

THE USES AND ABUSES OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDY GROVE

How would you define the term "Constructive Confrontation?"

It is a problem-solving technique that focuses on attacking problems in a straightforward way, as opposed to being overly careful, diplomatic or devious. Constructive Confrontation's two most important characteristics are directness and immediacy. It acknowledges that problems are a natural part of the business process, and that we should deal with them in real time without being embarrassed or insulted when they're raised. This is much healthier than letting them grow like mushrooms in the dark. "Politics" grows in that kind of environment.

Do you think Constructive Confrontation is being practiced correctly at Intel?

Yes and no. Sometimes I see people practicing the form but forgetting the substance. They attack individuals connected with the problems rather than the problems themselves. This is one of the worst mistakes that can be made. When the confrontation becomes personal, the reactions are personal too. The focus on the problem is lost, and the experience damages the person being confronted.

When discussions get heated it is sometimes inevitable that people shout and yell and use foul language; it's not desirable but it happens because everyone is so intensely involved. When someone looks in on this and adopts it as a norm, then we have a terribly disruptive behavior for no good reason.

Can you give me an example?

Yes. We recently had an instance where an Intel person used foul, abusive language interviewing an external job candidate. The premise was that the candidate didn't belong here unless he could take it. That's wrong. We have a responsibility to conduct ourselves in a businesslike fashion. We may fail from time to time, but we shouldn't project this kind of behavior as a model.

Are you part of the problem?

I think I have been part of the problem. I have been frequently guilty of being too intense and using bad language. I'm not at all pleased with that. I am pleased if I am able to be the confronter of problems and a role model for focusing successfully on difficult issues, but I'm not pleased when I leave a wake of discourteous behavior behind me. On my sabbatical my kids got on me about this. I worked on it and by the end of my sabbatical they could take me anywhere.

What about the role of managers as role models?

The behavior of managers is the single most important way that Constructive Confrontation gets transmitted -- well or poorly -- to employees. I know the intent of my fellow managers to solve problems when they practice Constructive Confrontation. If they're rude and profane when they do so, though, their people are subconsciously going to say "This is how a manager acts, and this is the style I have to adopt to succeed at Intel." That is both conceptually and factually wrong. Many of our senior managers do not fit that mold. They succeed by force of intellect and by being effective leaders, not by yelling.

I think senior managers have to be especially sensitive when they are dealing with people several levels below them in their organizations. In these situations, they are being closely watched. As the senior person present, their actions are amplified and the whispers of their behavior become shouts.

What would you suggest managers do to make sure people are practicing Constructive Confrontation effectively?

Well, we give a course on this subject and that is a useful start, but what we're talking about -- having good role models -- is probably more important. So, point one is that managers need to make sure their own behavior reflects what they want to propagate in their organizations. Point two is that whenever they see a situation like a staff meeting deteriorating into destructive confrontations, they need to stop it and take time out to show everyone what they're doing wrong. Destructive confrontation is a problem that should be confronted constructively, like any other problem.