conversation may escalate out of hand. He wants to cool things down. So just as Meg Is becoming more emphatic about the advertising approach she is sure is right, Hal says, "This seems to be getting nowhere. Why don't you two discuss this after the meeting so that we can get through the agenda?"

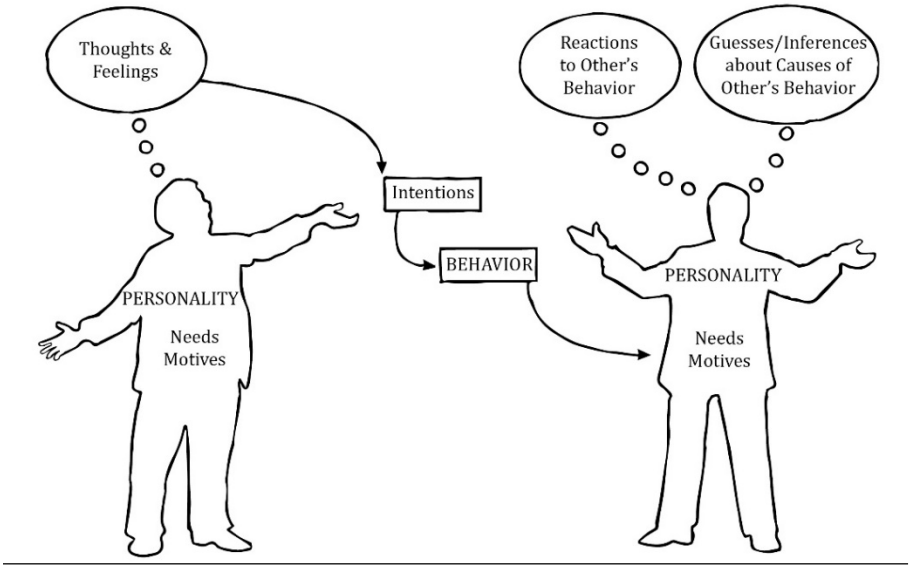

Figure A-1. Interpersonal Attribution

In this scenario, both Tony and Meg are likely to have reactions to Hal's attempt to divert the discussion, but focusing on Meg will illustrate how team members can address the most difficult interpersonal situation—changing a boss's behavior. Meg is annoyed that Hal is cutting off the discussion just when, from her perspective, they are finally getting to the key disputed points. She feels patronized, but fears what will happen if she objects, so she goes silent.

There are two differing realities in .this situation: Hal's actual thoughts, feelings, and intentions, and Meg's reactions and interpretations of what he said. Both participants are knowledgeable about their own realities and unaware of the other person's. Ignorance of the other's inner feelings and motives is unavoidable: a lot of emotion is attached, making accurate perceptions unlikely.

As Meg goes silent, she doesn't stick to what she knows (feeling annoyed and patronized); instead, she begins to make inferences about Hal's motives for cutting offer discussion with Tony*. Is he trying to protect me? Does he see me as weak and needing protection? Maybe this is just a problem he has with conflict; he usually dampens it at meetings. Then she begins to get suspicious: Maybe he can't stand a strong woman and wants to shut me up so that Tony can win.*

With her musings, Meg is moving from her area of expertise (her reactions) to her area of ignorance (guessing Hal's motivations). Trying to determine the motives and intentions of others reflects the basic tendency of people to search for meaning in observed behavior. The difficulty arises when people move from wondering about motives to unilaterally concluding that their conjectures are facts; they then become judge and jury, convict the offender, and throw away the key.

Since Meg has incomplete information, her conclusions are unlikely to be accurate. Is it that her boss doesn't value women, or could the opposite be true, and he cut off discussion because he thinks Tony isn't fighting fair, and Hal wants to create a level playing field? Does he believe that Meg can roll with the punches, but that Tony loses control when he thinks he is losing? Does Hal want to let Meg really go at it with Tony in private, so that others will not see Tony lose face? Does Hal come from a culture where the senior person's job is to ensure that conflict between any two family members, male or female, does no harm?

Meg's attributions and inferences about Hal's intentions and motivations are, at best, only guesses. Meg has moved from her side of the court, across the net, and is playing in Hal's backcourt. Foul! Once she assumes that she knows his motives, anything she says (or thinks, or conveys by attitude, tone or body language), will produce defensiveness and resistance in Hal. This lowers the likelihood that she will positively influence his behavior. She has gone from observing his behavior and statements to invading his innards, a place most people reserve for trusted intimates only. If she openly reveals her attributions, he will feel pigeonholed or oversimplified. Few people can take feedback or learn from anyone who is being judgmental, even if it is cloaked in polite language or forced smiles. The negative judgment is what comes through. What started as a legitimate role-related conflict has turned personal.

