

COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

Including a Brand New Chapter on Avoiding Conflict in the Age of Social Media

# THE POWER OF POSITIVE CONFRONTATION

THE SKILLS YOU NEED  
TO HANDLE CONFLICTS  
*at* WORK, *at* HOME,  
ONLINE, *and* IN LIFE

**BARBARA PACTER**  
*with* SUSAN MAGEE

### **Praise for *The Essentials of Business Etiquette***

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This is one of the best self-help books ever written. I wish this wonderful book had been available to me long ago—it would have saved me years of problems. We face the problems it identifies daily. The help it offers is immediate.—Larry King, Hall of Fame Broadcaster



THE POWER OF  
POSITIVE  
CONFRONTATION

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BARBARA PACTER  
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*To the memory of my parents, Esther and Victor Pachter.*





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## INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years I've been a business communications trainer and coach specializing in communication and etiquette skills. Practically since the day I started, I've had participants make comments during my seminars, or come up to me at breaks or after workshop sessions to share their experiences with someone they were having difficulty with. My seminar participants have come from all walks of life and all levels of the corporate food chain—from senior VPs at Fortune 500 companies to administrative assistants in accounting firms. Again and again, these people have expressed an urgent need to talk about the conflicts and difficult situations in their lives and have asked for my help.

I can't tell you how often I've heard frustrations like these:

*My boss isn't fair.*

*My employees take advantage.*

*My next door neighbor is so inconsiderate.*

*My coworker is driving me nuts.*

*I feel like a pushover.*

And after telling me their stories, they invariably ask, *What can I do?*

Some of the stories I hear break my heart. I feel really bad for the people who seek me out, and at times I've even commiserated—I've been there myself. I think at one time or another we all have felt frustrated, tongue-tied, or fed up with someone else's behavior.

I listen with sympathy, but always there is a part of me that wants to reach out, give the person a shake, and say, “Why don’t you do something about it?”

Over time, however, I made what I think is a significant discovery—*people don’t say or do anything to the person bothering them mostly because they don’t know what to say or do!*

I have also noticed a negative communication pattern in many of the comments I hear: when people have difficulty talking to someone in an appropriate manner about a situation that is bothering them, they simply don’t talk with that person at all. Instead, they complain to anyone who will give them a sympathetic ear, including me. Some people come to my seminars just seeking an opportunity to vent their emotions.

And yet there are just as many people who, when faced with a bothersome situation, say or do something that, however well intentioned, makes the situation worse:

*I told him that if he wanted a bloody nose . . .  
I said, “Who do you think you are, Miss High and Mighty!”  
I said, “Gee, I’m so sorry to have to bother you with this.”*

I remember cringing as I listened to many of these stories. I thought, “There’s got to be a better way!” Many people believed that they were doing or saying the right thing, yet it was often apparent to me, just hearing the stories, that they had not cleared things up with the other person. In fact in most cases, things had only gotten worse.

Lacking the skills to confront another person in a positive way, the people I met often ended up making their world less pleasant and more stressful, both for themselves and for the other people in it—whether they intended to or not.

I soon realized that there is a tremendous need for people to learn how to express themselves effectively in difficult situations. People need these skills to enable them to stand up for themselves. They need to learn how to confront positively instead of complaining or employing a host of other negative and self-destructive behaviors.

So I decided, once and for all, to meet that need.

This book is the result.

Mastering positive confrontation can improve your life. You will feel better about yourself. You will no longer behave like a wimp or a bully and will not be controlled by bad behaviors you may have adopted unintentionally along the way. You'll be able to deal with difficult people and situations directly and confidently. No more "I wish I had said . . ." or "If only I had thought to . . ." or "It's no big deal . . ." (when you know it is a big deal). Best of all, positive confrontation will often lead to a positive resolution—rather than to more conflict.

Over ten years ago the first edition of this book came out. Since that time I have continued to teach *The Power of Positive Confrontation* to people at all levels and from all types of organizations, including police officers in the Southwest, school board members in the Midwest, senior executives at a large utility in the Northeast, and over one thousand women at Microsoft's annual women's conference, two years in a row. These experiences have helped me fine-tune the ideas and the skills that are vital to positive confrontation, and what I learned has been added to this new edition.

