

# ARE YOU *CONFRONTABLE*?

By  
Lynne Eisaguirre

*People who don't mind telling the truth have mixed feelings about hearing the truth.* Jerry

Hirshberg, President, Nissan Design International, Inc.

Are you safe to confront?

When I'm asked to coach executives who've been accused of abuse, harassment, discrimination, poor conflict resolution skills or general "poor people management" skills, they frequently lament: "But I didn't know that he or she objected to my behavior. Why didn't they tell me?"

To this popular excuse I always respond: "What have *you* done to make it safe for them to come to you and complain about your behavior?"

This question is usually followed by silence. The executive views *confrontaphobia* as the other person's problem. But if you feast on conflict like a pit bull *and* if you're viewed as a person who has power in the organization (these two frequently go hand-in-hand), then you're probably difficult for others to confront. You'll need to take specific steps to make it safer for people to confront you.

One of the best ways to overcome your previous reputation is to be honest about your style. At the next staff meeting, mention that your own awareness has been raised about this issue and that you've realized that you may not have been the easiest person to approach with a conflict. Announce that you've changed your attitude and ask for suggestions about what would make it easier for people to come to you. You might try something like this:

I'm becoming increasingly aware of how much I need the feedback of each and every one of you to make this organization a success. But because I've had a reputation in the past as a pit bull that approaches every conflict or suggestion as a personal attack or as an opportunity to debate, I'm realizing that some of you may not have found me approachable. What could I do to make it easier for each of you to come to me with conflicts, feedback or suggestions?

Be prepared for resounding silence.

Your reputation as a pit bull will not be easy to overcome. As one high-powered attorney I coached complained about the associates in his firm: "*They won't talk to me; they think I'm the prince off----- darkness.*"

If you continue to ask for suggestions about your approachability, however, hints will eventually arrive at your doorstep.

Why do you care? you may ask. Many people have been successful and even gained power in the workplace with an abrasive style. As Vick, one VP of Finance complained when I gave him feedback about his brutal style that had generated a score of employee complaints, "In other organizations, my style would be viewed as an advantage. In fact, I used to receive compliments here for being a tough boss and a hard charger. People today are just too sensitive."

The reality is, the workplace *has* changed. An abrasive style may have been successful yesterday; it will not be successful in the future.

The intrusion of the law into people management in the workplace is one obvious reason for the change. The likelihood of an employee charging you with harassment, discrimination or a violation of the Americans' With Disabilities Act (which now may cover psychological as well as physical disabilities), skyrockets if you have a pit bull reputation. You may protest that you're not discriminating against any particular person, that you treat everyone this way. In my experience, that argument won't fly with courts or juries. They seem to assume that if you're abusive to everyone, you're even more abusive to people who have less power in the organization, usually women and people of color. Even if you do succeed, you will be stuck with the embarrassing defense of presenting a parade of witnesses to attest to how abusive you were to *them* also.

And these groups will make up more of the workplace as our labor force becomes more diverse. According to the Hudson Institute in their *Workforce 2000 Report*, by the year 2000, only 15% of new workers will be white males. In their updated version, *Workforce 2020*, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will bring a huge increase in older workers, adding new diversity management issues. As a manager or co-worker, you will increasingly need to know how to work successfully with a diverse workforce.

The second reason is that with the change in the economy, the tight labor market and how organizations are managed, no one can succeed alone. You'll need the suggestions, dedication and brainpower of all your people in order to prosper in the future. To elicit the best ideas from your troops, you need to encourage honest feedback. As Jerry Hirshberg, President of Nissan Design International, stressed in a recent interview:

Many of the best ideas are communicated through whispers—in the hallway meetings that happen after the official meeting. That's because people worry about how the boss will react if they speak the truth. What's remarkable, of course, is that these whispered ideas are what companies are most hungry for.

Many organizations now evaluate both leaders and employees based upon how well they address issues such as diversity, consensus and team building. You can't survive in most organizations without these skills.

After announcing at your next meeting your change in your own *modus operandi*, I'd also suggest that you start having weekly 15-minute one-on-one meetings with your direct reports or co-workers on your team. In those meetings, there should be one item on your agenda—keep asking the questions: *What do you need from me or others to be successful here? What behaviors do I or others engage in that limit your success?*

Again, when you first ask these questions, be prepared for silence. If you continue to ask these questions week after week, month after month, however, eventually your colleagues will tell you what they need from you. More importantly, you will start to see patterns in how others in the organization perceive you and what you must do to change.

You need to keep asking these kinds of questions—not because you're automatically going to change your behavior to suit others—but because you need to be able to skillfully manage their expectations about your behavior. Once you know how they want you to treat

them, you can begin to have an honest dialogue about what you can both do differently in the future to make your relationship succeed.