Crossing the line between objective remarks about performance and judgments about the person is common in workplace feedback:

- "You have a poor attitude."
- "All you want to do is build an empire."
- "You are a controlling person."

Each of these statements contains assumptions about another person's motives and intentions. None address observable behavior or its consequences. The person on the receiving end of this inept feedback will naturally become defensive.

Four Approaches to Supportive Confrontation

This section explores four approaches to influencing another person's behavior (and being influenced in return). Each has limitations and traps. No one way works in every context. In fact, they are often most effectively used in combination, which one to use, and in what combination, depends on the situation and the user's style. With practice, you should be able to find the most appropriate approach for each situation.

Approach 1. "This is the Effect of Your Behavior on Me"

The simplest and most direct approach is to make clear to the other the effect of the undesired behavior. Meg can tell Hal, "I feel patronized and controlled when you interrupt." Now she is staying with her reality. She is not saying that Hal is patronizing her, which he could deny; instead, she is sticking with her reaction, which is indisputable. Hal can't say, "No, you don't feel that way."

Hal might respond, "I don't mean to patronize you; I just want to keep a fight from breaking out and wait for a less emotional atmosphere before we examine the arguments." His reality *doesn't negate Meg's reality*—both can be true. When each reports his or her own reality, neither has to guess the other's intentions.

This is easier said than done; staying focused on behavior is difficult. A behavior is something observable that can be pointed to, which is possible, for example, with "you interrupt," but not with "you patronize." Figuring out what behaviors have caused the interpretation of patronization is complex, and would require exploration of the language, tone and non-verbal actions that led to the judgment.

If Hal is concerned about Meg's reaction, they are in a position to move to joint problem solving. Simply knowing Hal's intention maybe sufficient to prevent Meg from feeling controlled the next time. Or they may work out some mutual arrangement (e.g., Meg will agree to make her point more calmly, and Hal will agree not to cut off discussion so quickly).

This approach works only if Meg's reactions cause Hal to want to change. But something else is needed if he is defensive, and tells her, "that is your problem, not mine," or even worse, labels her as weak or over-sensitive.

Approach 2. "Your Behavior is Not Meeting Your Apparent Goals or Intentions"

The second approach to supportive confrontation is to show the other person how the particular behavior does not help advance his or her interests. That is powerful leverage for change. Most behavior is goal directed, intended to produce desired result. A person

who is behaving in a way that fails to achieve those results is more likely to take feedback seriously.

If, for example, Hal defines the issue as "Meg's problem" she can examine the extent to which Hal's behavior is not meeting his goals. "Hal, I think you want us to disagree without getting overwrought, but when I can't express my strongly held views, I get frustrated and angry."

Again, Hal can't say, "No, you don't feel frustrated," as she is sticking with her expertise. He might say, "You shouldn't feel that way," and she could agree, "Yes, I know I shouldn't—and I don't want to—but you are making it difficult for us to explore the Issue to the extent that we must in order to make good decisions. I don't think that's the effect you want." Does this get Meg into a guessing game of Hal's intentions and goals? Not necessarily. People often freely broadcast their goals:

- "I want programs that expand our base business."
- "We need to have people feel included and empowered."
- "We should have exhibits that draw on our core strength."

It is likely that Hal has said (probably many times) some variation of "We need to make informed decisions by considering all relevant views." Also, some goals are close to universal—wanting to be heard, wanting influence, wanting to be respected and so forth—although these must be tested against the particular situation. Meg made this test when she acknowledged, "I don't think that's the effect you want"; this made it possible for Hal to correct her, and to express some other desire.

What If Hal's goals are unknown or unclear? Is Meg then precluded from this second approach? Not if she proceeds from the premise that Hal is acting reasonably *from his perspective* (i.e., from his reality). Instead of attributing negative motives, she should take the radical step of inquiring! (This might have been a good place to start this approach anyway.) "Hal, I don't understand why you are interrupting me; it bothers me. Why are you doing that?"

Suppose Hal is resistant, responding: "Look we have a lot to accomplish and I'm impatient with all the time we are taking." Instead of treating this as a blocking statement, Meg could hear it as Information about one of Hal's goals, and link to it: "Hal, I agree that we need to move on, but each time you interrupt, it actually takes more time, because I find myself wanting to explain the point again. Can we work out a better way to deal with this?" If Hal agrees, problem solving is possible.