The rise of social media has added convenient new ways for us to communicate and share our lives, as well as new ways for us to misunderstand and annoy each other. Now we have Twitter wars, friends unfriending one another, diners texting others at the table, employees quitting their jobs on YouTube, and so on. Therefore, a chapter addressing online conflict has been added to this edition. You will also find stories of conflicts people experience on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, online groups, and blogs woven throughout the book.

I have received many emails and calls from people who read the first edition and want to share their experiences with positive confrontation, including the training director who called the book a "game changer." He only wished that he had read it years ago. It would have saved him a lot of unnecessary conflict.

I have heard that comment a lot.

Other comments include:

*I don't feel frustrated anymore.*

*In the past I would have sulked or complained until the person got the hint, but now I can just say something.*

Or

*Annoying things don't bother me as much because I know I can say something now.*

If you're like most of us, you were never taught the skills described in this book. They have already worked for thousands of people I have taught in my seminars, workshops, and coaching sessions. I believe they can work for you too.

# PART I

Positive Confrontation:  
What It Is and  
How It Can Make  
Your Life Better





## Conflict, Conflict Everywhere

Life is full of sticky situations, packed with difficult conversations, and loaded with confrontation. How do you handle these situations, conversations, and confrontations? When someone's behavior is bothering you—be it a relative, coworker, or neighbor—what do you say to that person?

Maybe you don't say anything. If you don't, you're probably fed up, worn-out, or just plain sick and tired of not being able to tell someone who's close—or not so close—what's bothering you.

You are not alone if you feel this way.

Do you approach a problem with a friend or neighbor with good intentions but then lose it? Do you clam up, unfriend, storm out, or just chicken out?

Do you feel walked on, annoyed, bothered, taken advantage of, frustrated, or upset by another person's behavior?

You guessed it! You are not alone if you have these feelings too. If you're reading this book, you may be like the men and women from all types of professions and all walks of life that I've taught or spoken with over the last twenty years. These people feel the same way you do. They are tired of not being able to tell someone when something is bothering them. They are tired of avoiding difficult conversations, getting angry, or tolerating rude behavior. No one sets out in life to become an unfriender, a door slammer, or a big chicken. But people adopt these negative behaviors anyway, all the time, and then they feel bad about themselves because of it.

Many people are honest enough with themselves to know they are not comfortable with confronting others. But they are stuck. What can they do about it?

Again, if you're like most of the people I've met and taught over the past twenty years, you probably could use some help in answering this question. These are smart, successful, well adjusted, and well liked people—and they don't know how to act either.

You may not be sure if you are having positive confrontations or not. Maybe you are simply curious about what positive confrontation means. What, you may be wondering, is the power that can be harnessed through it? How can it make your life better?

### **Are You Holding Yourself Back?**

Whether or not you realize it, you may have a way of handling, or not handling, conflict that has been holding you back. From what? From getting ahead at work. From having more satisfying relationships with friends and loved ones. From feeling empowered in a world that can often leave you feeling powerless.

In this book you will learn how positive confrontation can improve your relationships, your self-esteem, your sense of well-being, and even your career. Positive confrontation can empower you in your relationships with others. If you adopt and practice the skills I talk about in this book, they *will* empower you in dealing with others. Though I can't make any promises or give you any guarantees, I can tell you this: I get emails, Facebook posts, comments on my blogs, phone calls, and people who come up to me after my seminars—and they all say the same thing. They tell me that my approach to handling confrontation works for them.

That is why I am certain it can work for you too.

### **The Big and Small Picture of Conflict**

What exactly are the conflicts and the confrontations I'm addressing here? Let's consider the big picture of conflict first. The world isn't all bad, but our 24/7 news cycle with live Twitter updates can sometimes make you

worry. There are wars. There are racial tensions, crimes, terrorists, politicians attacking each other, and schools running out of money. It's understandable that at times we feel drained of power or just drained.

Even our entertainment news is fraught with conflict. Every day we hear about celebrities engaging in Twitter wars and talk show hosts insulting their guests. Reality television often relies on conflict for ratings. When reality stars or contestants are rude, attack one other, fight in public, and generally behave badly, audiences tune in and ratings go up.

This book is *not* about global conflict or societal conflict. I can't help world leaders deal positively with conflict. I wish I could. I also can't make reality television stars get along. I can't make talk show hosts be polite to their guests. I can't stop Twitter wars. I wish I could do all of these things; believe me, the world would be a lot less stressful.

