

Land Mine!

Confrontation Phobia

The Confrontation Phobia land mine ... I believe I feel an analogy coming on. Yes, before we dive headlong into that nasty old Confrontation Phobia land mine, we must first consider this:

The Perfect Car, the Perfect Road, and the Steering Wheel

Visualize this picture with me now: You are outside on a beautiful day. You are standing next to a brand new car. It has never been driven, not one mile on it, and the wheels, suspension, alignment, and whatever have been perfectly calibrated. This is a perfect car. The road you are on is perfectly straight and perfectly flat. Can you see it?

You get in the car, start it up, put it in drive and floor the accelerator.

Perfectly aligned car. Perfectly straight road.

Here's the question: As you fly down the highway, are you or are you not going to have to put your hands on the steering wheel? Do you have to steer or can you leave your hands in your lap?

Of course, you have to steer. You never know what's going to happen down the road. Minor (and sometimes major) corrections and adjustments need to be made all along the way. If you don't steer, that car is eventually going to run off the road and cause nasty scrapes, dents, and possibly personal injury. That's just the way it is.



So tell me, why do so many managers jump on the Confrontation Phobia land mine and leave their hands in their laps when they are supposed to be steering the car?

Driving safely requires that you steer the car. Leading the team properly requires that you confront issues when they arise. Simple as that. If you are a manager, this is the job they hired you to do.

The Confrontation Phobia land mine goes off whenever a manager chooses not to confront an issue because it's just plain easier to take the path of least resistance and let it go.

This is an ugly land mine. You have to take this one to heart because this ability to confront issues properly is at the very core of leadership. If nothing needed to be confronted, if everything worked smoothly, managers would not be needed. That's not the way it goes. In the professional world very little works smoothly, gets implemented perfectly, or arises without opposition. Confrontation is the business of meeting chal-

lenges big and small and managing through them. Unfortunately, too many managers avoid confrontation and in doing so detonate the Confrontation Phobia land mine which eventually has an extremely negative impact on their professional body of work.

Confrontation itself tends to get a bad rap. When someone says the word “confrontation,” most people immediately have a negative response. In fact, when a person is categorized as “confrontational,” it usually means that person goes out of his or her way to get in fights of one sort or another. Being labeled as “confrontational” is unfortunately not a compliment.

I stand on the other side of the debate table from most people on this issue. I do not believe every confrontation has to be negative or painful. In fact, once I realized that I was one of the many who *avoided* confrontations, I made a decision never to shy away from them and in so doing, I became a much better manager and a much better leader.

Main Entry: con·front

Pronunciation: kon-front'

Function: transitive verb

1: to face, especially in challenge

The worst thing a manager can do is ignore a situation that deserves to be confronted. I want you to erase from your managerial lexicon the phrase, “If I ignore it long enough, it’ll go away.” Ignoring and avoiding situations that need to be confronted is an extremely bad habit. And it’s a slippery slope. Once you start ignoring the situations and issues that need to be confronted, it keeps getting easier and easier to do it because you eventually get good at it. I’ve worked for a few bosses that were very good at

avoiding confrontation and they were a misery. Here's a story to illustrate. This story is called:

Tim Tobbogan and the Commissions Dispute

A long time ago, I had a boss who was a career confrontation phobic. His name was certainly not Tim Toboggan, but for the purposes of this story, that's what I'm calling him. The book on Tim Toboggan was, given any decision point, he pretty much stayed on the fence and avoided any kind of confrontation. Actually, he never made a decision about much of anything unless he was forced into it, and as a rule, bobbed along like a cork on the ocean. The less involved he was, the better he liked it. The last thing this guy ever wanted was a confrontation, especially if that meant he had to make a decision on something.

This guy was a *branch manager*. He had like sixty-five people working for him. You cannot effectively run a team that size and avoid confrontations. And he didn't. He didn't *run* anything. He had the title that said he was the leader of the organization, but he *led* nothing. Eventually, the folks working in our branch office learned how to keep him out of the loop, get what they needed to get their own jobs done and let the chips fall where they may. If you ask me, I think he liked it that way. While this guy had a lot of leisure time, he was no leader. He made no contribution to our success and we knew it.

Tim unwittingly taught me an abrupt lesson about the dangers of not embracing confrontation. I was in a commission dispute and Tim had to decide between me and another sales manager who would get the full commission on a rather hefty sale. I booked an appointment with Tim and made my case on a

Tuesday afternoon. He responded to my argument very favorably, nodded in all the right places, and said things like, “Sounds good,” and “That’s the way I see it too.” I walked out confident that I had won the issue and started mentally spending my next commission check, which was sure to be fat.