But what if Hal's action is meeting his goals (by causing Meg to be quiet, allowing him to move on to the next topic without having to deal with a possible explosion), yet his behavior is still bothering her? She still has another option that links to Hal's interests.

Approach 3. "Your Behavior May Meet Your Goals, but it is Very Costly to You"

If another person's behavior is bothering you usually it is in some way also *costly to him or her.* These costs can be of two kinds, specific or general reactions to the other person's behavior. Specific reactions are in relation to particular issues, such as the person being so persistent about selling an idea that you feel unable to get your objections heard; in response you dig in, and resist something you might have yielded on had your objections been considered. General reactions are those that make you generally less willing to cooperate, work together or be influenced. Similarly, the reactions of others maybe costs, about a particular issue, or more generally, about the person's reputation—competence, style, trustworthiness, attractiveness as a colleague. A poor reputation is very costly.

There are often more costs to problematic behavior than is immediately apparent. If the behavior makes you feel irritated, it is natural to focus on what annoys you; stepping back to examine the context can allow a richer assessment of the other ways that the behavior hurts the person doing it.

For example, does Hal's behavior make Meg less willing to see the positive sides of Tony's ideas? Does it make other team members feel less willing to express their views? Do people conclude they do not want to work for him? The Hals of the world can be winning battles, but losing the war.

Diagnosing the many negative consequences doesn't require that they all be dumped on the other person at once. It is best to reveal the minimum number of consequences that will motivate the other to enter into joint problem-solving. But knowing many different costs provides more potential sources of influence leverage, so one can escalate as needed.

Exploring the costs, however, can get into territory that requires careful navigation skills. Speaking of costs is likely to pull you dangerously close to crossing the net. Since the costs are connected to the goals or intentions of the other person, it is too easy to interpret motives negatively when all you mean to do is point out the costs to your colleague. To avoid this potential trap own any attributions as just that. "Hal, I don't mean to play amateur shrink since only you know your Inner feelings, but it's hard not to speculate that you can't stand conflict and will kill it as soon as you can. I doubt that's the impression you want to give, but when you close down discussion so fast, it's really difficult not to draw that conclusion. And it wouldn't be good for you if I just wrote off all of your comments on controversial issues because I saw you that way."

If you can stay on your side of the net and be clear that you are talking about your impressions, not your convictions, then the danger is reduced and the cost to the other person is sustained. It also allows you to be supportive and solution-oriented if the person claims that his or her intentions were quite different from your impressions of them. If Hal were to say, "No, stifling conflicts not what I want to do, in fact it's just the opposite," Meg could then respond, "So you can see that it is costly to you to continue cutting off discussion, and it's annoying to me. Can we talk about alternative approaches to resolving differences in our group?"

Many assessments of cost to a person imply that other colleagues, have a similar reaction to yours. While it is useful to someone to know whether the reaction you are describing is yours alone or shared by 80% of the team, bringing in others can be volatile. Have you represented the others correctly? Will they feel that you have violated their confidences? Would they admit to having the reactions if questioned individually or in a meeting? If they would not be comfortable, yet have strong feelings (as is very often the case in organizations where openness is not well ingrained), how can you convey what the person needs to know without creating more complications?

What someone doesn't know can hurt that person a great deal. If you truly care about your boss's effectiveness, allowing a negative reputation to fester can be deeply wounding, so discovering a way to be able to inform him or her is an important challenge. Reporting the reactions of other colleagues can be helpful and motivating by making the wider costs clear, but it can also be abused if the response is a demand to know "Who else said that?"

Even if Hal were to demand to know the identities of others who are reacting negatively, Meg has possible ways of being constructive without tattling or backing off. She can say, "Hal, I can't name names, because that would violate confidences. However, I can assure you that I am not the only one who feels this way. And if the others who do won't level with you because they fear your response, that is still not in your best interest. What could we do to deal with that problem?" The challenge is to be clear that the costs are real, and allow the other person to decide if they are sufficiently high to warrant getting into problem-solving.

Each of the first three supportive confrontation approaches assumes that the problem is totally with Hal's behavior. But even if Meg stays on her side of the net—criticizes his behavior, and not his persona—Hal may still feel that he is being blamed, and by a subordinate no less. The resulting defensiveness may be minor and pass quickly, but if Hal exhibits feelings of being labeled as the one at fault, Meg can move to Approach 4.

