

# How to give good CONFRONTATION

In this 24/7 world of juggling work, life and relationships, losing our cool once in a while has become standard. Here, *Lizzie Pook* reveals how to keep calm and carry on (dignity, firmly intact)



## At a dinner party before the

last general election, I found myself stumbling on my argument as to why I was voting a particular way. Ordinarily, I can voice my opinions in an eloquent, intelligent manner. And I don't know if it was the heightened emotions, conflicting opinions among friends or the empty wine glass, but I found myself backed into a conversational corner as voices grew louder and angrier. I left feeling frustrated and misunderstood – like a debating team drop-out.

Confrontation is a given, especially in the current divisive political climate, yet it often takes us by surprise and leaves us belatedly feeling let down. So what's the best way to deal with it when conflict arises? Unsurprisingly, experts maintain that the most effective way to settle (and actually win) disputes is to do so quietly and calmly. 'I always tell my clients to think back to a time when either they lost their temper or they witnessed another party losing their temper,' says life and business coach Gemma McCrae\*. 'I can guarantee it

didn't look good. It's rarely productive to be intimidating when you're confronting someone.' And Catherine Thomas, managing director of leading family divorce law firm Vardags, concurs. 'In my experience, those who try to shout their way through a negotiation are covering up for a lack of knowledge, sophistication or confidence in their position,' she says.

What can be helpful as a starting point – if you're looking to tackle disputes more effectively – is an awareness of how you react to confrontation. Are you a knee-jerk aggressive if someone queue-jumps, or do you disappear the second a pub debate gets too heated?

More recently, I've found that I'd rather keep my mouth shut and suffer in silence than face any sort of

confrontation. I know it sounds weak, but I hate awkwardness. When I discuss this approach with a friend, she confesses to doing the same. 'I rarely stand up for myself and, if I'm in an argumentative situation, I find myself getting backed into a corner.' But have I swung too far in the other direction? Surely, even if making your voice heard feels alien, you can learn how to use quiet, positive confrontation to your benefit. We asked those who argue for a living how *they* do it.

## THINGS JUST GOT PERSONAL

Think about how you felt the last time someone accused you of something (not pulling your weight during a work project, for instance). It hurt, right? 'Any ►



type of criticism, accusation or judgement (in the workplace or home) feels like a personal attack,' says Paul Randolph, barrister and author of *The Psychology Of Conflict*. In fact, studies by neuroscientists in Italy found that social pain – that of being humiliated, shunned or criticised during arguments – is treated by the brain as physical pain.

For this reason, the 'W' word ('wrong') should *never* be uttered in conflict situations. 'When this happens, the argument suddenly isn't about the thing you're discussing,' says Jack Mizel, CEO of the Institute for Sales Management. 'Instead, it has escalated and you've switched to undermining the person you're speaking to. It's important to understand where the other person sits, why they have those views and then challenge them gently. Say, "I see why you're saying that, but would you consider the fact that it's possible *this* could be the case?"'

#### **SHOOT FROM THE HIP**

You know when you want to raise an issue but the awkwardness is so colossal you end up mumbling into your coffee before petering off mid-sentence? Well, don't. 'The key to good confrontation is simple: be straightforward,' says Melissa Dahl, author of *Cringe Worthy: The Value Of Awkwardness In A Put-Together World* (out 2018). 'People who feel awkward during confrontation dance around the point, thinking it will help the other person save face. But this doesn't help anyone. It's better to say what you mean, kindly and clearly.'

#### **FACE FACTS**

Research shows that we are more confrontational and aggressive over email than we would be in face-to-face situations; hiding behind a screen can give us a false sense of bravado. A study by the University of Massachusetts Amherst also found that the further away people are from the person they are communicating with (physically or psychologically) the more likely they are to lie: those communicating via email

were found to lie about five times more than those speaking face-to-face. Emails desensitise us to emotions: we can't *see* that the person is hurt, so we are likely to be more thoughtless and aggressive.

#### **HIT REFRESH**

So, in a boiling-point scenario, how can you get the upper hand without losing your cool? 'Let the other person know you are listening to disperse anger,' says Randolph. 'Try paraphrasing their argument with, "So, what you're saying is x, y and z." Or, "OK, I can see why you're angry so let's sort this out." Once you say that to a person on the street, it's almost impossible for them to carry on shouting.'

#### **SOFTLY DOES IT**

When it comes to *how* you present your argument, a soft and stable tone of voice really brings home your point. 'Calm and quiet is more pleasing to listen to than loud and shouty,' says Tony Koutsoumbos, founder and director of the Great Debaters Club\*\*. 'If you're loudly saying something that a person disagrees with they will criticise the loudness, rather than thinking about the points you are making.'

Research by Cornell University has found using 'soft' words during arguments help alleviate tension. 'Team', 'discuss' and 'try' are all good starting points.

#### **EXIT THE CONFLICT ZONE**

If you're familiar with the term 'rage black-out', you have a friend in me. It is not a useful reaction (I once aggressively gestured at someone with a banana in a shop) but it does have a purpose. 'It's part of our fight-or-flight response; when we are under attack – physically or verbally – our amygdala (the brain's emotional processor) kicks in and we become defensive,' explains Randolph.

If you're losing composure, take a step back and give your brain a moment to settle. If it's the other party boiling over, give them time to simmer down. 'Allow their amygdala response to subside and they will look at things differently.' It's something to remember next time the red mist descends. ■

## **WHAT TYPE OF ARGUER ARE YOU?**

Anna Shields, co-founder and director of workplace mediation company Consensio, says a conflict-management tool called the Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument can help identify the six ways people deal with conflict. So, how do you argue?

#### **THE TURTLE**

Terrified of confrontation, you would rather retreat. Aggressive people thrive off conflict but will run out of steam if you give them nothing back, so look unfazed then calmly start speaking once the other person has stopped ranting. They will feel foolish.

#### **THE SHARK**

Known for 'competing', you react with a knee-jerk. Don't jump into something when you are in fight mode. Pause, let it settle, and then if you still want to confront it, plan your conversation goal and wording in advance.

#### **THE TEDDY BEAR**

Always accommodating, you downplay your own concerns to satisfy the needs of others. Think about what would benefit you from this conflict and speak up about it.

#### **THE FOX**

Also regarded as the 'compromiser', you're possibly the best person to have around in conflict scenarios because you seek a middle-ground resolution.

#### **THE OWL**

Ever the optimist, you are the collaborator who looks for a solution that satisfies everyone. This can be exhausting if it's your dominant personality type, but people will respond positively to you.

#### **THE MUTE**

You're the one who would prefer to keep quiet when an argument starts. 'Those who bottle up their emotions in an attempt to avoid confrontation will likely find their frustrations escaping elsewhere,' says Thomas. 'They may benefit from making notes about the points they want to raise in a discussion, so they don't get flustered.'