My rival in this dispute, who knew the lay of the land a bit better than I did at the time, walked into Tim’s office late on Thursday afternoon, made his case and had the Tim-approved paperwork down to the commissions office that evening. My rival wins.

I lose.

No fat commissions check for Marty.

Game over. Please insert more tokens.

A rude awakening for me to be sure. I watched this and other dramas unfold and it became clear that whoever got to Tim last was going to win. So instead of us doing what was right for the business, we always wound up playing the “Who can be the last man in Tim’s Office” game.



Tim Toboggan is not so much a great example of someone who simply avoided confrontation; rather he is a stellar example of someone who had made a *lifestyle* out of it. What’s the point? The point is that Tim Toboggans are in no way an endangered corporate species, Tim Toboggans abound and none of them are leaders.

But what have we learned from Tim Toboggan vis-à-vis leadership? Well, I’ll tell you what I learned, in a dispute there are always AT LEAST two sides to the story. As a leader, you have to know that, and you have to get both (or all) sides of a dispute

before making your decision. And if Tim had just said “OK Mart, I hear you, but I’m not going to make a decision until I hear both sides of what’s going on here” or *something* to that effect he’d have set my expectations appropriately. He would have exhibited leadership. That didn’t happen and leadership did not play a part in Tim Toboggan’s plan.

Now that was a situation where a manager was forced into making a decision. My rival and I approached Tim Toboggan and he had to react. Most management situations that deserve prudent and well-thought-out confrontation are usually more subtle and therefore easier to ignore.

I remember a situation I observed involving a few folks from our accounting group. The accounting group was a nice enough bunch headed up by a perfectly amiable young lady named Belinda. Belinda and the accounting group were responsible for keeping track of all office expenditures, managing our vendors, cutting travel and expense reimbursements, and producing the branch’s monthly profit and loss reports.

Once a month, Belinda and the entire accounting group gathered in the conference room to participate in a conference call hosted by our Regional Finance Director. And thus begins a story called:

Belinda, Super Nerd, and the Overnight Envelope

One sunny October morning I popped into the conference room and found Belinda and the accounting team all gathered around the table. They had not yet dialed into the call and so I asked Belinda how long this kind of thing usually went because I was

hoping to schedule the conference room as soon as she was through.

Before Belinda could answer me, one of her team members, a woman whom for the purposes of this story we will call Fetner, pointed at the phone and piped up with “Couldn’t tell ya, Mart. Depends on how long Super Nerd keeps us.”

The entire accounting team convulsed in laughter. I stood there thinking she’d respond to the rather derogatory comment made about her boss’ boss, but even though Belinda looked a little unnerved by the comment, she said nothing. She had the chance to step in and show some leadership but since that would have necessitated a small confrontation, Belinda chose the Confrontation Phobia land mine instead.

I suppose she reasoned that since the call hadn’t started yet, and since she was in Raleigh and her boss’ boss, the Regional Finance Director, was in Atlanta, what harm could that kind of thing cause? She looked at me and said “Oh don’t mind them. We should be done around 1:30.” And so, I left.

Actually, at the time I did not give the incident another thought. Then, about three weeks later I got copied on an e-mail from somebody on our accounting team. The e-mail had very little to do with me and my team but I did notice that the author of the e-mail had openly referred to the Regional Director of Finance as Super Nerd. Uh oh. Seems that Fetner’s little name for the Director had stuck and now all the kids in accounting were enjoying themselves. This was not my fight, it had nothing to do with me, but even from afar, I could tell that these guys were playing with fire.

And it was Belinda who got burned. Not more than a month later, someone else on Belinda’s team sent an e-mail that referred to the Director of Finance as Super Nerd, that e-mail got

answered, someone else got copied and around and around it went until finally somebody somewhere unwittingly copied the Director himself.

Whoops.

The next morning Belinda came into her office to find an overnight envelope from the Director sitting on her desk. The envelope contained the entire e-mail chain. The Regional Director of Finance for our company had taken the time to print it out and circle the numerous incidences that named him “Super Nerd” in red marker. On the top of the stack of paper, the Director had placed a note with a simple message that read, “Please call me immediately.”

Ouch.

Oh Belinda. All you had to do was nip it in the bud. How hard would that have been? All you had to do was show a smidgen of leadership, confront the issue and make it clear to the team that this was unacceptable. But no. You ignored it. You figured it would go away. You stepped on the Confrontation Phobia land mine and the whole thing came back to bite you. One small confrontation would have saved you. A little leadership would have saved you. But you punked out, your career just took a serious hit. Sorry Belinda.