Approach 4. "In What Ways Am I Part of the Problem?"

Conventional discussion of behavior place its causes completely within the individual, as needs, motives, drives—PERSONALITY. Everyone, at one time or another, indulges in behavior driven from within, no matter what anyone else is saying or doing. Some ineffective people do this all the time, only accidentally responding appropriately to others, like the stopped clock that is correct twice each day. But for most people most of the time, interactions with others heavily influence behavior. Hal maybe partly animated by Meg's behavior and this would, in effect, make her part of the problem.

Meg should consider whether she is compounding the problem. She might recognize her tendency to escalate emotions by adopting an attacking tone whenever someone questions her judgment and could then approach Hal with the following admission:

> *"Hal, we often fall into a negative cycle that must be as frustrating to you as it is to me. I realize I am part of the problem. When I disagree with one of my colleagues, I anticipate that you will cut me short. This makes me tense and causes me to argue my points harder and harder. That must drive youths. Can we talk about it?"*

Talking this way levels the playing field and generally makes it easier for the other party to be equally forthright. People are usually willing to take responsibility for some of the problem if others are willing to do the same. But park the entire problem at one person's door and that person will simply push it back, to yours. If either party to an interpersonal dispute that is being mutually reinforced can identify the pattern of reinforcement that frees both of them to explore it. Naming it helps change the discussion from blame to problem solving about how to halt the pattern.

This approach can make it possible to resolve disputes through reciprocal agreements. "Hal, if I pledge to remain calm when we explore differences, will you give me enough time to work through my issues with Tony and other people?" This process of exchange makes it possible to influence another person without identifying either party as the villain or the victor.

Choosing the Most Appropriate Approach

These approaches to influence have been described as if they were separate and independent, but they can readily be combined. When should each form of supportive confrontation be used, and in what combination?

Approach 1, pointing out the effects of behavior, is the simplest and most direct and therefore should be considered first. Because it lays out your needs and concerns, it makes you vulnerable. This is actually an advantage. Expressing the impact of the other person's behavior on your feelings places both parties in an equally open and vulnerable position, which reduces defensiveness in the receiver. This approach works best when the other person is concerned about you; doesn't want to have that sort of negative impact; and won't "blame the victim" by saying that the negative impact is a sign of your weakness or oversensitivity.

When these conditions aren't met, it can be useful to add the second or third approaches, showing how the undesirable behavior doesn't meet the other person's goals or is costly. These approaches explicitly speak to the other person's interests and therefore are likely to move that person, first through acceptance that there is an issue, and then into joint problem solving. Adding to rather than omitting the first approach is important, because omitting the effect of the behavior on you would withhold crucial information and would imply you are a good Samaritan, "only acting for the other's sake," when you are clearly acting in the interests of both parties.

The fourth approach, asking how you, the influencer, are part of the problem, is appropriate when a strong, *inter*personal dynamic has both people hooked into a negative pattern. Who started the negative pattern isn't relevant and is probably unknowable. When the other is sensitive to being blamed, taking responsibility for part of the problem reduces defensiveness, enabling the exchange of promises to change behavior in ways that benefit both parties. Because exchange has a negotiations aspect and is a less intimate way of discussing interpersonal problems, it is helpful when the other person has significant discomfort talking about interpersonal processes ("touchy-feely stuff").

Caring About the Other Person

If you stay on your side of the net, you do not have to be fond of the other person. You are merely providing information that by and large he or she does not possess, which might allow the person to more effectively meet objectives at lower personal cost. If you do care about the person, however, these four approaches have more powerful impact, because the recipient is less likely to be suspicious of your motives, or feel diminished by having to admit less effectiveness than hoped for.

You are implicitly saying, "I am concerned that you are hurting yourself with that behavior. It's not in your best interest." This "I may be tough on you but I'm on your side" approach only works well if concern for the other person's effectiveness is genuine. It is almost

impossible to fake sincerity despite Groucho Marx's cynical gag: "The secret of success is to be honest and sincere; if you can fake that, you've got it made."

It is hard to be concerned for someone when deeply angry at him or her. That is why it is important to speak up early, before anger has built, rather than keeping book on the other's bad behavior to gather conclusive proof. You can address issues early with little danger by staying on your side of the net and sticking to observable behavior and your reactions. That way the person has not been convicted in your mind, so you really can care about being helpful and avoid creating defensiveness.

