FORTUNE

HOW TO MAKE CONFRONTATION WORK FOR YOU

by Andrew S. Grove

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Too many executives shy away from forthright encounters with co-workers. They are fooling themselves, says the president of Intel Corp. Here's how to manage conflicts so that constructive results blossom.　　■ *by Andrew S. Grove*

"I JUST DON'T understand how your new way of measuring things around here will help us at all," the plant manager said, grimacing. Others at the meeting merely looked puzzled. The vice president of manufacturing, the plant manager's direct superior, had just finished vigorously urging the use of a particular statistical indicator to determine whether the company's plants were delivering products on time. Faced with the plant manager's incredulity, the vice president redoubled his efforts, trying again to win over everyone in the room.

The plant manager remained unconvinced. His colleagues then jumped into the fray. Arguments generated rebuttals, numbers collided with other numbers. New ideas began to surface, most of them to be immediately rejected, until eventually the heated exchanges dissipated. The still-animated group of people in the room suddenly realized, with considerable satisfaction, that they had now come up with the right statistical measure.

As the meeting ended, the vice president shook his head in mock dismay. "It's too bad," he said, "that you people are so reticent." He put away his papers somewhat ruefully—his hours of preparation for the meet-

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ing had not resulted in his proposal being adopted. But he also knew that what had finally been agreed upon was better than his original idea.

That meeting, which actually took place, exemplifies a direct approach to problem solving that we at Intel have developed over the company's 15 years in business. As we struggled to establish Intel's place in the sun, people focused almost completely on the task at hand, with no one too concerned about protocol and formality in dealing with co-workers. We kept this style as the company grew. Years later when a consultant watched a number of our managers work through problems in small groups, he remarked that we seemed to approach every problem in the same unusual way. In searching for a phrase to describe it, he came up with "constructive confrontation."

What we had stumbled on was a method for putting aggressive energies to work *for* the organization. Too often, in my observation, the failure to face up to these energies, to acknowledge that they exist and have to find expression, ends up bedeviling an organization. This failure is, for example, why most managers don't conduct meaningful performance appraisals—they are afraid to let go enough to tell subordinates what they really think, and also afraid of the angry response that may come back at them.

Why have constructive confrontations? Everybody knows that problems are inevitable in business. Machines stop working properly, orders are lost to the competition, co-workers don't perform their tasks the way we think they should. Such problems often produce conflicts.

If an order was lost, was it because the salesmen goofed or because product quality has slipped? Members of the sales force and quality-control people will probably disagree. But if the company is to get the customer back, we have to find the right answer to the question and solve the problem.

DEALING with conflicts lies at the heart of managing any business. As a result, confrontation—facing issues about which there is disagreement—can be avoided only at the manager's peril. The issue can be put off, it can be allowed to fester for a long time, it can be smoothed over or swept under some rug. But it is not going to disappear. Conflicts must be resolved if the organization is to go forward.

Constructive confrontation accelerates problem solving. It requires that participants be direct, that they deal face to face. It pushes people to deal with a problem as soon as possible, keeping it from festering. It encourages all concerned to concentrate on the problem, not on the people caught up in it.

Many managers seem to think it is impolite to tackle anything or anyone head on, even in business. By contrast, we at Intel believe that it is the essence of corporate health to bring a problem out into the open as soon as possible, even if this entails a confrontation. Workplace politicking grows quietly in the dark, like mushrooms; neither can stand the light of day.

I learned this as a relatively young and inexperienced manager, when I let myself get sucked into the middle of some unproductive political infighting. Two of my subordinates, one in charge of manufacturing and the other of quality assurance, came to dislike each other. The manufacturing manager would walk into my office and complain to me that the quality manager didn't know what he was doing. Ten minutes later the quality manager would tell me that his counterpart disregarded procedures, that he didn't give a hoot about quality.

I found myself investigating first one claim and then another, getting more and more anxious and angry. Finally I decided I would not tolerate it anymore. The next time one of them began the routine, I raised my hand and stopped him. "Hold it," I said. "Let's get the other person in here." When he appeared, I said to the manager in my office: "Now tell me what you were going to say." The confrontation between the two was tense and embarrassed—anything but constructive. But after a few such sessions, both managers discovered that dealing directly with each other was a lot less awkward and more productive than a scene in my office.

Constructive confrontation does *not* mean being loud, unpleasant, or rude, and it is not designed to affix blame. The essence of it is to attack a problem by speaking up in a businesslike way. Say that you are in a meeting. The man across the table is droning on with a clearly unworkable idea. When you are sure you understand his point, interrupt him politely: "I disagree with your proposed solution. It won't work because . . ." Attack the problem, not the individual.

If you find yourself saying, "You're out of your mind to even suggest such a thing," you're doing it wrong. Indeed, as long as the focus of what you say is the individual, even the most delicate phrasing won't help much. A remark like "With all due respect. I can't help but wonder what you might have been thinking of when you came up with this plan," while exquisite in its politeness, still misses the target. When you do focus correctly—on the problem—never be rude. Saying "The solution you propose is absurd" isn't constructive confrontation either.