□ □ □

Think about it this way. Belinda had a choice, either she confronts the situation herself, or she herself gets confronted. Simple as that.

The Confrontation Phobia land mine isn't only dangerous when the confrontation is a reprimand or even laying down the law on an issue. Take late performance reviews for example. It has been my experience that delivering performance reviews late (or not at all) is some strange corporate disease. Even when a perfor-

mance review should be delivered to a stellar employee, chances are the manager is late delivering it.

One issue is general laziness but I don't think that answers the whole question. I think the mystery component contributing to late performance reviews is confrontation phobia. It seems that even the whiff of a possible confrontation is enough to make some managers shy away.

Even during the most *positive* performance reviews when a raise is going to be handed out, some one-on-one coaching is expected, and that type of meeting has the potential for confrontation. My experience has been that employees are very hungry for coaching. When most people read their own performance reviews, they usually skip the praise and look for the parts where the boss has made recommendations for improvement. Most employees are *thankful* when a manager points out, professionally and with love, places where an employee needs to show some improvement. Good coaching usually deepens the respect and loyalty of an employee and that's why late performance reviews are a serious crime.

On my team, one extremely capable manager named Meredith was absolutely flawless in delivering performance reviews to her team on time. I asked her if she had made a conscious decision to keep her reviews on time or was this just part of her usual high-efficiency style.

MEREDITH: Oh no! I have each one of my people marked on my calendar so I don't forget to do their review. Performance reviews are big.

MARTY: Why do you think that is?

MEREDITH: Um, performance reviews? I think it's like their birthday. No one drives to work, snaps their fingers

and says, “Oh yeah, today’s my birthday!” Everybody knows when their birthday is.

MARTY: True enough.

MEREDITH: And everyone knows what month they should have their review. When is your next performance review due?

MARTY: February 12th.

MEREDITH: See? Also, it’s a time when you and your boss sit down and talk about *you*. So most people not only know when it is, they look forward to it.

As usual, Meredith was right.

See, Meredith was beloved, but most of all she was respected because she was truly a leader. She was absolutely unafraid to confront any issue she felt had any material impact on her team or the business, and in doing so exhibited consistent leadership.

Avoiding the Confrontation Phobia Land Mine

Let’s pull apart an actual situation in which I had every opportunity to ignore the opportunity to confront an issue but I did not. Don’t get me wrong, I *thought* about ignoring it. I gave the “Ignore It and It’ll Go Away” theory serious consideration. In the end though, I grew a backbone and made the right choice by meeting the issue head on.

The Employee Survey, Favorites, and the Eighth Floor

It was just another day in my insulated corporate world. There I was, in my office, bothering no one, when my trusted and invaluable

able administrative assistant, Doris, strolled into my office holding an ugly brown inter-office envelope.

MARTY (RECOILING IN FEAR): What? What is that? Don't point that thing at me.

DORIS (SITTING DOWN AND HOLDING THE ENVELOPE ACROSS THE DESK): It's from HR.

MARTY (HORRIFIED): Aaaaaaah! No. No way. I'm out of town. I'm, um, I'm ...

DORIS: It's inter-office, Mart. C'mon, let's go, you know I'm not allowed to open this if it's addressed specifically to you.

MARTY: Outpatient surgery! I'm having outpatient surgery! Torn rotator cuff! High ankle sprain! Irregular heart-beat! Deviated septum!!

DORIS (DROPPING THE ENVELOPE ON MY DESK): Look, Marylynn from downstairs wants to make sure all the VP's get these.

MARTY: Marylynn? Which one is Marylynn?

DORIS (NOT LOOKING BACK AS SHE WALKS OUT): Marylynn. You said she has "Texas hair."

MARTY: Oh, I know her. She's new.

Because I had been trained in unwinding the safety string tinger on the back of the interoffice envelope, I had the envelope opened in seconds. In no time, I had the contents of the envelope spread across my desk. My fear was for naught as I realized quickly that the envelope contained a summary of the responses to HR's giant employee satisfaction survey.

At first, I read the report only because I knew that if I read the thing I could later drop, in an off-handed manner, a

quasi-relevant statistic from the survey while attending a high-level meeting. This would earn me valuable Company Man points with my superiors and greatly irritate my enemies. However, as I read the survey summary, one simple statistic leapt out at me. It turned out, according to the summary, 53 percent of the employees at World Headquarters answered that they felt “very strongly” that favoritism was an issue in our company. Favoritism. Hmm, that means salary increases, bonuses, and promotions were not handed out based on merit but based on who liked whom.