Achieving Resolution

Resolving difference through supportive confrontation requires three things:

1. The parties must reach the point where they are willing to engage in joint problem solving.
2. They must reach mutually acceptable agreement
3. There must be follow-up.

Joint Problem Solving

For effective problem solving parties must be willing to engage about the problem and seek resolution. Winning—getting others to do what you want—is not the object of influence activities. Thinking of influence that way assumes both that the other person is wholly at fault, and that you already know what must be done. There is high probability that you are in part causing the difficulties you want to resolve.

Blaming is equally out of place in stimulating the other person to joint problem solving. Not wanting to be seen as totally at fault, people have a tendency to shift responsibility to others. This generates a cycle of unproductive finger pointing. To prevent this cycle accept that there are inevitably multiple realities: "I understand how you view the situation and have explained how I view it differently; each of us can be right, since each version is real for us." This counters the unstated assumption that behaviors leading to bad results must be caused by bad intentions.

You will move toward problem resolution when you can bring yourself to accept that the other person is acting with the best of intentions. At that point, you can say, "I see what you are trying to accomplish; unfortunately, this isn't happening, so let's try to figure out why you're not getting the outcome you intend." Next you should move beyond generalizations to specifics. The other person needs to know *exactly* what behaviors have been troubling.

And it is useful for you to know the other's intentions, goals, and concerns. The other is likely to openly share these ideas without your having to guess at—and probably distort—them. Just knowing that the irritating behavior was not done with malevolent intent is often enough to reduce its sting.

Reaching Agreement

Team members encounter two main traps in reaching agreement, even after people attempt joint problem solving. The first is "I am what I am. I can't change my personality." The person refuses to explore alternative behavior because what is called for seems out of character, implying that personality precludes behavioral choices. But people don't have to change personality to choose new behavior, even if it is uncomfortable or difficult. The antidote to this trap is to separate basic personality from specific behavior, not transplant personality. "The particular behavior is not a result of your basic personality, just your actions. You don't have to change who you are to change what you do in meetings." In most cases, you can point to occasions when the other party—operating with the same personality—behaved more effectively.

The second trap is to make what we call "toothless agreements:"

- "I'll try to improve."
- "I promise to be more considerate."
- "I will seek your input in the future."

The desire to quickly end a stressful conversation often induces disputing parties to rush to these ineffective fixes. What they lack are specifics. Effective resolutions state something like the following:

- "These are the times and the areas in which I want to give input."
- "Here's how you can signal me to calm down."

Follow-Up

Like any change, behavior change require regular follow-up to avoid backsliding. Three follow-up steps help assure the improved relationship: (a) monitoring progress in repairing the relationship, (b) reinforcing changed behavior, and (c) handling regression.

In most cases, initial problem solving has a positive effect. But doubts quickly creep in:

- "How sincere was the other person in recognizing my concerns?"
- "The boss seemed to take my confronting her rather well. But has this soured her

attitude toward me?"

- "Have we overlooked important points of division?"

Each party must follow up about agreements and determine whether more work, or repair work, is needed. The new behaviors also need reinforcement. As psychologists have confirmed, reinforcement is more potent than punishment in changing behavior. Even if progress is slow, saying, "I appreciate your efforts in making this new arrangement work" has great power.

Finally, some regression is probable, especially if the behavior in question has been a central part of the other's style. One discussion or agreement is unlikely to change 30 years of learned behavior. But rather than viewing regression as failure, use it to reinforce the new behavior. Stopping the action and sympathetically or humorously commenting, "Oops, what you did after Helen disagreed is an example of what we talked about," Is the sort of specific feedback that can reinforce learning. Drawing attention to real-time regression works best when the parties have previously agreed to watch for occurrences. This makes follow-up less a case of "Gotcha" and more a continuation of the improvement process.

Being responsive in the moment requires tuning into the process as it unfolds, so that when Hal blocks disagreement yet again, or Meg retreats, the other one can notice and use the incident to clarify the behavior, its consequences, or the intentions of the person who is behaving in ineffective ways. Alertness to the moment reveals how certain behavior perpetuates irritating tendencies in others.

