

On Confrontation

Dear Jeremy,

On 9 November, you wrote:

“Andreas and I were talking of becoming more skilful in the area of confrontation—how do we get the clients we work with to confront what needs to be confronted and how do we confront them with it? I am certainly aware that one must listen-get it-ensure they get that you get it. However, how does one practice it? What are the practices? How does one do it without losing them or having them turn against you?”

I am usually OK with clients who are ready, but I am often too confrontational with those who are not. What is it I can practice?”

Here are some ideas I’ve been mulling over (for more than a decade now) relating to this question. They point the direction of my thinking and how I aspire to act/consult, but they aren’t intended to be or be applied as absolute truths.

Confrontation is disrespectful and possibly unethical.

Although I’ve been confronted many, many times over the years, I cannot recall a single occasion when I ended up truly grateful for and benefited by the confrontation. Think about your own experiences. Truth be told, aren’t you left resentful and disempowered — whether or not the substance of the confrontation was accurate?

Earlier this year, a *New Yorker* book review quoted a young author — Adam Heller, I think — saying that after a man reaches the age of 30, the only person who has a right to yell at him is his wife or girlfriend. We could transform organizations with this alone, huh?

There are many (sports performance coaches, for example) who assert that people become measurably weaker physically and less intelligent when they are confronted. I haven’t seen research that backs this up, but it sure rings true to my experience.

The psychologist Alice Miller says that the worst form of abuse is that which is inflicted “for your own good.” (She finds in this the roots of violence in society.) If the person being confronted doesn’t have and perceive having the freedom and power to reject the confrontation (as an act and as substance), then that person could end up damaged in his/her sense of wholeness and experience/expression of responsibility, and — like someone who was abused as a child — inflicting similar damage on subordinates.

To play with Miller’s idea: The most confrontational managers might well be those who were heavily confronted by their own managers earlier in their careers. They adopt the practice not because it works organizationally, but as a way of restoring their own rightness.

So, our confrontation produces a short-term improvement, with a great, even disastrous, long-term cost.

Confrontation is probably counter-productive.

Lewis Thomas writes:

When you are confronted by any complex social system, such as an urban centre or a hamster, with things about it that you’re dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping... You cannot meddle with one part of a complex system from the outside without the almost certain risk of setting off disastrous events that you hadn’t counted on in other, remote parts... [T]he safest course seems to be to stand by and wring hands, but not to touch. Intervening is a way of causing trouble.

And Peter Senge, stating that the “harder you push, the harder the system pushes back,” writes Systems thinking has a name for this phenomenon: “Compensating feedback”: when well-intended interventions call forth responses from the system that offset the benefits of the intervention ...

Pushing harder, whether through an increasingly aggressive intervention or through increasingly stressful withholding of natural instincts, is exhausting. Yet, as individuals and organizations, we often glorify the suffering that ensues. When our initial efforts fail to produce lasting improvements, we “push harder”...all the while blinding ourselves to how we are contributing to the obstacles ourselves.

When we as consultants confront our clients, we are saying that current reality — who they are being and what they are doing — is wrong; that it should not be the way that it is, and that they should not be the way that they are. This, of course, is bullshit. Right now, reality should be only what it is. Failure to embrace current reality wholeheartedly is likely to deprive us of a sufficient foundation for constructive action.

So, what to do? Which practices?

For context, maybe the best place to start is with Dennis Emberling’s four necessary conditions for effective change agency — especially the first. If we are not perceived as appreciating the client for who he/she is, exactly the way he/she is right now, we don’t stand a chance of doing long-term good. Once that’s in place — and I think we need to go beyond the client’s perception to authentically being appreciative as well — there are numerous options.

Thomas suggests taking *the point of view of experimental pathology: maybe some of the things that have gone wrong are the result of someone’s effort to be helpful.*

...Instead of trying to move in and change things around, try to reach in gingerly and simply extract the intervener.

Quoting Donella Meadows, Senge insists that any long-term solution must...“strengthen the ability of the system to shoulder its own burdens.”

John Heider exhorts us to *remember that you are facilitating another person’s process. It is not your process. Do not intrude. Do not control. Do not force your own needs and insights into the foreground.*

If you do not trust a person’s process, that person will not trust you.

Imagine that you are a midwife; you are assisting at someone else’s birth. Do good without show or fuss. Facilitate what is happening rather than what you think ought to be happening. If you must take the lead, lead so that the mother is helped, yet still free and in charge.

And Lao-tzu says: *The Master leads
by emptying people’s minds
and filling their cores,
by weakening their ambition
and toughening their resolve.
He helps people lose everything
they know, everything they desire,
and creates confusion
in those who think that they know.*

*Practice not-doing,
and everything will fall into place.*

For myself, I keep trying to remember that people are doing the very best (and maybe only) thing they see to do under the circumstances they perceive. (Think of our talks on action being correlated to the occurring.) If that's so, then appreciation is the only appropriate response to another. In appreciation, what possible use is there for confrontation?

And specifically...

In the coaching I do — which, I believe, is directed at the outcome you're seeking with confrontation — I tend to fall back on asking open-ended, non-leading questions for clarity in four areas:

- What are your goals, outcomes, intentions, objectives, commitments in this endeavour?
- Vis-à-vis those goals, what, concretely, is so right now? What is current reality?
- What are your options for getting from here to there?
- What specific actions will you take, in what specific time frames?

In each area of inquiry, I go rigorously into the details, focusing on my own — not the client's — clarity. I refrain from making suggestions — or even nudging them toward ideas I like — when using this method. I force myself to honour their responsibility for their own performance and to keep true to the strategy that consciously taking a path that they've created themselves (even when I think the path is not the best one) will in the long run have them develop more appropriately than if I step in to protect them from the learning/mistakes along the way.

Even so...

Last Wednesday night, in a nice restaurant in Malaysia, I yelled for two minutes at the construction manager of a project we're consulting.

I knew I was taking a big risk, even in the short run. But the guy was not my client, and I was willing to risk hurting him. My client was his boss's boss's boss, and he'd asked me to straighten the guy out right away. (I'd suggested simply firing him.)

It'd been years since I'd last yelled in an engagement, and I don't recommend it. This time it turned out. I spent the entire next day making sure that the construction manager won, on his terms, and that there was no residue from the shock treatment I'd used.

My aspiration

Again, from Lao-tzu: *They were careful
as someone crossing an iced-over stream.
Alert as a warrior in enemy territory.
Courteous as a guest.
Fluid as melting ice.
Shapable as a block of wood.
Receptive as a valley.
Clear as a glass of water.*

*Do you have the patience to wait
till your mind settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?*

I appreciate that this is a good deal more verbiage than you requested. Hope some of it was useful.

Much love to you, my friend,

Allan Henderson
12 November 2000