

Turn Your Difficult Business Conversations Into Productive Problem-Solving

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How many times do you walk away from a conversation wondering whether you've gotten your point across, been understood, actually resolved the issue or reached an agreement that will result in the outcomes you want **and**, through the conversation, enriched the relationship rather than constricted it? Were you able to have a real conversation and tell the truth in a way that honored both your reality and the other person's, so that together you learned something new and were able to move forward in a stronger alliance?

Robust, high-quality conversation is the linchpin to productive work relationships in high-performing teams, organizations and businesses. In fact, our relationships succeed or fail one conversation at a time. High-stress, fast-paced, action-oriented environments such as health care settings can predispose to communications that are quick, telescoped or truncated, easily leading to misunderstanding and breakdowns in relationships, teamwork, and organizational climate, all of which impact employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction.

Yet difficult conversations are a fact of life, no matter how skillful we are at communication. What usually happens in difficult conversations is a cycle of non-agreement (Stone et al, *Difficult Conversations*, 2000) in which there is a strong conflict of views about what to do that is **not** expressed, leading to a compromise "agreement" or delay. What follows are non-existent, half-hearted or incompatible actions that generate lousy results and mutual blame. This then becomes a self-perpetuating cycle.

Typically we find ourselves with two unsatisfactory options: we are anxious and therefore take no action, which is costly, or we overcome our anxiety and take action but in an unhelpful way, which is also costly. If we can transform difficult conversations into learning conversations, we create better working relationships, ease communication problems, improve decision-making, get better substantive results, increase productivity and decrease the cost of conflict. The bottom-line benefits are increased employee and customer satisfaction, two key drivers of business results.

The precondition for a learning conversation requires that we risk three conditions, which Susan Scott (*Fierce Conversations*, 2002) articulates as: a *willingness to be known*, a *willingness to be seen*, and a *willingness to be changed*. Learning does not occur otherwise.

Given those preconditions, how do you now change the course of a difficult conversation, either one that has already occurred or one that you may be anticipating with dread or resignation? There are five core strategies and tools that facilitate a profound shift in the course of a conversation and a relationship, when you practice them consciously.

1. Shift from Blame to Contribution

When things go wrong, it seems to be almost an instinctive response to want to attribute blame to someone. Yet blame always provokes defensive reactions and shuts conversations down. Therefore, we need a different mindset to understand the mistakes and failures that lead to breakdowns. That mindset is one of “contribution.” If the intention behind blaming is to judge or punish, assuming an “either/ or” attribution, then the intention behind contribution is to mutually understand and improve the situation by asking “What did we each do or fail to do that put us here?”

It’s important to remember that acts of omission as well as commission are forms of contribution. For example, avoiding something or being unapproachable, role assumptions, not considering another’s choice, not preparing adequately, or not making necessary trade-offs are all forms of contribution.

Even if your contribution is only 5% of the problem, you will find that a willingness to own your contribution disarms the other person and offers you a window of leverage to do something different.

2. Engage in Empathic Listening

One of the deepest human desires is to be listened to, heard, and understood. Listening to others helps them listen to you, thereby transforming the conversation. In emotionally charged conversations where opinions vary and the stakes are high, empathic listening is the key. There are three core listening skills to practice:

- *Inquiry*: Ask open questions that provide information and meaning, such as “What did you notice?” or “What did you think?” or “What conclusions did you draw?”
- *Paraphrasing*: Ask questions that check your understanding against what the other person meant, such as “When you said this, did you mean...”
- *Acknowledgment*: This may be the most under-utilized but powerful tool for defusing negative emotions. What makes conversations difficult is that people have strong feelings. Acknowledgement of another’s frustration, upset, or anger goes a long way to defusing the emotional charge that blocks ease of communication. Phrases such as “I can see how angry you feel” or “If I were in your shoes, I would probably feel just as frustrated” honor the other person’s reality even if you don’t agree with their perspective.

3. Move From Certainty to Curiosity

The tension of conflict, either explicit or implicit, derives from each of us being attached to a conclusion or position that we *believe* to be right and the truth. After all, what we know is our truth. But it is not the *whole* truth, ever.

Each of us continuously selects and pays attention to different data in the environment, interprets it and makes assumptions in different ways based on our unique life history and personal values, and draws different conclusions. It is from our conclusions and accumulated beliefs that we take action. People usually argue about their conclusions.

Use inquiry to understand the assumptions about reality that others hold and how they've arrived at the conclusions they hold. Then explain your view, the interpretations you made about the things you noticed and the conclusions you've drawn. By being curious about and exploring the other person's view, you understand each other's meaning making which then changes the perception you have of the other.

4. Separate Impact From Intent

Actions often have unintended consequences. When people experience a negative impact, in the absence of information to the contrary, they frequently assume a negative intent or motivation, and then act accordingly.

A common dynamic in conflicts between groups is attributing intention, defending ourselves, and ignoring the impact we've had on others. If you're aware of causing negative impact, acknowledge it. If you're on the receiving end, if need be, clarify the other's intent. The bottom line here is – if you're doing anything that impacts anyone, the more information, intentions, and desired outcomes you share, the better the results.

5. Make Effective Requests

Requests and promises are the lifeblood of work-life and business communication. They are the commitment to some outcome occurring based on action. The anatomy of an effective request has four elements:

- a. Say exactly what you want
- b. Say exactly who you want it from
- c. Say exactly when you want it
- d. Make sure you have the same assumptions about what's needed to ensure the desired outcome

Notice that the operative word in the first three elements is “exactly”! Too often, we sabotage the results we desire by not making requests at all, making unclear requests, not communicating expectations, and promising when unclear about the request. These actions, or lack thereof, coined “linguistic viruses” by Matthew Budd (*You Are What You Say*, 2001), create confusion, resentment, unmet goals and relationship breakdown.

Putting It All Together

It's important to remember that intent matters more here than technique. Being clear about the purpose of the conversation and staying true to it, even in the tension or heat of the

moment, provides a compass for moving forward. Approaching a difficult conversation with a purpose other than learning is perilous and will undermine your success. Perilous purposes include: delivering a message, changing the other, controlling their reaction, controlling the outcome, and venting.

In a learning conversation, uncovering assumptions provide the key to greater mutual understanding. Therefore, explore the other's views and experience first. Then share your views and experience. Only after both parties' views are clear does it make sense to problem-solve.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the time taken to engage in empathic listening and respectful sharing of divergent perspectives greatly increases the quality and speed of problem solving. While engaging in difficult conversations often feels risky and challenging, the price of not having them - lost time and productivity and less than optimal results - could cost you and your organization far more than the time and effort of doing so.

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