

Confronting With Care:

An Approach that Builds Trust

With Martha Lasley

Originally published in Facilitating with Heart

The word “confront” raises alertness, but is often associated with fear. A sweet alternative is the practice of “care-fronting,” a term coined by Sushma Sharma, an organizational consultant in Mumbai India, for confronting with care. This empowering experience wakes people up to something they are not aware of in themselves. The intention is to enhance their well-being or the well-being of others. But how do you do this without being presumptuous (judging what they are not aware of, determining what is in their best interest to become aware of, and raising consciousness about the matter without being asked)? To do this without bullying, nagging, or assuming a stance of superiority involves choosing the intention to support, selecting the depth that clients are open to hearing, and having confidence that they have the desire and ability to do something about it. For care-fronting to have the desired impact, you first need heart connection, useful content, and spot-on timing.

Most importantly, when I care-front, I want to have the best interests of the receiver in mind. If I believe the person is doing the best he can at any given time (with whatever information and resources are available) and I am truly investing in his development, public feedback is a growth vehicle for all involved.

By definition, care-fronting is unsolicited because the person is unaware of what she’s unaware of. Before launching into care-fronting, you can ask for permission from the person, but ask yourself a few questions first:

- Am I trying to make the person feel powerless?
- Do I want the person to feel embarrassed, guilty, or ashamed?
- Do I have a need to get other people on my side of the argument?
- Am I anxious, angry, judgmental, or blaming?
- Do I think I am right and the other person is wrong?
- Does the person seem in an unreceptive state?
- Is the person unable to take action on the information I want to give?
- Does the timing, energy, or ambiance seem wrong?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, don’t carefront publicly, but don’t give feedback privately either, until you’ve transformed your own judgments or distress into more useful, inspirational feedback.

On the other hand, if you’re investing in the person’s development and believe they’ll receive the care-fronting as a gift, then play on. If the team values care-fronting and you ascertain others can benefit from hearing the feedback, a deeper level of camaraderie can evolve. Likewise, it opens the door to receiving a high quality of feedback publicly because people find confrontation inspirational when done with full compassion.

An example: the first time I co-facilitated with Richard, we were struggling to keep to the timeline, and the discussions went off-track often. When I tried to reel the group back in to move on to the next piece, Richard said, “and there’s one more thing I want to say about that...” and the conversation would go on for another ten minutes. During the break I started to realize how exasperated I was with skipping content and holding time without support. So I shared my observations and described the tension that I felt in my chest. I also gave him a vague description of the support I wanted from him for helping me hold time.

However I didn't have a specific request in mind. So I asked him to help me think of ways that he could participate more fully in holding time with me collaboratively. Excited by the challenge, he came up with several options, including how he would time the next activity and keep it on track. Despite my anxiety and tension about the time, I didn't have any anxiety about my relationship with Richard. I trusted that he could fully hear the feedback, take it in, co-create new strategies and take action. Our assistant, Jan, listened to this entire interaction without speaking. Afterward she said, "Thank you for letting me witness this process. I appreciate the care and the way both of you interacted with each other."

Anxiety can lead you to put on rose colored glasses, walk on egg shells, or circle around the issue without ever coming to direct center. Coddling, pampering, seducing, and colluding are all common ways of avoiding confrontation. Out of a desire for shared love and shared power, confrontation can lose its power unless you can find a way to be both supportive *and* direct. People are hungry for an authentic, rigorous, powerful, loving approach to confrontation.

Cindy O'Keeffe describes her coaching style as "compassionately direct," She raises the bar on integrity by having clean, direct conversations like this one:

I work with a client who was repeatedly passed over for promotions and couldn't understand why. Like a lot of intense, successful people, he'd hit a bump in the road and didn't know how to get around it. Upset by the critical feedback he wondered, "Wait, I work so hard – how can they doubt what I'm doing?" and felt betrayed. He saw it as a ding to his integrity and work ethic. So I acknowledged his dedication and that he felt bruised, and then we took a look at what might be hindering effectiveness. I coached him to consider their point of view and describe how others might be interpreting his actions. He then was able to see things differently and come up with new ways of approaching the team. I ended by summarizing what I really value about him, as well as what's getting in the way, and he felt seen and validated.

From there, it's very comfortable to explore. A complete absence of judgment can sometimes feel very vanilla, possibly even remote and sterile. By layering in recognition and compassionate directness, the process becomes validating as well as constructively vulnerable.

He's smart and collaborative, but he's been criticized for being too passionate, intense, and assertive. When he began to dial it down, he said he felt like such a pussy cat. Everyone was still intimidated, but no one on the team would tell him. I'm the one to put out there the unsaid thing – that the pussy cat is still ferocious. He responded, "Really?" The gap between his perception and theirs was much bigger than he realized.

When I work with him, I connect with the essence of his humanity – that place where we're all the same. Intrigued and connected, I honor the soft spots and recognize his desire to affect change. There are times I do feel judgment, particularly if a third party might be negatively affected by my client's actions (or inaction). Rather than coach them to "my solution" I'm direct about what I'm thinking and say, "This is really your choice, and I have an opinion," which I share candidly.

I connect with so many different types of people, and so many parts of people. The exterior is how they're known – hard-driving professionals, but they're also dedicated parents, artists, pet lovers, or spiritual practitioners. They all have a softer side and are surprised that their colleagues don't see it.

A lot of this direct conversation comes fairly easily to me with a natural flow to it. Still, every day I ask myself, "How can I be fresh today? How can I dial the curiosity up right now?" This alignment of focus helps me connect to my intuition. What's provocative for me right now is the idea of slowing down to ramp up.

Scan your memory for times when you've avoided confrontation – you've withheld your reaction, delayed having a conversation, or avoided potential conflict. Stop procrastinating – pick up the phone

and practice care-fronting. How does it feel when you care enough to express yourself with full honesty? How do you get feedback from the people you care-front?