This book is about conflict on a smaller scale—the conflict, rudeness, and incivility you probably face in your life on a daily basis. It's about how we go through the day and interact with others, whether face-to-face interactions, texting, or tweeting.

### **Difficult Communication . . . Difficult Conversation**

On a broader scale, heads of state have trouble talking to each other, getting their points across, being understood. This happens on the smaller scale too, with the person in the next cubicle, your roommate, your brother-in-law, your Facebook friend, or your bank teller.

Sometimes, in this smaller picture that is day-to-day living, we have a hard time talking to each other when there is conflict. We have a hard time expressing ourselves appropriately to others. We don't know what to say or how to say it. We don't know how other people will react if we tell them how we really feel. There are many other reasons why we feel uncomfortable having difficult conversations and dealing with conflict. Communicating successfully with others in uncomfortable situations is especially difficult. I will talk about why this is true in more detail in Chapter 3.

In this chapter I focus on the ability to communicate successfully. The effects of unsuccessful communication are obvious: road rage and airport

rage; Facebook flameouts, cubicle clashes, roommate rumbles, and supermarket strife. Half the people you pass on a crowded street seem stressed out and in a hurry; the others are preoccupied or distracted by their phones. The presence of so much conflict and stress all around you can make you feel powerless. A silent frustration can take root that grows and keeps growing.

### **It's the Same Twelve Conflicts: Over and Over Again**

During each seminar, I ask participants to describe on an index card a situation with another person that is bothering them. After conducting hundreds of seminars, I see the same conflicts over and over. These aren't the only conflict areas, but they are the most common.

#### *Twelve Kinds of Behavior That Drive Us Nuts*

1. **Space spongers.** They play their music too loud, even while wearing ear buds. They lurk around your work space, leave messes for others to clean up, or claim three tables in Starbucks as their new office space.
2. **Digitally distracted devils.** They can't have a face-to-face conversation without sending or receiving a text. This is the coworker who plays with his smartphone or iPad during meetings, and the friend who can't be in the moment because she's too busy making a video of it and posting it on Facebook.
3. **Bad borrowers.** They return your car with no gas, your favorite book with coffee stains, or take your stapler without asking. And money—it doesn't get paid back.
4. **Constant complainers.** Everyone knows one . . . the person who *always* has a problem or gripe that never gets resolved. You're tired of hearing about how your friend's mother-in-law makes catty comments or how unhappy your coworker is about the new boss.
5. **Interjecting interrupters.** Some people just can't let others have their say. They don't let you finish a sentence during a cocktail party or share your ideas during a meeting.

6. **Callous commentators.** This can be the neighbor who thinks your house needs to be painted, the friend who corrects your grammar, the person who posts racist or sexist jokes on Facebook, or your sister who, unsolicited, tells you she liked your hair better long.
7. **Work welchers.** Some people just don't do their fair share, whether it's the weekly chores, a group project for management, or a PTA volunteer committee.
8. **Request refusers.** These offenders don't respond to your emails, whether it's the data you need by Wednesday or the RSVP to the party you're hosting. Or you've asked your spouse to be on time for dinner and he is late again. Then there's the neighbor who lets her dog go in your yard despite the fact that you have put up a sign prohibiting it.
9. **Annoying askers.** Enough already! You're continually asked to sponsor your friend's many charitable causes, coordinate the bake sale, host your visiting relatives (plus their dogs), or take on extra work when you're swamped.
10. **Social media menaces.** These offenders share unflattering photos of you, tweet what they had for breakfast, chronicle their daily outrages, or flaunt their fantastic love lives/adorable children/fabulous vacations/enviable accomplishments way too much on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.
11. **Holiday hasslers.** Who can relax? Your mother just doesn't understand that you need to go to your in-laws for Thanksgiving, or you want an adventure vacation in the woods but your significant other wants to lie in the sun on a tropical island. You love your family . . . but a week in the mountains with fifteen of them?
12. **Gruesome groomers.** You can smell her perfume and hear her bracelets jangling before you see her. He clips his fingernails in meetings. They floss at the dinner table. She wears her skirts way too short and he doesn't shower after his morning workout.

