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Excerpt from Solving People Problems at Work

To be sure, the first few seconds of the conversation are critical to your ultimate success – they affect the kind of response you'll get from the person.

Avoid beginning with you statements like, "You have a problem" or "You've been making a lot of people mad lately ... including me!" While those words may be true, they also tend to make people anxious and very defensive. Instead, use a non-accusatory, tactful opening that asks the individual for his or her cooperation:

I need your help to solve a problem.

Most people will respond with an "Okay" or "Sure" or "What's the problem?" Now, it's imperative to avoid any long-winded speeches intended either to prove you are in the right or to sugarcoat the issue. Get right to the problem at hand. In a non-judgmental, non-accusatory mode, identify the problem – the specific behavior that was (or still is) at issue. Describe ...

1. What you think/observed the person did or didn't do;
2. When it think/observed happened;
3. What think/observed resulted – what you think/observe the negative impact was or could have been.

Then, seek an explanation with an open ended question like *What do you think happened?* or *What do you think is going on? Why? What can "we" do to different in the future?*

Source: Walk The Talk: Our mission at www.WalkTheTalk.com is both simple and straightforward: to provide you and your organization with high-impact resources for your personal and professional success. They offer hundreds of tactical and practical tools... each designed to inspire, inform, and most important, take you to higher levels of skills and confidence.

NOTE FROM STEVE: YES, YES, YES - think "clarification" NOT "confrontation."
Another good way to phase the question is "Please, can you help me understand..." then listen intently and try repeating back what you think you heard them say – seek first to understand, then be understood (Habit #5 of Stephen Covey's "7 Habits of Highly Effective People). Remember, between every stimulus and response is a space called CHOICE, and YOU OWN IT!