My initial thoughts were, and here we have a decision point, this is me deliberating so pay attention. My initial thoughts were:

“Well, obviously, not on the eighth floor. Not on my floor. Not my team. These guys know I love them all equally. Sure, they are each their own individual snowflake but I love them all equally. They all know that. Obviously none of my people answered with a “very strongly” on the favoritism question. That number’s probably skewed by those social rejects down on the first floor. That’s probably your answer right there. Yep.”

I was ready to leave it at that. Then I stopped. As easy as it would have been to ignore that survey and go along like always, I decided to dig into the situation. If my assumption was correct, then all was well. But it was an assumption. And if it turned out my team *did* think I was playing favorites, well now we have a problem. Time to take a little action and show a little leadership.

As soon as I decided to act I knew I was doing the right thing. So I yelled out of my office.

MARTY: Doris! Doris, my perfect angel.

DORIS: Oh please.

MARTY: C'mon in for two seconds.

DORIS (ARRIVING): What's up? I put the guys from legal on hold for this, so you can take your time.

MARTY: Who do we have out in the field and who's in the building?

DORIS: On *your* team?

MARTY: No, on the Chicago White Sox.

DORIS: Um, everyone's in the building except Large Settle. He's in Rocky Mount.

MARTY: Edgecombe County!

DORIS: Other than that, they're all here.

MARTY: OK, I want every one of them in the conference room at 4:45 today. Put the word out.

DORIS: Done. By the way, it's "whom."

MARTY: Whom what?

DORIS: It's "*Whom* do we have out in the field?" You said "who." It's "whom."

MARTY: You're fired.

DORIS: You wouldn't know the paperwork to get it done.

MARTY: Be gone from me. I cast you out as a demon.

And so it came to be that I stood before my assembled team in the conference room with the HR survey in my hand. I explained about the favoritism statistic. I told them that, while I didn't expect anyone to come forward right then, I wanted them to know I took this issue very seriously (which clearly, I did). I

encouraged them to find me any time the next day, no questions asked, and let me know if they felt I was playing favorites and we could talk it over. It was rather a short gathering and again, I was keen to avoid melodrama. Still the message was sent.



Beware the path of least resistance.

M. CLARKE

The key is that I had every opportunity to ignore the survey. That would have been the path of least resistance to be sure. The point I want to make here is, as a manager, the path of least resistance is often your enemy. In fact, as a leader, I would assert that anytime you find yourself deciding what to do, or whether to do anything at all, beware the path of least resistance. That path is paved with undercurrents of resentments, petty jealousies, and lack of team harmony. Any manager who makes a habit of taking the path of least resistance is typically not going to last very long or rise very high.

In avoiding this very sneaky and destructive land mine, I encourage you to keep three rules of thumb in mind. And they are:

1. What you accept you teach.
2. Now is better than later.
3. Is that the hill you want to die on?

What you accept, you teach.

I do not know where my mother got hold of this phrase, but when she says, “What you accept, you teach,” she is talking about

avoiding the Confrontation Phobia land mine. Think about this for a second. As a manager, what you accept, you teach.

That means if you look the other way when you should confront poor performance, behavior, or general unrest, you are teaching everyone who reports to you that this performance, behavior, or unrest is perfectly OK.

Cast your thoughts back to poor Belinda. When she did not react, when she did not confront the issue when one of her employees referred to the Regional Director of Finance as Super Nerd, she taught her entire team that this was acceptable behavior. There's very little middle ground here. What you accept, you teach.

I saw a great bit of leadership that illustrates this point when I was visiting the great city of Knoxville, Tennessee. Knoxville! Home of the Volunteers and an airport recently redecorated in 1972. This story is called:

Harvey vs. Buster, “The Knoxville Showdown”

The situation was this: Knoxville was, for the most part, an under-achieving sales office to say the least. This was not because the market was soft. Certainly not, Knoxville's a boom town! No, the reason that the Knoxville office never could get themselves above the quota line was because of Harvey.

Harvey was not only the Knoxville office's best sales person; he was the *company's* best sales person. He was number one and second place was an also ran. In the Knoxville sales office, it was Harvey radio: All Harvey, all the time. And Harvey knew it. Unfortunately, while Harvey's production was enough to make him a superstar, it was not enough to carry the whole sales office above the team quota.

Also, Harvey's sales numbers were huge but so was Harvey's attitude. Harvey didn't turn in sales reports. Harvey didn't go to sales meetings. Harvey's paperwork was always a mess because Harvey never did attend the training classes. Harvey was also a poison to the new recruits in Knoxville. He was forever running his mouth, spewing negativity to whomever was within earshot. All of this behavior was tolerated and never confronted by whatever sales manager happened to be occupying the Knoxville office at the time.

