



Relationships That Work®

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Adapted from *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matter Most*

Keys to Successful Conversations

Examples of specific kinds of enlightened conversations

1) Delivering bad news

- Be direct. Do not ask the other what they think, hoping that they will initiate bad news first. Include that you can imagine how painful or difficult it may feel to receive this news.

2) Making requests

- “I wonder if it would make sense if...” takes you out of demanding and into including the other person in the decision-making process. It averts the unconscious automatic resistance people feel to being told the way things should be.

3) Revisiting conversations gone awry

- You know (imagine) that as soon as you raise a conversation that has not gone well, the other person will feel resistant. The best way is to talk about how to talk about it: “I know that when I’ve raised this issue before, it has not gone well. Let’s find a way that we can communicate in a more productive way.”
- State your intent as not to provoke the old feelings (people feeling accused, criticized, etc.) but also note that the issue still concerns you.
- What to talk about:
 - Explore where each story comes from: “My reactions have to do with my previous experiences in relationship...”
 - Share the impact on you: “I don’t know what you intended, however the impact on me was that I felt hurt.”
 - Take responsibility for your contribution: “I realize that I did not handle things well and actually contributed to the confusion.”
 - Describe feelings: “I feel nervous about bringing this up (First Truth First), yet I want to get through this” (this seems like a good place to also include your intention to have things work better, to feel closer, etc.). This helps the other person relax and realize that you are not there to cause harm.
 - Reflect on the identity issue: “I think the reason that this situation triggers me so much is that I’m afraid I am insensitive.”



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3 guidelines to sharing your story with clarity

1) Do not present your conclusions as the truth:

- Share your opinions and conclusions as just that. Be humble—not in an obsequious way. Assume that you do not know the veritable truth— and even if you happen to know it— most likely other people will not like it being communicated that way.
 - Inadequate conclusions occur all the time in psychology when therapist's interpret their client's behavior solely based upon their theoretical position. Open to feel the freedom of being in the creative unknown.

2) Share where your conclusions come from:

- Your conclusions come from the information you have and how you have interpreted this information. Actually, much of the so-called information you have is based on connecting some dots. Someone else may connect those same dots in very different ways.
 - Nothing will make a difference if you keep having the “tastes great, less filling debate.” Only when you share your own particular story will your conclusions make sense.

3) Do not exaggerate with “always” or “never”. Give others room to change:

- These exaggerations cause two problems. They elicit worthless arguments about frequency and they imply the other person is hopeless in changing.
 - Better to convey the feelings in a way that invites the other person to change. “Perhaps you don't realize how hurt I feel when you correct my language. I feel like a schoolchild being scolded by his parents and it triggers my feelings of incompetence”; This might be the beginning of a very fruitful conversation. By leading with vulnerability, the other person has an opportunity to know and understand you better and also has an opportunity to be more on the same team with you.
 - Take the freedom to ask how you are coming across: “I want to know if I'm being clear. Would you tell me what you heard me say?” Ask how they see it differently— and why: Rather than asking if they agree with your story, better to ask if and how they see it differently. It shows that you are interested in understanding their experience and will likely elicit a more honest response than asking them is they agree.



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Putting it all together

Step 1) Prepare by walking through the three conversations:

- What's my story?
- What's his or her story?
- What were my intentions?
- What was the impact on me?
- What were his intentions?
- What was the impact on him?
- What did I contribute to the problem?
- What did he contribute the problem?
- What feelings underlie my attributions and judgements?
- How does what happened threaten my identity?

Step 2) Check your purposes and decide whether to raise an issue:

- Do not let fear fool you into thinking that you should or should not raise an important issue.

Step 3) Start from the third story:

- Talk about what was difficult for you and what you imagine was difficult for him or her. Have a more global perspective.

Step 4) Explore their story and yours:

- Even when someone is attacking, they are giving you an inroad into their story. You can ask them to tell you more and practice your own inner coaching. You certainly cannot count on the other person soothe you. After listening, you will more likely have an opportunity to share your story with them listening
 - Although the most common response when someone is convinced they know your intent (when actually they only know how they have been impacted), the best way to handle this situation is not to defend yourself. Better to reflect back what you imagine the other's underlying feelings are.

Step 5) Problem-solving:

- Once the other issues are handled well, it is far easier to come up with creative ways to problem-solve. How can we handle this difficulty more easily in the future?