These twelve examples show how ordinary, routine interactions and relationship issues become problems. Too often conflicts that should be, and

can be, easily resolved get messy, complicated, and frustrating. You end up in a confrontation that turns aggressive or you don't have a confrontation at all. The problem gets ignored.

Your coworker talks too loud and it's driving you crazy. A man steals your parking space on the street. Your sister-in-law makes a comment you find offensive. Your boss criticizes you but not your teammates: these may be run-of-the-mill communications problems, but they come up again and again for people everywhere, all the time. We ignore these behaviors, overlook them, or overreact for a simple reason: *we don't know what else to do*.

People think not having a confrontation is easier than having a confrontation. Not true. It's just that it's not easy to know what to say or how to say it, in a way that is both Polite and Powerful, if no one ever taught you.

I am talking about the ordinary conflicts that arise all the time, for everyone—at work, at home, standing in line at the bank, on Facebook, with your neighbors, your in-laws, or your kid's teacher. Difficult communication affects all areas of your life. I will use examples throughout this book that illustrate conflicts at work, at home, online, and just about everywhere else. The names and faces change. The details vary. All of the examples I cite in this book are real. I learned about them from participants in my workshops or they come directly from my own experience. I do protect people's privacy, but I don't make anything up. These examples prove, again and again, how badly people need the skills I talk about in this book.

### **The Communication Problem Is the Same**

The unpleasant situations that I hear about may change, but the underlying communication problem is often the same: *we have a hard time talking to each other*. And if we can't talk to each other constructively about what's bothering us, we can't have positive confrontations and we can't resolve problems. The same is true for online conflict. Often the best way to resolve serious online conflict is to take the conversation offline. As I explain in Chapter 13, you may need to stop typing and talk to the person, and yet so many of us find this difficult to do, especially when we're not used to interacting with the person directly, either face-to-face or speaking by phone.

When we don't resolve conflicts, we don't feel good about the other person or ourselves. The effect can often be cumulative. It can sneak up on you, this feeling of powerlessness or anger. One difficult conversation you do not have leads to another you do not have. One difficult conversation that ends in shouting leads to another that ends in shouting. You feel taken advantage of, sick and tired, or mad. Or maybe you feel a little out of control. Feeling powerless or angry is not a fun or healthy way to go through life.

The problem we have with successfully resolving many kinds of day-to-day difficulties is the same and so is the solution—which you will learn about in this book. It will work for you if you have a hard time speaking up, or if you speak up too harshly, quickly, or aggressively. You can use this solution if you are sometimes too quick to respond with an angry email or a harsh Facebook post or tweet. In Parts II–III of this book, I present the solution as a series of communication skills and techniques that you can easily learn and adopt.

It's up to you to use the skills and techniques described in this book to positively resolve the conflicts in your life. I hope you will choose to make them a part of the way you operate out there in the world. You'll be glad if you do because these are life-enhancing skills that, in all likelihood, no one ever taught you. This isn't saying anything bad about you if you don't know them. Very few people ever learn how to have difficult conversations comfortably, since this is not taught in high school, college, or work orientation. Fewer of us go on to figure them out on our own.

### **What I Can't Help You With**

In this book I am not going to teach you skills to deal with extreme or abusive situations. Sadly, a woman approached me after a seminar and asked me how she should handle her physically abusive husband. Though my heart went out to her, I told her positive confrontation was not a solution for her current situation. She needed professional help, and I urged her to get it.

I don't know what you should say if you meet someone on a dark street who makes you nervous. You should probably avoid a conversation and just get yourself to a safe place. While I do address how to deal with rude



strangers, for the most part, I'm talking about those day-to-day conflicts that crop up, drive you crazy, and never seem to get better—not dangerous situations. As you will discover by the end of this book, addressing rude strangers may not be the necessity you thought it was when you started reading this book. You'll see.

### **How I Can Help You Solve the Problem of Not Being Able to Talk to People in Difficult Situations**

I just told you what I can't do. Here is what I *can* do:

- Help you if you're having a hard time talking honestly to another person about something that's bothering you.
- Show you how to handle conflict better through Polite and Powerful behavior. You'll learn what it looks like, sounds like, and acts like.
- Improve your life in what will seem like a small way at first. Then the improvement will ripple. It will reach and spread, touching more and more corners of your life in a positive way.