Why? Well Harvey himself had the answer: "I'm the best sales person in the company, you better not make me unhappy." Most managers, unfortunately, were just fine with that arrangement. Most of those Knoxville managers took the path of least resistance and in doing so immolated themselves on the Confrontation Phobia land mine.

The pattern that played out over four Knoxville sales managers in three years was this: Instead of confronting Harvey for his behavior, negativity, and general disregard for management, the sales manager would let Harvey go his own way, infecting all the other sales people and undermining the manager's authority in the process. And at the end of the month, typically Harvey would wind up 150 percent above quota and the Knoxville office as a group would end up at about 78 percent. This situation went on for years.

Until Harvey met Buster.

Buster was a young lady about 5' 3" tall, red hair, square jaw, pretty smile, and a backbone made of titanium. It took Buster about three days on the job to determine it was either confront Harvey and risk a possibly unpleasant situation or it was to knuckle under and eventually follow the other four failed managers out the door.

She'd been on the job about six months when I found myself back in the Knoxville sales office. The sales team had finally shown signs of life, had been above quota for two months and was looking very good for doing it again. I had to ask her how she did it. While we were eating lunch, the following conversation ensued:

MARTY: OK, let's have it.

BUSTER: What?

MARTY: The Knoxville office is number one in the region and number six in the company this month.

BUSTER: And we're going to be around number three next month.

MARTY: My point exactly. How'd you do it?

BUSTER: Well, you know, I think if you set goals, and don't expect your people to do anything you wouldn't do, you know, I guess the result ...

MARTY: Harvey. What did you say to Harvey? I was in that sales meeting this morning, dear. Harvey didn't run his mouth at me once. Boy's had a personality transplant. Can tell by looking at him.

BUSTER: Harvey's having a great month.

MARTY: He was there on *time*. He didn't waltz in late with his usual strut and extra large double skinny latte with extra whip. Spare me the mom and apple pie. Did you, or did you not, straighten that kid out?

BUSTER (SMILING): Yes. Harvey and I had a conversation.

MARTY: When.

BUSTER: It was on the morning of my fourth day.

MARTY: No way.

BUSTER: Oh yeah, I could see how it was going to go with him. I mean I've seen it before. So I called him into my office and explained the situation to him.

MARTY: Explained the situation to him.

BUSTER: Sure, he was a little taken aback at first. I told him the specific behaviors that I was not going to tolerate any more and he tried to "Yeah, yeah, yeah" me.

MARTY: And what'd you do? Did you pull out your nun-chakus and go all Jet Li on him?

BUSTER (LAUGHING): Nooo!

MARTY: I'd have had your back if you did.

BUSTER: No, no. Harvey sat in my office and tried to blow it all off and I just stood my ground and explained that my job was to get the Knoxville office performing above quota. And if he continued his whole Harvey act, if he continued to, you know, to hold himself above acting like a sales rep and being a source of negativity to my junior reps, then I'd let him go.

MARTY: You told him you'd fire him? Did he believe you?

BUSTER: I was *not* bluffing and I think he could tell. I mean, look at it, either we get the Harvey show or we get the entire Knoxville office up above quota. And that was that. I mean I didn't like *scream* at him, but I brought him up short and, well ...

MARTY: Everything's great now.

BUSTER: Everything's *better*.

MARTY: Knoxville in the top five? Trust me that's great.

□ □ □

If Buster hadn't stepped in, if she had let Harvey continue his destructive, disrespectful ways, what message was she sending to the other reps and staff in the office? If she does not confront Harvey, she is *de facto*, *accepting* that behavior. That sends the message that the behavior is acceptable. What you accept, you teach. Confronting the behavior professionally and providing clear direction and a sense of the consequences of making another choice, is your route to true leadership. Ask yourself, what behavior are you accepting right now that you shouldn't?

***Now is better than later
(or Think, but think fast)***

The Confrontation Phobia land mine is deadly but *speed* is its mortal enemy. Speed is by far your most important weapon in avoiding the Confrontation Phobia land mine. One of my favorite bosses, Tex, was the one who taught me that in any given managerial situation, the only thing that can hurt you is hesitation. My man Tex NEVER shied away from a necessary confrontation and he did so with amazing speed. His responses were well thought out and he moved on them quickly.

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly.*

W. SHAKESPEARE

Speed of reaction is critical in most leadership situations. As soon as your managerial intuition gives you a little tweak that something's not right, as soon as your mental "check engine" light comes on, pay attention to it and act as swiftly as you can.