Final Points

Resist the Urge to Attack

We have thus far focused on interpersonal problems from the viewpoint of the person who wants to change someone else's behavior. But everyone at one time or another has been the recipient of an accusation that attacked his or her motives or intentions: It is likely that the accuser has crossed over the net and imputed negative motives, making you feel defensive or misunderstood. When you find yourself under attack, the urge to defend or retaliate is strong. In this situation, the most important thing to do is to take the lead in separating your behavior from your intentions, and acknowledge—whether you are at fault or not—that you have done something that bothers the other person. Then invite behavioral exploration. Say something like, "I see that I have done something that bothers you, which is not the effect I want. Since that wasn't my intention I want to understand specifically what I am doing to upset you." Then after gaining clarity about the offending

actions, you can encourage joint problem-solving by adding, “Here’s what I was trying to do; how could I have accomplished it without causing these problems?” If the other person persists in imputing (and impugning) your motives, you can firmly block the attack by staying with your expertise: “Look, you don’t know why I acted that way and I’m beginning to resent your claim to be able to read my mind, despite my assurances. We are going to get much further if we can stick to specifying what I’m doing that is so troubling to you and then figuring out a better way to interact.”

Getting difficulties on the table in this way can have one of three positive outcomes:

1. Once you explain your intentions, the behavior no longer is so irritating.
2. Once you see the Impact, you agree not to do the behavior any longer and search for a new one that meets your goals without upsetting the other.
3. If this interpersonal problem is interpersonally caused, you can enter a negotiation in which you agree to change your behavior in return for a needed change by the other person.

Any one of these is superior to defensiveness and retaliation. Supportive confrontation can resolve interpersonal problems when initiated from either side to the dispute, and does not require that both parties be highly skilled in the approaches described. It just takes one person to hold to the model of staying on one’s own side of the net to help both keep from leaping over it with flights of negative fancy.

Position Power Doesn’t Matter

Supportive confrontation is not dependent on position power. While leaders may be better able to enforce agreements, supportive confrontation can be initiated by peers and subordinates as well. If the initiator stays on his or her own side of the net, speaking to the needs of the other person and being persistent in revealing the unwanted consequences of the other person’s behavior, it is possible for anyone to confront anyone else. Higher-ups and colleagues also want to be effective.

Even when dealing with those lower in the hierarchy, there are many actions that cannot effectively be commanded. The subordinate must want to change. Speaking to his or her best interests, which is the heart of supportive confrontation, can produce cooperation rather than reluctant compliance.

Careful Approaches to Supportive Confrontation Are Not Always Necessary

There are many ways to address interpersonal problems. When the relationship is solid and there is mutual respect and concern, the supportive confrontation guidelines can be

violated and people can speak to the intentions and motives of the other (usually off-limits). Good friends and good colleagues can listen to each other when the dialogue is not perfect, or say "cut the crap" when the feedback strays too far from what is acceptable.

But when the relationship is strained or the behavior in question is a touchy subject, supportive confrontation is best: stick with the specific behaviors and .their effects. This is the most accurate and direct way to communicate. Even with close colleagues who can usually handle the no-holds-barred communication, attribution and psychological interpretation can get in the way.

Reticence Reduces Influence

Outright warfare is less a source of influence problems than the fear of speaking straight. When people are not direct, their concerns are ignored and problems fester. Here's how one manager's reticence reduced her influence.

Catherine's Limits

Catherine was in charge of program development, while Rob, her colleague, was responsible for marketing and publicity. This was a new assignment for him; he had been recently demoted and, at 53, saw this as a last chance to redeem himself. Unfortunately, he spent most of his time on self-promotion.

Catherine rightly decided to confront Rob on this issue. She started out by saying how upset and frustrated she was about the situation; and how demotivating it was for her and her staff. She was about to describe the ways in which this self-promotion actually hurt him, when he burst into tears; "I have failed again. I am just a failure. I have a family to support. What am I going to do?" Catherine was totally taken aback, embarrassed for hurting him. She quickly back peddled to downplay the problem. She ended the meeting by saying that she would take care of the publicity herself, when in fact, she was already understaffed.

Later, as she described this encounter with a friend, he asked, "Why didn't you use what Rob had said as a way to get him to change?"

"What could I have said?" Catherine asked.

"How about, "Yes, Rob, you are falling—but that doesn't make you a failure as a person. I want you to succeed. Your success will help you and help my department. In fact, that is why I am raising the issue. The question is, do you want to succeed?"

"I never could have said that," Catherine responded. "That's so direct, and he was so upset."

"Then," replied her friend, "You know who has the problem."

To what extent do needs for approval, to be liked, and to be seen as a nice person keep you from powerful talk, from using the influence tools at your disposal? Most people can be influenced *if you want to* influence them. The choice is yours.