### **“Oh, This Isn't for Me”**

Oh, maybe it is. I don't care who you are, how much money you make or don't make. I don't care about your gender, your race, your religion, or what your hobbies are. Everyone, absolutely everyone, has conflict in life. At some point, you will eventually find yourself in a confrontation. The big question is, How will you handle it?

Many people think, believe, even insist that they're approaching conflict the right way. You may think you're an assertive person, but you may be wrong. Look at the following letter to Ann Landers. Though several years old, it describes the kind of story I hear all the time:

Dear Ann Landers: A few years ago I was in the elevator of a New York department store, and the woman in front of me kept swinging her head from side to side. Her hair hit me in the face every time. I finally tapped

her on the shoulder and said, “The next time your hair hits me in the face, you will not need a haircut for a very long time . . .” Your readers might like to try my approach.

This woman believed that she was acting appropriately. She believed she was sticking up for herself, taking a stand, speaking up. But she blew it. She was not polite. She was rude. She was not powerful. She was aggressive. And to Ann Landers’s credit, she didn’t recommend this approach. I will give the woman who wrote this letter the benefit of the doubt. She probably had no idea she was behaving inappropriately. If I have learned anything over the last twenty years it is that people really do not know *how* they are behaving in difficult situations and confrontations. They do not understand how they appear to others and what effect their behavior can have on other people.

This is why, even if you think you would behave appropriately during a conflict, I challenge you to read this book. Then tell me if you’re handling yourself and your difficult conversations in the best possible way.

### **It’s Not Brain Surgery, But Brain Surgeons Need It Too**

Okay, not everyone is so easily convinced that the power of positive confrontation is all that powerful. A man who attended one of my seminars sponsored by a professional association said, quite sarcastically, “Well, this sure isn’t brain surgery.”

“No, of course not,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean it can’t change your life in a positive and lasting way.” Then a surprising thing happened. A woman in the audience stood up and said, “I *am* a brain surgeon and I didn’t know any of this. I’ve been frustrated because my supervisor has been asking me to work weekends all the time. He’s not asking anyone else. I’m here because I keep saying to myself, ‘I have to say something,’ but I don’t know what to say or how to say it.”

Positive confrontation skills benefit everyone. Brain surgeons have trouble handling conflict on the job and at home. So do salespeople, homemakers, IT managers, administrative assistants, husbands, PTA presidents, Cub Scout leaders, wives, and significant others.

These skills are applicable to every area of your life. Anyone who has a problem telling coworkers, friends, family, and significant others their concerns—Politely and Powerfully—will benefit. It’s also for anyone who has ever left a restaurant, movie theater, or grocery store thinking, “When that jerk butted ahead of me, I should have said, ‘Hey, jerk! Whaddya think you’re doing?’”

And this book is for anyone who thinks that telling a jerk off is a positive action. It’s for anyone who may think that sticking up for yourself means putting another person down. As you’ll soon discover, what we think is acceptable or appropriate behavior may actually be rude and unacceptable behavior.

### **So What Exactly Is Polite and Powerful Behavior?**

Speaking of rude . . . Polite and Powerful *isn’t*. Here’s what it is:

It describes the way you handle yourself during a positive confrontation. It’s more than saying please and thank-you.

It’s more than having the guts to march up to someone and express yourself forcefully.

### **What Does Assertiveness Mean?**

No one really knows. You can look it up in the dictionary. I ask people all the time to describe behavior that would be characterized as assertive. Usually what I hear is silence.

Ask ten people what it means to be assertive and you will get a shrug or you will get ten different answers. This is why “assertive” is not my favorite word for this kind of discussion. The woman who wrote to Ann Landers thought she was being assertive. People think of themselves as assertive; meanwhile, other people think of them as passive or aggressive. This is why “assertiveness” can get confusing. I call the behavior I talk about in this book Polite and Powerful because it’s a more accurate description for the behavior used in a positive confrontation.

Polite and Powerful is a set of skills that combines what most people think of as *assertiveness* training with *etiquette* training. Twenty years ago, I

began teaching both of these skill areas. More and more, I saw that many of the same issues I addressed in my assertiveness classes—becoming a powerful person—were cropping up in my etiquette classes—becoming a polite person—and vice versa. Many of the questions overlapped. Many of the skills overlapped. It was clear to me that the combination of Polite and Powerful behavior provided a practical skill area that many people need.

