

## **Reducing Contentiousness in an Environment of Fear and Concern**

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*This article is a preview of Jim Lukaszewski's next IABC web-based teleseminar, "Managing Contention: Building relationships, reducing anxiety, bringing constituencies to agreement," on Wednesday, 25 March 2009, from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. EST. Please visit [www.krm.com/IABC](http://www.krm.com/IABC) to find out more about the program and to register.*

With the economy continuing to decompose, and the daily recitals of job reductions and productivity shrinking, even the most basic interactions with others can be contentious. What is contention? In simplest terms it is lack of agreement, or a divergence of views and goals. It can be destructive, corrosive and contagious.

There are two root causes of contention: negative behavior and negative language. Put the two together and, quite often, contention explodes into conflict. How do we fight contention? How do we mitigate it? How do we, where possible, turn it into agreement or at least neutrality?

The first step is to recognize the behaviors that cause contention. Here is a catalogue:

- Abuse of any kind
- Arrogance
- Assault
- Bullying
- Callousness
- Carelessness
- Confrontation
- Deception
- Discrediting
- Dismissiveness
- Disparagement
- Embarrassment
- Fearfulness
- Lying
- Negligence
- Ridicule
- Sarcasm
- Shame
- Surprise

Undoubtedly, there are more, but you get the idea.

The second step is to work to inhibit, prohibit, control or even eliminate these kinds of behaviors. In most organizations, this is one of the crucial roles of leadership during intense times. Every individual in the organization models their behavior on what they see the boss and bosses doing. If contentious behaviors are permitted, tolerated or encouraged, everyone in the company is authorized to be contentious with everyone else. This rarely happens but, in reality, those without power are empowered, those with power are ignoring their obligation, and the trust gap widens between employees and those who lead.

The third step is for leadership, that is managers and organizational leadership from the top to the bottom, to focus on modeling the behaviors that reduce contentiousness, anger and fear. Here are three of the most important steps leaders and managers can take:

1. **Use positive language.** Eradicate the use of negative words, phrases, and approaches. Of all of the disciplines in leadership, this one is the hardest. Leaders and business managers are still taught that the best ideas and concepts often come through the clash of ideas and intellects.

Generally speaking, if leaders, managers and supervisors give instructions and conduct themselves in positive ways and use positive language, both eradicating their use of only negative words and helping others eradicate the use of negative language in their communication, a sense of calmness will settle over the organization. It may be somewhat less than agreement, but calm is certainly better than contentiousness.

2. **Be constructive.** Eliminate the use of criticism as a means of advancing interests, evaluating individuals, and clarifying duties, obligations and tasks. Criticism is always negative. Human beings remember criticism more than anything else in their lives, because negative language sticks. Or, on the other hand, you could say that negative language weighs more. It is memorable, injurious and human nature being what it is, tends to dominate the attitudes and memories of individuals.

There are three huge benefits to being constructive. First, it is difficult and, in fact extraordinarily challenging. This means that there will be far fewer attempts to change people or alter their behaviors, because constructive suggestions are so few and far between. Second, the likelihood of someone actually adopting a constructive suggestion is far higher, since they will not be burdened with dozens of negative, insulting or embarrassing comments or suggestions. Third, being constructive can be taught. Managers, supervisors and leaders can teach their peers, colleagues and subordinates to act in a similar fashion and, here again, a sense of calmness can be developed. Experience demonstrates that before one can reach agreement in a contentious situation, there must be some period of stability and calm to allow people to consider their options and move toward reconciliation. Constructive suggestions are a key ingredient.

3. **Wage peace.** Replace employee/management conflicts and workplace tension with more permanent, positive relationships. Abandon war-like, defensive and threatening tactics as tools of employee management. Work with employees to renounce confrontation and job actions as tools for manipulating management judgment. Help employees, at every level, have achievable, self-guided mandates for their own behaviors and success. Market the positive environment your workplace offers. Focus on building the best possible workplaces and conditions.

Teach managers to communicate in positive ways and change the language of management. Simplify organizational goals. Institutionalize management commitment to lead the workforce.

Revamp organizational infrastructure so that employees can access information and decision making as and when they choose to. Reduce the amount of stuff generated for employees; they don't really want most of it anyway. Communicate in real time; say less but make it more important. Say it positively and say it now. Believe it or not, it is management that controls whether or not there is peace. If you are tired of the wars, the anger, the frustration, why not give peace a chance?