

Approaches to Positive Confrontation

As educators, leaders and facilitators you likely experience situations where you need and want to confront language and behaviors that are hurtful and oppressive. It's common in these situations to feel angry and want to correct and perhaps even verbally attack the person. Patronizing, correcting and attacking people for what they've said or done may cause them to become defensive and more entrenched in denial. If our goal is to stay connected and in community with others even through times of tension and difficult discussions, we may need to respond differently in order to promote growth, learning and change. The following approaches may be useful to those who want options for responding in the moment:

- **Be aware of yourself:** It's difficult to confront others when acting out of anger or fear. Take a deep breath and be mindful of your thoughts and feelings before speaking. Use whatever strategies work for you as you keep in mind the results you want to achieve.
- **Find your center of powerfulness:** Draw strength from your wisdom, confidence and sense of personal power to impact positive change.
- **Decide to confront publicly or privately:** Think about how you want to be confronted when you've done something to hurt or offend someone. A more public intervention may be appropriate if the hurtful language or behaviors happen in front of others. The goal is not to embarrass but to educate and challenge from a place of support. Clearly and firmly intervening in front of others is a powerful illustration that you will not tolerate hurtful language, actions or behaviors and helps to create a safer more caring environment for all.
- **Be respectful and constructive:** Don't blame or shame people when they've made a mistake. Model what you want to see from others to promote growth, healing and learning. Practice "deep listening" and seek to understand more fully what's happening with everyone involved. Your goal is to stay in right relationship with others.
- **Be clear:** Be sure that the person you're confronting knows what language or behavior is being questioned. You may need to repeat the offense. Another option is to ask people to explain more about what they mean or believe. Asking questions such as "can you help me understand what you mean by that...?" may help you find out more about the person's perspectives or experiences so that you can be in dialogue and provide your own perspectives. If you choose to ask questions, be sure that they come from a place of curiosity and genuineness and not from a place of shame or blame.

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- **Use “I” statements:** Own your own thoughts and feelings and resist the temptation to say “You” (e.g., You make me angry...). “I” statements help us speak from our own perspective and avoid blaming language that often makes others feel defensive. Connect your “I” messages to your feelings to promote empathy and caring. For example, “As a woman, I sometimes feel that my voice is not heard in authentic ways.”
- **Use “softening statements”:** Softening statements help us hear feedback and reduce the tendency for people to become defensive. A softening statement shows the person you’re confronting that you care about *them* and are concerned about their *behavior*. Examples of softening statements are: “I care about you and know you wouldn’t want to intentionally hurt others and I’m concerned about...” or “I can relate to what you’re saying because I used to believe that too. I’ve come to more deeply understand the way white privilege has and continues to open doors for me....”
- **Provide accurate information:** Take the opportunity to provide important information. For example, if young people say “That’s so gay” they may not understand that using that phrase is hurtful to others. Provide accurate information such as “When you say ‘that’s so gay’ you’re really saying ‘that’s so stupid’”. Using the word ‘gay’ in that way is a slur against a whole group of people who are lesbian and gay and it’s hurtful and offensive. Let’s practice affirming people more and hurting people less through our language.”
- **Invite further discussion:** Remember that one conversation or confrontation may not create lasting change. Let others know that you are available to them and that you are open to keeping the conversation going. Remember that our goal is to stay in right relationship with others. Invite people to be in dialogue with you by saying, “Are you willing to talk with me about an issue that came up yesterday...?” or “Are you willing to hear feedback about how something you said impacted me....?”
- **Be mindful of your silence:** Not speaking up may communicate that we don’t care. Silence can communicate that the hurtful behavior is acceptable. We all have a responsibility to speak up when we feel that we can, to interrupt hateful, hurtful and oppressive comments.

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