### **Minding More Than Your Manners**

Business and social etiquette is more than learning about table manners, such as which water glass is yours at a business lunch or a wedding reception. In reality, that's only a small, small part of any modern etiquette training. (Your water glass, by the way, is on the right.)

Another critical but lesser known aspect of etiquette, whether in the board room or your living room, is understanding how to get along with others. Etiquette training teaches you how to make the best impression on others, including your boss, book group, customers, great-aunt, and neighbor.

Trust me when I tell you that a lot of people lacking etiquette skills don't get promoted—no matter how smart or technologically skillful they are. People with poor etiquette skills are not made president of their civic association. They are not asked to head important department projects or help out at the church bake sale, and then they grumble about it.

“Etiquette” is all about treating others the right way. The “right way” means with tact in both your words and actions. It is what you say and how you say it. It is treating people with kindness. This is the polite part of positive confrontation.

### **Etiquette Meets Assertiveness**

In my seminars, I help people understand that they have a right to be heard and to speak up. But you have to act on this belief and you have to act correctly—that means Politely and Powerfully. Again, the combination of etiquette training and assertiveness training gets people to tune in to how they may be appearing to others. It helps them understand how their verbal and nonverbal communication skills are helping or harming an already

difficult situation. We send silent messages out to others, all day long, day after day, often without knowing what messages we're actually sending.

Just being polite may not be enough to handle a difficult situation. You may come off as wimpy. If you are just powerful, that approach won't work either. Without the polite part, powerful behavior is often just aggression. You need both for positive confrontation.

### **I Had No Idea I Did That!**

Once people tune in, many are in for a big surprise! Oh, I could tell you stories that you would find outrageous. Things you would think no one would do. But the fact is, people do unbelievable things every day. I know of a high-level executive who licked his knife at an important business lunch and lost thirty million dollars' worth of business as a result. Or a woman at a conference in New Orleans who posted, "Off to another stupid meeting. Would much rather be on Bourbon Street." You might not do anything so outrageous, but we all have bad habits.

When a client of mine complained about his "unfair" boss, I suggested that he film himself giving a presentation. He was shocked to discover that literally every other word out of his mouth was "okay." He heard how bad he sounded. No wonder he wasn't asked to give more of the department's key presentations. *Before* he watched the video, he thought his boss "had it out for him" by not giving him the plum assignments. *After* viewing himself, he understood that he was probably holding himself back.

Like this man, you'll learn how to identify and break habits that have been undermining your success at work and satisfaction in your relationships. You will learn about the specific dos and don'ts of positive confrontation using verbal and nonverbal communication skills and techniques. And you'll learn about the benefits of positive confrontation throughout this book.

### **The Benefits of Positive Confrontation**

Speaking of the benefits of positive confrontation . . . there are many. But explaining the benefits—the increased self-esteem and lower stress level for

starters—experienced by Polite and Powerful people is a little like explaining the benefits of exercise. You know why it is good for you but may not know how to go about getting started. I'm not just saying that Polite and Powerful can change your life in a positive and lasting way. I can prove it. I can prove it in the way I handle myself in tough situations. My filing cabinets and my email inbox are filled with positive testimonials I have received from participants at my seminars.

People describe to me the relief they feel when they finally confront someone about something that may have been bothering them for a while. Others say that they no longer feel taken advantage of by people at work or that they are able to quickly resolve misunderstandings with friends. As a result, people feel happier at work and in their personal lives. Most of the time, you will feel the benefits in little ways—an improved relationship with an in-law or coworker here or a less stressful day at work there. But the little ways will start to add up and then you will find that you are less stressed and feel more in control.

The benefits of positive confrontation can change your life. Learning how to be Polite and Powerful will not cure all of your problems, but if you are unable to tell other people how their behavior is affecting you or you are speaking up but still not getting resolution, this book can help you.

Trust me on this too: it's much better to be an ex-wimp than an active wimp. When you practice Polite and Powerful behavior, you can be a positive role model and a true leader rather than someone who intimidates employees. You will discover creative space in your brain you didn't know you had. And you didn't know you had it because complaining, or a host of other nonpositive behaviors, was sucking up that creative energy. Not being Polite and Powerful can wear you out mentally and drain you physically. Two more reasons—enhanced emotional well-being and better health—to give positive confrontation a try.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

After a brief confession from me, an exploration into who you are as a confronter and how you got the way you are, we head right into the land of positive confrontation. Step by step and brick by brick, we will build the

skills you need so that you too can become a Polite and Powerful person. I have seen it proven time and time again—when people have the right skills and the right tools, an approach rooted in being Polite and Powerful works.