Conversely, acting in a rash manner, or acting without thinking (the dreaded “knee-jerk”), often has pretty disastrous results too. So when you have to confront someone or some issue, *think*, but think fast. Here’s a think-but-think-fast story called:

Jiffy, the Staff Meeting, and the Bathing Suit Comment

So there we were. Waaaaay up there in the ninth floor conference room, high atop World Headquarters. It was toward the end of the summer and I was holding an afternoon quarterly staff meeting. There were about twenty-one or twenty-two folks around the table. Marketing people, product managers, quality assurance, training, administrative staff, and public relations, all of us together.

Toward the end of the meeting, spirits were running high. These folks had all worked together for a number of years and were on excellent terms with each other. I forget who brought up the idea of a team pool party, but the idea gained immediate traction. Soon some of my more detail-oriented staff were deciding what dates were open, where we’d go, and who was to bring what.

I was most pleased. This was shaping up to be an epic party. Then, one of my product managers, a boy from Buffalo to whom, for his own protection, I’ll refer to as Jiffy, went one step over the line. I had a choice either to let it go or address it. Here’s how it went:

DELAWARE: OK! OK! Sssh. Everybody hush! OK, I have Large Settle bringing the caramel popcorn.

LARGE SETTLE: Caramel popcorn. Got it. And I gotta buy a new swim suit. Old one’s about wore out.

DELAWARE: That brings up a good point; nobody has to wear a bathing suit if you don't want to.

JIFFY: Yes they do! How else am I going to get to see Doris in a thong?

At this point, the entire table exploded into riotous laughter, Doris included. And well they should have, it was an extremely funny comment at the time.

Then, in the back of my head, I heard the voice whisper "Dangerrrr ... We're on thin ice here, Mart ..."

Because I often listen more closely to the voice in the back of my head than to the voices of the people around me, I stepped in and gingerly steered the discussion to a safer topic.

After the meeting, as I waited in the crowd for the elevator, I was deliberating on whether or not to confront Jiffy for his comment. On the one side, Doris was, and probably still is, as down to earth a person that you'll ever meet. She possesses a razor sharp sense of humor and indeed, she was laughing. On the other hand ... Because I've seen a few promising careers derailed, I have become hypersensitive to comments that flirt with the line between funny and inappropriate.

I figured I'd wait for the morning and see how I felt. Then, as the doors opened to let us on the elevator, I asked myself, "What would my old boss, Tex, do?" The answer was clear. Tex would be all over this and he'd be all over it right now. He wouldn't wait until tomorrow to confront the issue. Additionally the more I thought about it, the more I realized that by tomorrow, it would all be too late. I needed to act while the impact of that statement still hung in the air. I'd already blown the opportunity to confront the issue right as it happened. I turned to Jiffy in the elevator and said, "Jiff, come see me before you leave for the day."

And that was it. Alone in my office he and I talked it over, and he told me he “was just being funny” and that Doris “was cool” and would never go to Human Resources, I told him that was not the point. I told him that I just could not afford that kind of loose talk and if it happened again, *I’d* go to HR. That’s just not the way I run the team.

Having had it explained to him that way, he was very receptive. Besides being a bit of a motor mouth Jiffy was, and probably still is a joy of an employee and a gifted product manager. He actually took it upon himself to approach Doris and make sure he hadn’t offended her. The point is I acted then. That afternoon. Some situations can stand a bit of pondering. However, most benefit from thinking and acting quickly.



Is that the hill you want to die on?

Not every situation, comment, or behavior needs to be confronted. If you tear off and confront every nit-picky thing, you become a micro-manager. This is the kiss of death. So to avoid becoming a micro-manager, the simple question, “Is this the hill you want to die on?” can be extremely useful in helping you decide where, when, and how to apply your efforts.

If you forget to ask yourself this question, sometimes you can get blinded to how your actions are affecting your team or even your own career. I heard a great story about a guy who absolutely left that question out of the equation, got himself “career-blind” and the results were catastrophic. I remember I was sitting on the edge of a huge pool when I heard this story.

The hub of social activity of the development in which my family and I reside is the giant community swimming pool. This thing is mammoth. In the summer months, it is not an unusual site to see about twelve million happy, screaming children in the pool. This leaves us, their parents, lining the outside of the pool, sitting on the ledge, dangling their feet in the water, and passing our summer afternoons and evenings talking about all things great and small.

Last summer I found myself sitting next to an excellent man about my age whom, for the purposes of this story I will refer to as Boris. Boris related an “Is that the hill you want to die on?” story to me called:

Renaldo, the White House, and the Parking Spot

Back in the late 90’s my man Boris worked in Washington, DC. He was on staff in the President’s administration and enjoyed the prestigious perk of having an office in the White House. He also informed me that this situation had, for almost all staffers, the unfortunate consequence of having to use methods of mass transit to commute to work every day. It seems that parking spaces at the White House are not in great supply. In fact, there are precious few of them and it is for this reason that every possible parking spot at the White House is assigned on the basis of rank.

