Science Societies

Avoiding Confrontation

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I have historically avoided conflict, especially with people that I didn't want to upset or disappoint. You could say I was a people pleaser for much of my early life. As a graduate student, I learned quickly that conflict was going to be part of my life and my career, and I was going to have to face it head on at times. Part of the reason for my avoidance is fear: Fear I would upset someone, fear of not being liked, fear of disappointing someone, fear I would make things worse, and the list of fears goes on. By actively avoiding confrontation, I allowed situations to simmer and build up, making it more difficult to handle as time passed. We have difficult conversations in almost every aspect of our lives, often as an active means to improve relationships, so it's important not to shy away from them at work.

"Confrontation" tends to have a negative connotation. Confrontation does not have to be fraught with anger or heightened emotions. If we reframe the scenario as a positive action, we can go a long way in de-escalating our emotions. Conflict should be embraced and dealt with—not just to resolve a problem but as a moment to learn about yourself and the other person. Of course, some confrontations are necessarily more difficult than others, especially if the topic is sensitive for one or both parties. In this case, it is important to approach the confrontation in a measured and thoughtful way.

One thing that has helped me deal with confrontation is having someone I trust (friend, spouse, colleague, mentor, etc.) to talk to about a conflict before approaching the situation when time allows. Often another person can add some perspective that I haven't seen or haven't thought of. It gives me an opportunity to think about my side of the issue as well as where the other person might be coming from. Often stepping

away from the situation and allowing yourself time to calm down and reevaluate can help you avoid saying something out of anger or frustration, which often results in escalating the conflict.

There are many kind and assertive ways to speak up and express your opinion, and doing so might improve the situation more than you ever imagined. Respect the unique differences in people, and learn to see things from differing points of view so that you can better understand how to prevent the issue altogether. Don't let fear of confrontation and being in an awkward conversation for a few minutes hold you back from moving forward.

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Back to issue

Back to home

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