

PREPARE FOR IMPACT IN THE CONTACT ZONE™

By Barbara Bouchet, MEd

ADAPTED FROM
The ENLIGHTENED EDGE for LEADERS:
Ignite the Power of You

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Author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*
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The
**ENLIGHTENED
EDGE**
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WHEN you're called on to deal with tension between you and another person, you enter complex territory that requires multiple skills. Emotional intelligence and communication skills are more important than ever. However, if you prepare, prior to entering a highly charged situation, you'll have a much greater ability to skillfully navigate and manage this unpredictable territory.

Tension intensifies when you enter the Contact Zone™, the space where people come into contact and can have significant impact on each other. For example, you're in the Contact Zone™ when you are negotiating, having an intense conversation, trying to influence someone, closing a deal, giving difficult feedback, or really connecting with someone. In each of these examples, there is considerable potential for impact on both parties.

The meeting space between people that we call the Contact Zone™ is illustrated in the following diagram.



Relationships can be strengthened and charged with liveliness and purpose when relational activity

is present. Significant connections can bloom, grow, and mature in the Contact Zone™.

When you contain and manage any reactivity that arises, you can see, listen, feel, and think with greater range and nuance. This allows you to learn about the other person, make clear choices, and respond in ways that will optimize positive contact.

You know you're in the Contact Zone™ when:

- ◆ You feel some tension or intensity
- ◆ Equilibrium is at least mildly upset
- ◆ You and the other person can significantly affect each other
- ◆ There is something important at stake

The Contact Zone™ can be an unsettling space, especially when the material or emotional stakes are high and vested interests are in focus. You and the other person can potentially have a profound effect on each other. This can be energizing and exciting but also uncomfortable.

The Contact Zone™ will test you. You'll find out how much resilience you have and how far you can be pushed before you slip into a reactive pattern. The Contact Zone™ can get very hot and isn't for the fainthearted. However, it will build your relational strength and leadership ability.

When you relate to others, you may be able to hold and manage your own tension, but you can't be sure how the person will manage his or her self. Their decisions and actions will affect you in ways that you can't possibly control. Fortunately, you can often anticipate certain possibilities and prepare yourself.

Preparing for contact in stressful or high-impact situations will help you navigate potential minefields with skill. For example, it's not always immediately obvious how to proceed when others are behaving badly. And in certain situations, it's not always clear how to avoid your own reactive patterns. But if you prepare, you'll have your wits when you need them and won't be pulled into mind-numbing or toxic reactivity.

The following exercise summarizes much of what you can do to stay centered and optimize your leadership ability in the Contact Zone™. It focuses on behaviors and skills that you can apply in the middle of an interaction with someone else. This checklist draws on many principles, processes, and skills that have been discussed in detail in *The Enlightened Edge for Leaders; Ignite the Power of You*. You'll find it beneficial to review this list on a regular basis.

Assess Your Impact in the Contact Zone™

Review the following skills and processes and place a ✓ beside those skills and processes that need further development or that you need to pay special attention to.

- Correct any misunderstandings that have occurred. Often simple clarification is sufficient. Sometimes it's necessary to look at the bigger picture to understand what happened.
- Take responsibility for what is yours and give responsibility to others for what is theirs. When

accepting or assigning responsibility, check to see if there is sufficient power to fulfill the responsibility.

- Acknowledge damage you have dealt. Then repair it when possible. A sincere apology works wonders.
- Make it clear where you stand in a clear, non-combative, and non-defensive way. Directness, paired with kindness, is very effective.
- Create an environment of respect and understanding with others. Others will more easily trust you and be inclined to support your agenda.
- Say what needs to be said, even if it is uncomfortable. Say it especially when your integrity will be compromised if you don't.
- Ask clarifying, strategic questions. Find out who the other person is, what his or her vested interests are, and where he or she stands.
- Invite feedback in any area where you need a reality check. Use trusted sources.
- Listen deeply to the other person's response. Listen for patterns and undisclosed positions. Verify what you heard.
- Create clear agreements. Verify any agreements you think have been made. Base your future expectations on these agreements. Renegotiate them as needed.
- Pay attention to your intuitive feelings, gut sense, and hunches about the other person. These data points often provide insight you can't find any other way.
- Stay in a collaborative dialogue, even when feeling challenged and especially with complex issues. Make sure the other person knows you are committed to a relational solution, even if it gets difficult.

- Articulate your vision for what is possible. Inspire others to activate their own potential by joining you.
- Hold the tension between you and others until something new happens. Don't yield to your insecurities, engage your defenses, or react to the other person's patterns. Stay with the exchange.
- Take in diverse points of view. Stay open to exchanges that will give you valuable, divergent information. Receive the information graciously, even if it isn't what you want to hear or disrupts your view of the world.
- Create a vital support system. Ask friends and family to support the changes you are making. Enlist the services of a counselor, coach, or consultant as needed.

Review the items you checked and highlight the ones that you know are most crucial to your success.

Refer to this list especially when you feel challenged in a relationship. Review it from time to time and see if the areas that need focus have changed.

Preparing for the Contact Zone™ and using the above skills will allow you to come forward with integrity and lead others, even when the situation is complicated or loaded with entrenched positions. You don't have to wait for the other person to do their part. You can choose to act from your own center of integrity regardless of how the other person acts.

Ongoing practice will not only help increase your emotional intelligence and strengthen your relational skills, it will also support more complex activities, such as collaborative problem solving and decision making. The payoff for this preparedness will come

when you demonstrate that you can effectively hold onto yourself and lead others through a challenging situation. This will benefit everyone involved. It is the mark of someone with positive personal power and will contribute enormously to your success.

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WORKING WITH

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- ◆ *[The Enlightened Edge for Leaders: Ignite the Power of You](#)*, book
- ◆ *[The Contact-Zone™: Power & Influence](#)*, board game and training
- ◆ *[Work-Life Effectiveness Assessment](#)*
- ◆ *[Performance and Balance: Dynamic Tools for Work & Life](#)*, training and transformational toolkit
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