With practice, it's surprisingly easy to learn and apply the skills of Polite and Powerful behavior that will lead you to positive confrontation. I've created a simple model called WAC'em, which you'll learn about in much greater detail soon. WAC'em will help you overcome what is often the biggest obstacle to confrontation—figuring out exactly what's bothering you and what you want to say to (or ask for from) the other person—all in a way that's positive. Putting your words together for a difficult conversation or confrontation won't be a problem anymore.

This sounds like a cinch. And in time, it will become easy for you. But in the beginning you will see that putting Polite and Powerful into action can be tricky. The process of figuring out what's really bothering you and what you really want from the other person can be challenging. Though it requires some effort at first, WAC'em will help you prepare for confrontations and difficult conversations in a step-by-step, brick-by-brick manner. Later, handling the sticky situations and having the conversations that now make you wince will become much simpler. You'll see.

Along the road, I will encourage you to do four things:

1. Gain awareness of how you handle yourself, including your confrontational style.
2. Limit the assumptions you make about the behavior of other people.
3. Have a confrontation when necessary—and be Polite and Powerful when you do.
4. Learn how to reduce the amount of conflict in your life.

### **Avoiding Conflict**

Are you surprised by number 4 above? Isn't the point of this book to have positive confrontations? Yes—when it's necessary and appropriate. But Polite and Powerful people know how to present themselves in a way that

invites less conflict. Also, Polite and Powerful people learn when “letting something go” is the better, healthier alternative than engaging in a confrontation.

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

Learning new skills takes time. You will have to practice. I don't want you to put this book down and go tell your boss you don't think he's fair or your best friend that she's bossy. Start slowly. Build your confidence. In time, you will have a whole new way of operating in the world, a way that's more effective and positive. Over time, Polite and Powerful behavior will come naturally to you. You'll feel better about yourself. You'll feel better about your relationships with other people. You may not always get what you want from the other person, but I promise you that if you practice and work at having positive confrontations you will at least know where you actually stand with the other person. And you can be certain that you'll be the one standing tall.

For now, feel good knowing that you're on your way.





## The Confrontational Road Less Traveled Is Paved by Bullies and Wimps

As I told you in Chapter 1, I've met more people than I can count who have a hard time resolving day-to-day conflicts positively. But my knowledge of this communication problem doesn't come simply from teaching Polite and Powerful skills to others. My knowledge is also firsthand. At one time in my life, there was no one in the world who needed this book more than I did.

This leads me to a confession: I used to be a wimp. A big one. I'm not kidding—huge.

This surprises most of the people who attend my seminars about how to confront people in a positive way.

Think about it. How else would I know this subject so well? How else could I be so enthusiastic about this communication issue?

Back to the huge wimp. The professionals I teach look at me and say, "You! No way. You don't look like a wimp." It's true, I don't. I'm tall and I stand tall. I talk to huge crowds and look at ease. I have command of my words and of my gestures. I can walk across a stage without feeling like I might fall or faint. And after years of teaching hundreds of seminars, you can bet my voice reaches the last row of just about any room.

Yet there I was. Queen of the wimps.

### Once Upon a Time . . .

When I was a kid, I was incredibly shy. Being tall wasn't the greatest feature to have then. Now I love it, but then . . . there I was, feeling like a skinny tree, all elbows and knees. It was the era of "children should be seen and not heard," and I think that was especially true for little girls of my generation. We were encouraged to play nicely and be ladies—as we still often tell little girls. Societal gender norms do not change quickly. A woman told me that the coach of her daughter's basketball team told the players during a game to get out there and "play like ladies." How, her daughter wanted to know, was she supposed to shoot baskets and be a lady?

Little boys got—and still get—messages about how to behave in confrontations. Many boys are encouraged to be tough: "Don't get mad, get even." Of course, when I was growing up, crying for most boys was out of the question, and after they enter middle school nowadays, it often still is. Tears mean "he's a wimp."