Enter Renaldo. Renaldo was Boris’ boss. Over time, he had clawed his way up the ranks of the President’s administration to the point where Renaldo had reached the lofty position of Anonymous Government Functionary. Since he had a few people reporting to him, that meant he was management! This, in Renaldo’s mind, meant he got a parking space.

As Boris tells it, at first Renaldo tried dropping hints to his superiors that he would like, and owing to his diligently acquired rank, he was *due*, an assigned parking space of his very own. His hints did not fall on deaf ears but he was denied. Actually, he was never flat out denied, he just never got his spot from the powers that be. This was when Renaldo started thinking very small. The parking spot issue started to consume him and his thoughts. His issues were:

1. I am *entitled* to a parking space.
2. I shouldn't have to *beg* for a parking space.

See? That was the problem: Renaldo was right. He was in the right and he knew it and this gave Renaldo a scorching case of righteous indignation. And, as we all know, righteous indignation is the enemy of clear thinking and the warm friend of petty, small-minded petulance. Renaldo's indignant rage burned slowly, fueled every day by the uncertainty surrounding the question of who exactly gave out these spots? Renaldo reasoned that if he could just figure out who had the authority to grant him his parking spot, he'd make his case to that person and he'd soon be pulling up to the guard gate, flashing his permit, and pulling into his very own parking spot. He'd walk to work with his head held high as his car cooled in the shadow of the White House complex.

So of course, Renaldo never shut up about it. I am not sure what the precise statistic is, I have no clue what the actual head count of the Commander in Chief's staff is, but since it takes two buildings besides the White House itself to house these folks every day, well I imagine the number is pretty healthy.

Renaldo left no stone unturned. He asked everyone he could think of about the parking issue. As you might expect, Boris said it got to be rather a joke up and down the corridors of the administration buildings. However, Renaldo was not to be denied.

He brought out the big guns by putting his request in writing. Uh oh. Not only did he make a formal request on letterhead, but also in the request, he listed all his efforts to be assigned a parking spot and made some recommendations that the process be a bit clearer in the future.

Well, that memo got forwarded up and up the chain of command. Renaldo was very much on top of the progress his request was making and every time it looked like progress had stalled, Renaldo was there to move it along. Have to admit, the boy was focused. The memo eventually made it onto the desk of the President's Chief of Staff.

Now here's me, sitting on the side of the community pool in my Myrtle Beach '98 t-shirt with my legs in the water and my mouth gaping at Boris as he told me that.

MARTY (RECOVERING): That is such a lie. No way was the Chief of Staff involved.

BORIS (SMILING): Nope, it's true. Why would I lie? I'm telling you the Chief of Staff had the memo on his desk. It is absolutely true.

MARTY: A parking spot.

BORIS: Yep. That's why the story is so *funny*. It's funny because it's true.

Now, I do not consider myself completely vacant of political acumen but truth to tell, when I think of the items that might

be on the to-do list of the President's Chief of Staff I think of things like:

- The safety and well being of the American people
- The economy
- Health care
- Foreign policy
- The state of the union address or whatever.

You get the point. And while that list may not be entirely accurate and complete, the point is the Chief of Staff has some big fish to fry on a daily basis and here, plunked on his desk, is Renaldo's memo. Let the games begin.

The memo came rocketing back down the chain of command and what do you know, Renaldo got his parking spot. By order of the President's Chief of Staff, Renaldo got his spot, his badge, the whole shootin' match.

So Renaldo wins, right? No, my perfect friends, Renaldo loses.

Think about it. Because the parking spot was the hill upon which Renaldo was apparently willing to die, everyone from the lowest rank possible all the way up to the Chief of Staff knew that the biggest issue for Renaldo over the last seven weeks was *not* a matter of national interest; it was a parking spot. So even if they didn't even *know* the guy, what is their opinion of Renaldo?

Yes, "Renaldo is a small-minded dope" is the correct answer. His superiors thought that way and Renaldo's own staff knew it too.

MARTY: Was he a genuinely dumb guy?

BORIS: No! He was a bright person. And a decent manager.

But that whole thing just sunk the guy. I mean,

Renaldo lets it go and rides the Metro with the rest of us and he'd have lasted a lot longer.

MARTY: They fired him?

BORIS: Oh yeah. Six months later, they canned him. No joke. I forget why they said. But we all knew, you know?

MARTY: That is an incredible story.

BORIS: I know. Can't make that kind of thing up.



