

Constructive ~~Criticism~~ **CONVERSATION**



Resolve Conflict & Get Results

BY JUDY KAY MAUSOLF

Many of us go through life trying to avoid dealing with conflict out of fear. We hope it will just go away. But the more we try to avoid it, the more it builds until eventually, it escalates to a point where there is serious damage to the relationship.

Our fear of conflict is the problem, and it seems bigger the more we dwell on it. Here is the funny thing - **fear is really only a negative prediction about the future.** Whether or not we take action is governed by a simple ratio: our perception of danger versus our confidence in our ability to handle the conflict. **If we believe we can resolve the conflict, the amount of fear we feel is minimized and we will take action. This is why it is so important to teach our teams the mindsets and skill sets they need to give them confidence that they can handle conflict.**

If we examine conflict, it is really just conversation where there is a disagreement because of a difference of opinion or expectation. We will continue to experience different opinions and expectations during our life. We can eliminate the negative emotional energy in the conversation by coming from a place of care and concern instead of judgment and criticism. **Take time to ask and understand their why.**

Employers and managers often utilize what they consider to be constructive criticism to resolve conflict. The words "constructive criticism" always make me cringe. There doesn't seem to be anything constructive about criticism. The dictionary

defines criticism as the act of passing judgment as to the merits of qualities, values and abilities. I have yet to see where judging someone has helped to promote their further development and advancement or improve and change outcome. Instead, **criticism comes across as judging, condemning or blaming and has negative effects, such as employee shut down, lack of confidence and decline in performance.**

You can effectively get results by transforming criticism into a constructive conversation. There are two key roles in a constructive conversation. The Approacher and Approachee. The Approacher is the person conveying and enquiring and the Approachee is the person receiving and responding.

THE APPROACHER'S ROLE

Start Out Positive.

A constructive conversation is always in private and starts with positive communication from the Approacher. The Approacher shares what they appreciate about the other person. They build up instead of tear down by focusing on the other person's strengths. A positive conversation has a minimum of a three to one ratio. Three positives for every one growth

opportunity. Research shows that exceptional relationships have a five to one ratio. You may be thinking, "What if I can't find 5 positives?" Every person has a least 5 strengths you can highlight! We will discover their strengths when we shift our focus from their weaknesses to their strengths. How ironic that our strengths are just taken for granted and minimized, whereas our weaknesses are highlighted.

Ask For What You Want.

A lot of us never ask for what we need or want. We hold it inside and then get resentful when we don't get it. Be clear with yourself first about what you want, and then ask for it. People can't read our minds. Well, at least most people can't! One of my favorite new phrases is "I prefer...". It's a kinder, gentler version of "I need" or "I want", but it clearly states your preferences and it works. I have adopted a new motto in my life. I ask myself, "What have I got to lose?" If it's not a life and death situation, I ask for what I want. It's amazing how many things have manifested in my life simply because I have asked!

Be Transparent and Specific.

Choose to be transparent in all communications. We want others to trust not only what we say, but what we mean. Avoid hidden agendas, gray areas or reading between the lines. Transparency sheds

light on our intentions and builds trust. **People work hard for and follow the people they trust!** Be specific instead of generalizing. **Focus more on objective points than subjective opinions.** Just saying "I don't like it" or "You're doing this wrong" is not helpful. On the other hand, stating the specific strengths or skills you would like to see developed is helpful. **Avoid using demeaning words.** Remove the hedging phrases like "I just" and "I only" from your vocabulary. Sometimes you may need to soften the impact of what you're saying when you're in a touchy situation. **Choose language that softens the impact without diminishing what you're saying.**

Don't Make It Personal.

Talk about issue, not the person. Avoid saying "You need to...". Start the conversation with the word "I" instead of "you". For example - "I noticed", "I have seen", "I observed", or when sharing feedback from others, "I have had reported to me". "I" conversations are issue-focused instead of person-focused. **Always consider how your words may impact the other person.** Ask yourself; How can I say what I need to say and be respectful of how they may feel?

Control Your Emotions.

