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## CONSIDERING CONFRONTATION AND CHALLENGE

### WISE, SKILLFUL CONFRONTATION AND CHALLENGE ARE CRUCIAL FOR PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.

We tend to back away from confrontation and challenge partly because of negative connotations—the terms conjure up images of head to head disputes, aggression, a desire to win and hostile intent. But, there are less well known, positive definitions:

- **Confrontation:** bringing ideas together for comparison relative to specific goals or pointing out discrepancy between intention and action.
- **Challenge:** calling on a person to see his/her fullest abilities and highest potential to achieve specific goals.

Both strategies can be seen as *simply calling out information not being considered*.

This more positive, simple definition does not do away with or provide answers for all of the difficulties, risks and uncertainties of speaking up in this way. But it may help support ongoing consideration and more skillful use of these two strategies of communication.

### A KEY RESPONSIBILITY IS TO CONTRIBUTE TO AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF REALITY.

The constant change of organizational life frequently pushes us out of our comfort zone requiring changes in habits and patterns of thinking, relating and doing.

In such circumstances, blind spots, errors, problematic behaviors and oversights are human and common. Desired organizational goals can be put at risk.

In this sense, successful change requires a willingness to confront and challenge at times. Careful choices about when and how to use these skills are a key responsibility for everyone.

### INTEGRATE EMPATHY, RESPECT AND POSITIVE INTENTIONS.

For successful results, confrontation and challenge are best used together with, not instead of, empathy and respect. Here are some of the key elements for success:

- Maintain understanding, empathy, and respect.
- Keep to facts, behaviors and specifics; avoid generalizations and characterizations.
- Keep the goals in mind. Relate why the information is important to personal and organizational goals.
- Use “I” statements in putting forth your information and observations.
- Explicitly offer input as information for the person to consider not as the only way of seeing things. Mutual inquiry is a primary aim.
- Inquire about their reaction to your confrontation or challenge

Avoid the following:

- Proceeding if you have strong feelings of anger or judgment
- Getting into a dispute about who is right
- Getting attached to the person seeing things in a certain way

### **ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND SITUATIONAL CONTEXT MATTER.**

Risks and complexities with confrontation and challenge vary in each organizational culture and specific situation. Talking with colleagues about issues being ignored differs from talking with an employee who is not being accountable or a supervisor who may be making a major error.

### **Successful confrontation in two scenarios: background**

Bev and Jane are VPs in two different organizations. While Bev has been a VP for years, Jane is new in her position. They both are considering confronting their executive teams which are led by their CEOs. Both believe that their colleagues and CEOs have dropped the ball on a major initiative.

Both are angry and frustrated but want to avoid emotional outbursts which have hurt past working relationships. Yet they do not want to remain silent—the stakes seem too high.

### **Bev's scenario: high level of trust and safety**

Bev knows her CEO is at ease with confrontation. She decides to speak up in a team meeting.

Bev: *“I would like to raise an observation for your reflection. We have discussed before that we have a tendency to back off from initiatives especially when we have to make people do things that they do not like. I am concerned this is happening again with our new initiative. After all of our work getting it started, my perception is that we never talk about it. I am concerned our work will go to waste. What do you think?”*

### **Jane's scenario: uncertain level of trust and safety**

Jane is a new VP, unsure of trust and safety, and decides to meet her CEO (John) privately.

Jane: *“John, I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your giving me the opportunity in this new position. It is a pleasure to work on your team. I do want to share with you a perception and get your viewpoint. It seems to me that we are no longer paying attention to that new initiative we started a few months ago. Do you see things the same way? Do you think this could be a problem for our goals?”*

### **SUMMON THE COURAGE TO PRACTICE AND LEARN FROM MISTAKES.**

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Application of confrontation and challenge can be complex and there are not fixed rules. Becoming more adept at these strategies means putting them into practice and learning about the nuances of when and how to use them, always weighing the risks of remaining silent versus speaking up. Self-reflection, collegial consultation and coaching enhance personal practice.

Speaking up can be an act of significant courage. It all depends on context.