Kids get messages from their parents about how to handle conflict and other people. You went to school, church, Little League, Girl Scouts . . . and you got messages there too, messages about how you were expected to behave. Many of those messages were good, but because we lacked positive role models for handling conflict, some of them may not have been so helpful: *It's okay to yell when you're unhappy. Just ignore someone's bad behavior. It's okay not to talk to people if you're upset with them.*

### Childhood Messages Can Chase You into Adulthood

Again, some of these messages were good, but others may be causing you problems to this day. Messages about how to handle difficult situations don't just get in, they stay in. Over time, your self-confidence is chipped away, or you have trouble communicating in relationships, or it's easier to get new friends than deal with the old ones. For me, it was classic wimp syndrome: I fantasized about speaking up, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Naturally, being a wimp followed me out of adolescence and into the adult world. What better place to discover exactly the width and depth

of your wimpiness than in your professional life? Many years ago, when I was first starting out in the corporate world, I worked for a largely male-dominated aerospace company. I can tell you tales of how I was slighted or treated rudely by people at work, everyone from a big boss to the woman in the parking lot who screamed at me for taking what she considered “her spot.” But I’m not going to tell them all, just one. The one that changed everything for me:

Once during a meeting with one of the company’s directors, he told me, “Why don’t you stay home and have babies like a good gal.”

*Well!*

Lucky for me I had the good luck of working for a director named Ann Davis. She was one of two high-level women in the entire company. She was confident and self-assured—two things I wasn’t then. She became my mentor. So after the director said these demeaning words to me I ran, top speed, into Ann’s office, crying of course.

She asked me, “Why didn’t you just tell him you were offended by his comment?”

“You mean I can tell him that?” I asked.

I look back now and think, “Duh, Barbara!” But then I honestly didn’t know that I had a right to do this until Ann told me that I did. What I did instead of telling that director he offended me was complain. And did I ever complain! I complained to Ann and my sisters and my neighbor . . . that was my standard operating procedure. If someone treated me unfairly, poorly, or rudely, I used to complain to my girlfriends about that person’s behavior. I’d complain to my hairdresser or the stranger sitting next to me on the plane. I wasn’t picky. I just needed an ear. I could talk for hours and hours about it. I could wear your ear out and still want to complain more.

But I never said a word to the person bugging me. Never. Not one word. And by not confronting, I felt bad about myself.

### **Speaking of Crummy Self-Esteem**

Let’s get it over with—the self-esteem part of any discussion about confronting others. Here’s what I have learned about self-esteem: we can all suffer from bad self-esteem at times, some of us more than others. Yes, it feels bad.

Yes, it probably holds us back at times. I certainly recognize that it's a reason why many of us don't confront positively. But it's not the *only* reason.

The preoccupation with low self-esteem is not necessarily helpful to this discussion. As I was trying to cure my own wimpiness, I read books. They helped to a degree, but I found many of them frustrating. Mostly these books talked to me about why I had gotten the wimpy way that I was—poor self-esteem. I knew that I had poor self-esteem. I wasn't a complete wimp, or hopeless in every situation in my life, but, yes, I needed help with my self-esteem. Why else was I reading the book in the first place? I wasn't looking for someone to psychoanalyze me. I was looking for a step-by-step guide on how to assert myself positively.

There was no guide. But slowly over time, with patience and practice, I did learn how to confront others in a more positive way and my self-esteem improved dramatically. I looked to Ann, my mentor, for continued guidance. Sometimes just watching her in action was inspiration. I saw how she remained calm, no matter what the other person said or did. In tense situations, her body language was strong but not overwhelming. Her word choice always seemed Polite yet Powerful.

I realized that in order to fulfill my career goals, I was going to have to become a Polite and Powerful person too. I understood the cost of not being one. When I was a photojournalist, I once applied for an editor's job. I was told that I would be contacted for an interview. They forgot to interview me. At the time, I accepted that.

*I let them forget me!*

### **A New Formula for Success**

I knew that I would never get anywhere if I continued to let people forget to interview me. I was going to have to lose my fear of sticking up for myself. And I was going to have to do this without alienating other people. I don't care what your gender is, what era you're living in, or what technical skills or special talents you may have. You cannot just assert yourself any way you want and automatically have people respect you. You have to deal with other people—even people who are bugging you—in a respectful manner. We are now living in a world where the wrong tweet or blog post