Show passion and positive emotions. It shows you are

human, you care, and are excited about life. However, control negative emotions such as anger, frustration, outbursts and dramatic displays. **Keep your energy neutral and come with a mindset of care, curiosity and concern instead of judgment and criticism. Never have a conversation when you are angry or frustrated or your emotions will rule the conversation.** Instead, take a few minutes to process and get calm. If something takes you by surprise, and you feel yourself getting emotional, tell them you need to think about it and will get back to them by a certain time. This will allow you time to regroup and respond clearly and logically instead of emotionally. Start out by making eye contact with the other person. **Be mindful of tone and body language as well as words.** A tone of care and concern communicates a sense of importance and provides the appropriate level of sincerity to the conversation. Avoid using sarcasm or derogatory words or the content of the conversation will get lost in the harshness. Once you say something it cannot be taken back. An apology doesn't mean we forget. The old nursery rhyme "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is not true. Words can destroy even the best of relationships.

Avoid Rambling. We often

ramble on, particularly when we are nervous. Try to keep your phrasing succinct and focused and don't go off on tangents. Data dumping too much information at one time is confusing to the listener. State your point briefly and clearly - then be quiet. Silence gives the listener a chance to consider what you've said, and respond.

Break your feedback down into key points.

Don't give your feedback as one big lump. Break it down into various key points, then give your feedback point by point. Give examples of each point. What are the exact issues, situations or examples where the person exhibits the behaviors you highlighted? There is no need to highlight every single one - disclosing a couple of examples per point will be sufficient. The purpose is to bring the person's awareness to things which he/she may not be aware of and clearly illustrate what you mean.

Be Timely! Try to address issues/concerns as they happen or within 24 hours of the occurrence. I have actually seen employers make a list of everything an employee has done wrong or needs to improve on for the year and go over it at their annual review. It reminds me of Santa Claus's naughty list! It's no wonder reviews get a bad rap! Ask the other

person what they need from you (communication, support, training, practice) to be able to achieve the desired results. Together discuss and agree on an action plan.

THE APPROACHEE'S ROLE

Don't Take Offense.

The approachee is to start out by just listening and not taking offense. It is important to recognize that the approacher's intent is good and to realize that it is not easy to approach someone.

Listen Openly. Listen intently before responding. Make eye contact with the other person. Consider how your actions or lack of actions affected the outcome instead of defending, deflecting or blaming someone else. Be honest with your response.

Avoid Assumptions.

Acknowledge you heard and understand them. Never assume. If you are unsure, ask questions until you clearly understand. If you are thinking "I think they mean this...", ask more questions.

Don't Take It Personally.

If the concern pertains to the patients, the practice or the team, it is necessary to address. It may not seem important or be a priority to you, but it is for the other person. It can be difficult to

hear when we are not meeting the standards or expectations. However, it is necessary to address in order to create and sustain a happier, healthier and higher performing culture.

Control Your Emotions. If you are upset, don't just walk off in anger or frustration. Instead, let them know that you need a little time to process the information they shared and you will respond later that day. Try respond within 24 hours.

Reset Energy. If you are on the receiving end of anger or frustration, ask the person if they are okay. This is their cue to reset their energy to calm and neutral. If they do not dial it down and you are still feeling attacked, let them know. For example, "I feel attacked" or "I feel disrespected when you raise your voice; roll your eyes; are being sarcastic with your words."

Agree On A Solution. Share what you need (communication, support, training, practice) to be able achieve the desired results. Together discuss and agree on a solution and make a commitment.

**In the end it's all about results!
If we want to be effective at getting the results we desire, a constructive conversation always trumps criticism!**



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Judy Kay Mausolf is a dental practice management coach, speaker and author with expertise in helping others get happier and more successful! She coaches teams how to grow their practices by becoming better leaders, working together better and delivering service with more passion and fun. She provides teams with what they need to know on how to communicate positively, effectively and have a better attitude on a daily basis. She teaches teams how to get the re-engaged and accountable by building a culture based on happiness, trust and respect.

She is Past President of National Speakers Association (Minnesota Chapter), Director of Sponsoring Partners for the Speaking Consulting Network, and a member of the National Speakers Association and Academy of Dental Management Consultants. She is author of two books; "*Ta-Dah!*" And "*Rise & Shine!*", and a contributing author for many dental magazines. She also publishes a monthly newsletter entitled "*Show Your Shine*".

Judy Kay lives in MN with her awesome husband Steve who makes her special coffee every morning and Zoe...it's all about me, 7 pound Yorkie!