If you're a leader in your organization, consider the model Robert Rodin, President and CEO of Marshall Industries, uses:

The more you insist on hearing the truth, and the more often you act on what you've heard, the more often people will give it to you. But most leaders do precisely the opposite. Their companies systematically distort the truth—by design . . . . It's human nature to avoid conflict . . . . If you want to hear criticism, you have to invite it. At least once a month, I convene a forum called "Marshall Live." I gather people at one of our sites: no managers are allowed. I start every meeting by saying something like "This is your company. Tell me what's wrong with it." I get amazing feedback. And then I promise to deal with the feedback in two weeks or less. We don't always do what people want: Companies aren't democracies. But people know that we haven't just heard their criticisms—we've dealt with them.

If someone does summon the nerve to complain directly to you about your behavior: stop. Do not immediately respond. Listen to the suggestion of Jerry Hirshberg, President of Nissan Design International, Inc.:

Even people who don't mind telling the truth have mixed feelings about hearing the truth. It's like a chemical reaction: Your face goes red, your temperature rises, you want to strike back. Those are signs of the "two D's": defending and debating. Try to fight back with the "two L's": listening and learning . . . . So the next time you feel yourself defending and debating, stop—and start listening and learning instead. You'll be amazed by what you hear.

When someone comes to you with a conflict or criticism about your behavior, follow these steps:

1. *Stop what you're doing and listen.* Give the person your complete attention. If you cannot do that, schedule an appointment as soon as possible.
2. *Do not get defensive.* First restate what the person said to make sure you understood. Say, for example, "Let me make sure I understand what you said. I heard you say that you don't want me to yell at you when I give you feedback. Is that correct?"
3. *Apologize if appropriate.* If you're convinced you did nothing wrong, at least say you're sorry your behavior offended them. A good boss or co-worker should be sorry someone else is upset even if they're convinced the other person over reacted. If you really did do something very wrong, grovel!
4. *Ask what specific behavior the person needs from you in order to work effectively with you in the future.* Be certain you focus on behavior, not attitudes or their feelings. You can change your own behavior, but you may never be able to change how they feel.
5. *Thank them for bringing the matter to your attention and for their courage and honesty.* Let them know that you respect and appreciate them for talking with you directly.

6. *Follow-up.* Make sure you schedule another meeting with them to see if your change in behavior has met their needs.

7. *Keep talking and keep meeting until your working relationship improves.* If the two of you cannot make it work together, seek an experienced mediator to help you resolve your differences.

Does this all sound like too much effort? Unfortunately, there's no quick and easy way to change a pit bull's reputation. You do it by changing your own behavior—inch-by-inch, day-by-day. You also do it by assuming leadership in conflict resolution in your organization and by encouraging feedback as learning.

As William Rosenzweig, Managing Director, Venture Strategy Group and co-founder, president and “Minister of Progress” for the Republic of Tea, points out:

Why are people reluctant to tell the truth? Because so many of us take the most well-intentioned criticism personally. The only way to unleash open communication is to convince people that honesty is about group learning, not individual criticism.

### ***How To Manage Your Own Anger***

The biggest challenge for most pit bulls in becoming confrontable may be to manage their own anger. Understanding your anger is the first step.

The practical, popular psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, in a recent interview, summarized the current research about anger management. Understand, she stressed, that your own anger is all about fear, especially the fear of exposing something about yourself and the fear of losing control.

When you feel anger, before exploding, ask yourself of what or whom you are afraid. What might you lose in the encounter? How might you be hurt? Knowing the real, underlying reason may help you control your anger.

Next, suggests Dr. Brothers, don't ignore your anger, but don't express rage inappropriately. There was a time when people thought it healthy to immediately express their anger. More recent research, however, suggests that constant ventilating actually makes us more angry rather than less. The most accepted theory is to assume a middle ground between exploding and suppressing anger. Follow these tips, Dr. Brothers suggests:

- don't ignore your anger, but don't immediately blow up
- count to ten
- direct your anger at the proper person
- deal with the issue at hand; don't bring up old issues
- confront the person in private
- stay calm; act calm
- don't smile—smiling can be viewed as mocking and can increase anger
- use “I” statements, i.e., “I don't want you to throw away my papers without asking,” rather than “You have no respect for my things”
- wait for their explanation

- offer understanding (let them save face)

If counting to 10 doesn't work, Dr. Brothers suggests you count to 100!

Most of all, understand that expressing anger appropriately will be a key to making you confrontable.

If you're confrontable, and if you encourage skillful confrontation in your own organization, you can move from defending and debating to listening and learning. You can evolve from debate to dialogue. You will have taken another step on the road to unleashing the power of a good fight.