Poor Renaldo. *Qué lástima*. Had he just stopped and asked himself, OK, is this the hill I want to die on? He may have snapped out of it. Who knows what would have happened but he wouldn't have embarrassed himself in front of his superiors and his staff.

So what situations do you confront and which ones do you let go? In Renaldo's case, it was obvious to everyone but Renaldo. Going to bat for seven straight weeks for a parking spot is small-minded any way you slice it. Plain as day. Unfortunately, the situations that come to a leader's attention are often a lot less clearly defined. Still, the question needs to be asked and it can only be answered by the leader himself or herself.

Typically, when you ask yourself, "Is this the hill I want to die on?" about a particular issue, you can use the following three guidelines in order to help you make the best decision for yourself, your team, and the company. These guidelines have helped me immensely.

Guideline #1: Is it good for business?

So many times when you are immersed in an issue or one comes out of nowhere and blindsides you, you can lose perspective. You

lose sight of the big picture and/or the core business results you and your team are trying to achieve.

Once you ask yourself this question and answer with cruel honesty, you can separate yourself from the situation itself, emotionally disengage and begin to make well-thought-out decisions that will be in the best interest of the business.

Guideline #2: Is it consistent with my pattern?

Again, think in terms of your leadership body of work. If you cannot identify your pattern of behavior and leadership responses, that's not tragic. Now is the time to start thinking about establishing your pattern of behavior. Consistency is a huge cornerstone in the leadership edifice.

If you *are* a consistent manager, then ask yourself while thinking (quickly) about a possible confrontation whether or not your course of action is consistent with that pattern. If it is consistent, then your actions will be in line with what you stand for and what you will and will not tolerate, thus reinforcing and adding to your leadership body of work.

If your actions break your pattern, are you doing that by design? Trying to effect some change? Inconsistency is not necessarily a bad thing if done sparingly and purposefully to effect positive change.

Guideline #3: Do I have my reasons worked out in my head?

As I have stated, I encourage one and all to think and think quickly. Please note that I use the phrase "worked out in my head" rather than "*perfected* in my head." As long as you can get your

mental arms around a possible confrontation and see in your mind what the probable consequences of your actions will be, then go ahead and act.

Let's apply these three rules of thumb to two of the scenarios I've used in this chapter.

Scenario: Jiffy makes an inappropriate remark in a meeting.

Question: Do I confront him?

Is confronting the issue good for business? Yes. If I let it go, I'm inviting more of that type of behavior. Plus, if someone did make a complaint later, it would only serve as a distraction to me, the principals in the complaint, and my entire staff. I am inclined to confront Jiffy on this.

Is it consistent with my pattern? Yes. I have a pretty low tolerance for any kind of toe-over-the-line comments. For whatever reason, I have a heightened sensitivity. So yes, I have a history of being rigid on the issue.

Do I have my reasons worked out in my head? Yes. I need to get this nipped in the bud. I cannot let him slide. This alone will send the message I want to send to my team.

Answer: Confront Jiff before he leaves for the day.

Scenario: Renaldo wants his parking spot.

Question: Does he confront the issue?

Is confronting the issue good for business? No. It's not bad for business, but it has nothing to do with the results he was trying to accomplish with his staff.

Is it consistent with my pattern? No. According to Boris, Renaldo usually had things pretty well thought out and was on his

way to bigger and better things in the administration. For some reason, he had a blind spot on the parking issue.

Do I have my reasons worked out in my head? We'll never know. I suspect if Renaldo ever checked himself and asked, "Where am I going with this whole parking spot thing?" he'd have realized that he was creating a tempest in a teacup. An annoying and credibility killing tempest.

Answer: Leave the parking spot issue alone.

Even though tripping the Confrontation Phobia land mine and deciding to head down the path of least resistance feels great in the short term, those types of decisions are surely the ones that hurt you in the long run. These are the moves that hurt your professional body of work. What kind of pattern of behavior are you looking to establish? Certainly, you want to be counted upon by your team and your superiors to be well-thought-out and able to make the decisions that help the business. Most times, establishing this pattern of behavior is going to rule out the path of least resistance and help you ascend into the very valuable role as a leader.

Worth Repeating

- Confronting issues properly as they arise is at the very core of effective leadership.
- Beware the path of least resistance.
- Remember these three rules of thumb when deliberating whether or not to confront an issue:
 - What you accept you teach
 - Now is better than later
 - Is that the hill you want to die on?
- As for, “Is this the hill you want to die on?” ask yourself these three questions to help you arrive at an appropriate answer:
 - Is it good for business?
 - Is it consistent with my pattern?
 - Do I have my reasons worked out in my head?