

9 Principles for Healthy Confrontation by Kris Vallotton

When Jesus walked the earth, He had a few advantages over us. Minor things like He never sinned, for instance, so He never had to worry about hypocritically pointing out faults in others while neglecting His own. He was also God and knew the hearts of men; therefore, His assessments of people's motives were always accurate. Undoubtedly, these advantages gave Him confidence and grace when it came to approaching a confrontation; He was neither shy nor overly harsh.

We, on the other hand, have to be told, "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). According to this standard, confrontation must never involve yelling at someone, accusing him or her of evil, venting frustration or punishing the person for failing or hurting you. We must be especially careful about not judging the motives of people. In my experience, our so-called "gift of discernment" often turns out to be suspicion in disguise, especially when we are upset with someone.

Over the years, I have learned these nine principles for practicing the art of healthy confrontation:

1. WHEN A PROBLEM ARISES, GET AN APPOINTMENT TO TALK TO THE PERSON AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. Waiting too long allows the seed of bitterness to gestate. Don't wait for anger to be your counselor. Remember, this is not about punishing the person for his or her inappropriate behavior. You are meeting with the person for his or her benefit. The goal is to help mold the person into the image of God and reconcile your relationship.

2. LET THE PERSON KNOW HOW HIS OR HER BEHAVIOR HAS AFFECTED YOU. Describe in detail how the person's actions are making you feel.

3. KEEP YOUR ARMOR OFF BY BEING TRANSPARENT ABOUT YOUR OWN STRUGGLES. When a person is responding to you, listen from your heart to his (her) heart. Many people are not good at articulating their struggles, so you often have to listen beyond their words. As the person is speaking to you, don't develop your defenses or turn the conversation into a war of words. Ask questions that unearth the root problem. What is really wrong? What kind of core problem would cause these symptoms?

4. ALWAYS GIVE THE PERSON THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT, NO MATTER HOW HE OR SHE HAS BEHAVED. Remind yourself that the person you are having a problem with was made in the image of God and, therefore, most likely has a good heart, even though his or her behavior is negatively affecting the environment. Never think of the person as an enemy, but instead as a wayward son or daughter (father or mother). Show honor at all times. Let the person know you believe in him or her. Remember, you only have as much influence in someone's life as they have value for you.

5. ASK THE PERSON HOW YOU CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION. By this time, you may have found out that you are actually part of the problem. Maybe you are King David in this situation. Has your fear, weakness or dysfunction become a seedbed for the person's strength to be overemphasized or his or her weakness to be exposed? Have you reacted to the way you were raised or to some negative circumstances in your own life?

6. IF OTHER PEOPLE ARE NOT PART OF THE PROBLEM OR PART OF THE SOLUTION, IT IS NONE OF THEIR BUSINESS. Don't talk to other people about your offense with the person. Don't build a case against the person by bringing up other people's names in the conversation, saying things like, "I talked to John and Mary and they have the same problem with you." This just makes you look like a coward and a gossip. If you do that, don't be surprised if the person being confronted feels like he or she is a victim of a gang assault. You are not there to be someone's attorney.

On this note, if someone comes to you to talk about a problem with someone else, tell him or her to go talk to the person, not to you. I have 550 employees who work for me at Bethel Church. Many of my team members used to come up to me and begin to tell me about a struggle they were having with another staff member. Before they got 20 seconds into their discourse, I would interrupt them and ask, “Have you talked to this person yet?”

Nine out of ten times they would say, “No!”

Then I would ask them, “What business do you have talking to me if you haven’t even talked to the person who offended you?”

It is important to remember that a person who talks to you about someone else will one day be talking to someone about you. Allowing people to complain about others creates a culture of gossip. I personally will not tolerate it at Bethel.

7. IF YOU REALIZE DURING THE CONVERSATION THAT YOU ARE THE PROBLEM OR A PART OF THE DILEMMA, BE QUICK TO REPENT.

Humility always leads to repentance. Don’t defend yourself; leave your weapons outside the door. If the other person is wrong, verbally forgive him or her. Forgiveness restores the standard, so the person needs to be treated as if he/she never sinned after he or she repents.

8. IF YOU COME TO AN IMPASSE, HAVE SOMEONE YOU BOTH EQUALLY RESPECT JOIN YOU IN ANOTHER MEETING TO HELP RESOLVE THE ISSUE.

Bringing someone into the meeting that is not respected by one of the parties will only feel like the other person’s attorney is present. But a wise person who is not emotionally attached to the conflict can bring insightful perspective that is hard to see when you are in the middle of it, and will usually help bring the necessary resolution. I can’t count the number of times I’ve had a problem with someone only to find out in a meeting with him or her that I am the problem. Having a respected third party present helped me see the truth.

9. LAST BUT NOT LEAST, DON’T WITHDRAW FROM THE PERSON AFTER A CONFLICT. Make an extra effort to stay close to him or her during the healing process. This is often the difference between a long healthy relationship and a lifelong pattern of conflict.

A study was completed in the business world many years ago concerning this issue of conflict. The survey showed that when a customer had a problem with a business and the company satisfactorily solved the issue, that customer became many times more loyal to that store in the years that followed than they were before the conflict. I believe that conflict and confrontation resolved inside the core values of the Kingdom actually strengthen our relationships. These struggles are the sign of real relationships where people feel safe to tell one another the truth in love. This creates covenant societies that bond around family values, instead of fatherless sibling rivalries where orphans vie for preeminence in the pecking order of the world’s chicken coop.