A case in point, about which I still feel bad: A seasoned Intel manager was delivering a report on a key project. I was unhappy with the presentation. Though the project was clearly important, the man was unprepared. As I sat there seething, one of my associates started to criticize the manager, who responded with lame excuses. I then jumped in. My temper got the best of me, and what I said turned into an attack on him rather than on the

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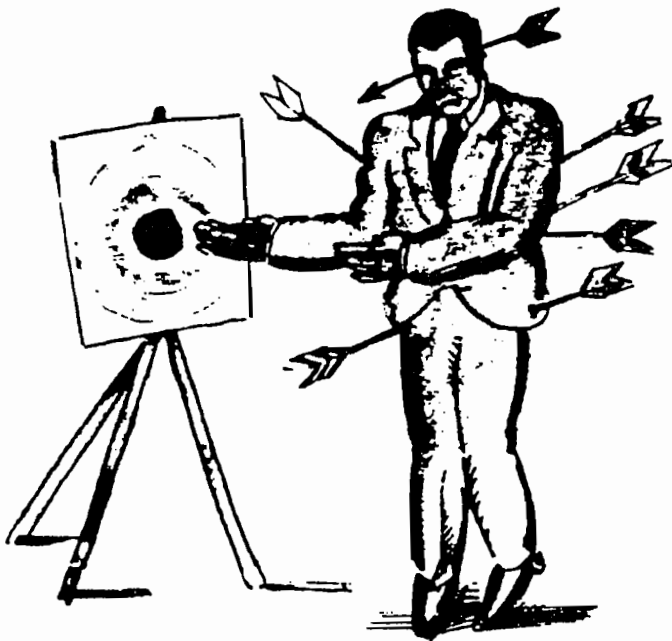
poor performance we had all witnessed. After I cooled down, I apologized to him, but by then it was too late. A loyal, experienced, and valuable manager had been so hurt that no apology could get through to him. A few months later he left the company.

Constructive confrontation is admittedly hard to practice. While a few people are natural "black belts" at the technique, most find it somewhat painful, at least initially, because they have been brought up to think that politeness excludes confrontation. People who have trouble picking up the technique should be comforted by the fact that they're in good company. Consider the following, from a column by Joseph Kraft: "Ronald Reagan enjoys a reputation as a fierce tiger in asserting American interests. But foreign leaders repeatedly come away from sessions with the President claiming he is a pussycat, too nice even to mention disagreeable subjects."

In our formal course to teach new Intel employees about constructive confrontation, we explain the reasons for using the technique—the need for conflict resolution and the desirability of speeding this process up. We then practice dealing with problems by role playing in small groups, so that at the end of the seminar every participant has had at least a taste of it under supervised conditions—but only a taste. The best way to learn the technique is by observing others in the company—co-workers, supervisors, subordinates—in real confrontations.

Are some people by nature less adept at constructive confrontation? Women, for instance? Actually, I have found that women seem to have an easier time with it and more often do it right. I don't know why.

SOME CULTURES do seem to better prepare people to use the technique, however. I was once asked to teach constructive confrontation to a group of managers at our subsidiary in Japan. The Japanese readily grasped the reasons for the practice, and we sailed along merrily until we came to the role playing. So that I could follow it, they began by doing this in English. It went well. Gradually their role playing switched into Japanese. While I could not follow the dialogue, I noted growing amusement among the Japanese managers who were watching. When I asked them to explain their mirth, it turned out that while the role players had a fairly easy time practicing their confrontational roles in English, they absolutely froze when they tried to do it in Japanese. The ingrained habits of nonconfrontational behavior so strongly established in Japanese upbringing effectively inhibited them from bringing off a confrontation in their native language.

The practice of constructive confrontation has to be managed, of course, particularly its use with people outside the company. Someone who employs the technique with, say, a job applicant is likely to at least confuse and at worst antagonize. At Intel we have learned not to impose our style of direct problem solving on others unfamiliar with it—customers, for example. Once I paid a sales call on one of our largest customers, a company known for its indirect and nonconfrontational internal style. Accompanied by a group of sales and marketing people, I participated in a fairly large meeting, which included some of the senior management of the other company. We ran into a few problems and went to work on them. The discussion meandered around far too long compared with what I was accustomed to at Intel. Without even realizing what I was doing, I started to take over the meeting—asking questions, directing the discussion. Nobody objected, so I thought nothing of it until we left. Once we were outside the customer's building, the Intel sales people gathered around and almost lynched me for behavior they considered totally inappropriate in the customer's presence. They were correct. The story of that meeting reverberated through the other company. Our sales people had to make a number of follow-up visits to smooth the feathers I had ruffled.

Sometimes, of course, a situation simply runs away from us. Rational arguments give way to a scene in which the participants need to win an argument much more than they need to resolve an issue. When that happens, it's best to adjourn the confrontation. When things aren't getting anywhere, raise your hand and say: "Hold it! Let's take this up later when *everybody* is cooler." When you reconvene, chances are that all present will be thinking more clearly. Then they will be ready for the kind of confrontation that works. ∎