

Holding resistant staff accountable: From negativity to optimism

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Children eagerly observe us in their intense quest to learn how to grow up. Eighty percent of early childhood leaders are conflict-avoidant. As a result, children observe adults communicating indirectly or not at all about our inevitable conflicts. The *Latin* root of “confront”, means “bring people face to face”. For many of us, “confrontation” means a bloody battlefield, to be avoided at all costs. Houston, we have a problem! Are you ready to take on the challenge of holding resistant staff accountable?

Consider these questions and situations:

1. Seventy percent of women, and 44% of men, value relationships over tasks, take things personally, hold grudges, feel guilty, and “forgive, but don’t forget”(Myers-Briggs data based on over 40 million surveyed). Do you believe women are “hard-wired” to be sensitive, caring/relational? If so, can nurturers be direct and confrontational? If not, **why do you think so many women (and a considerable minority of men), take things personally and avoid conflict?**
2. **Think of a person with whom you have an unresolved conflict.** Imagine that you are about to meet face-to-face with that person to deal with the conflict. Picture yourself in the moments before you meet with the person. Now, draw a picture (no artistic ability required) of how you feel and/or your mental state just before you confront the person.
3. At the presenter’s signal, please stand up, holding your drawing in front of you. Circulate around the room, observing as many other drawings as you can. Find a person whose drawing resembles yours or intrigues you. Sit down with that person and ask what s/he sees in your drawing. After you have gotten this feedback, explain what your drawing represents. Repeat this process with the other person holding up her/his drawing for your feedback. **Identify together any commonalities you share in facing/avoiding conflict.**
4. As the group reconvenes, listen to other participants share how they feel about conflict. If you were to describe those feelings in one word or phrase, what would that word or phrase be?
5. **“Someone else’s action does not have to predict my response”**, notes the Dalai Lama. When someone’s behavior offends you, what helps you maintain your professionalism?
6. **Principles of effective confrontation:** a) **Focus on behavior**, not on personalities; b) **Be factual** and concrete; c) **Don’t** allow yourself to **“get hooked”** into a power struggle; d) Keep your **“eyes on the prize”**: remember what you stand for; e) **Expect adults to take responsibility** for themselves. *Res ipse loquitur*: the facts speak for themselves.
7. **Five steps to effective confrontation:**
 - Name the **inappropriate behavior**
 - State what is expected
 - Ask **“What will you do** to correct this situation?”
 - Persist until a **workable solution** is identified and **agreed upon**.
 - Make a clear **plan for follow up** and **state consequences** of failure to change behavior.

8. **You are Beulah's supervisor. Apply the 5 principles and 5 steps:** Beulah is your program's cook. She is responsible for planning menus of nutritious meals, managing the food budget, and preparing meals posted on the menu. Yesterday, Beulah served canned spaghetti for lunch; chicken fingers and broccoli were on the menu. Today, Beulah, angry with her boyfriend, Claude, bought expensive chocolate croissants for the children, instead of serving the pancakes on the menu. Loved by children, Beulah is a great cook. However, Beulah "has attitude", and feels she can do no wrong.

9. Have you been able to change another person? Serenity Prayer counsels: "Grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change (other people), courage to change the things I can (myself), and wisdom to know the difference. Consider the person with whom you have that unresolved conflict. **What can you change about yourself** in preparation for holding that person accountable? Practice (with another participant) applying the 5 principles and steps.
10. **You supervise toddler teacher, Betty** who smiles whenever she sees you. Teachers and parents tell you Betty gossips about you. Today Rodney's mom said Betty complained about the money you "waste" going to conferences (like NAEYC). Team teacher Rhina fears Betty will gossip about her if Rhina tells Betty to stop gossiping. You overhear Betty saying: "That director has a drinking problem." What steps do you take?
11. When **dealing with whiners** do not agree or disagree with them. Instead, interrupt and ask for a concrete example. Problem solve with them. If they whine to you again, say: **"Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again."**
12. "When we have concerns about the ethical behavior of a co-worker, we shall 1st let that person know of our concern in a way that shows respect for personal dignity and for the diversity to be found among staff members, and then attempt to resolve the matter collegially and in a confidential manner" (NAEYC's *Code of Ethical Conduct*). **In Kioko's culture** "saving face" is preferable to confrontation. How can Kioko supervise Jasmine who continues to be late, regardless of Kioko's gentle prodding?
13. You supervise team teachers, **Gabriella and Maude who clash. Gabriella is a free spirit:** fun loving and creative. When Nate finds a frog on the playground, Gabriella spreads out finger paints for the children to create frog ponds. She tells children: "Spread your art work around the edge of the room to dry", as she leaves at 3 pm for her 2nd job. **Maude says children learn best in a structured environment**, with predictable lesson plans. **Maude** is uncomfortable when blocks or books are not put away properly. **Maude** often stays late to tidy-up **Gabriella's** "mess". **Maude**, fearing someone will slip, tosses the wet papers into a garbage bag. The next day, **Gabriella** asks **Maude** where the children's artwork is. Refusing to let them get into a cat fight, you say _____?
14. **Venting: helpful or harmful?** Most early childhood professionals say "getting things off their chest" helps. Long term venting can wear out the supervisor. Venting ground rules: a) Vent to an appropriate person (supervisor only); b) Limit venting time to 3-5 minutes; and, c) If venting persists, commit to address and resolve the underlying conflict.
15. **What is the most valuable principle/practice you will take home** as a result of participating in this workshop?