



Hard Conversations that Create Teams

Tools of the Trade

Listen more. Talk less.

Many of us have a tendency to talk more when conversations get hard. It is as if we repeat our points, somehow, the difficulties will go away.

Being able to listen intently and effectively is the most important skill in having a hard conversation. Being able to listen, simply to understand the other person, is the essence of this skill. As simple as this sounds, it can be very difficult in the midst of an emotionally difficult, hard conversation. Be that as it may, your ability to listen well often makes the difference between success and failure in achieving your objectives.

Allow Silence

Susan Scott in her book *Fierce Conversations* suggest that if we “let silence do the heavy lifting” we will be much more successful in our most difficult interactions. Try an experiment. Check your watch, look away, and be quiet for as long as you are comfortable. When you can’t stand it any longer, check the time. Most people have little tolerance for ten seconds’ of silence. Yet in that ten seconds of quiet time, you can allow someone to process a thought or let an emotion pass.

More questions. Fewer statements.


Well framed questions allow for you and your partner in a hard conversation to explore issues and better understand both the facts of the matter and your stories about the facts. Questions help to keep you in curiosity-mode and more open to new information and ideas. Questions allow you to understand where the other person is coming from so that you can stand in their shoes and work for a mutually acceptable outcome.

This is not to say that there is no place for you to state your own thinking. However, by making more use of questions, you will be in a much better position to know what needs to be said, and what needs to be heard by the other person.

Stay true to your objective. Listen for theirs.

The starting point for every hard conversation is for you to know what your objectives are. However, in the heat of the conversation, you can lose track of what you want and get sucked into being right and making the other person wrong. When this happens, take a deep breath and reconnect with your objective.

It is likely that your partner in the hard conversation may not know what their objective is. When this is the case, your keen listening for what they really want out of the conversation



can be very helpful. In fact your first objective in some hard conversations may be to help the other person to clarify what they really want.

Practice “Both” and “And.” Eliminate “But.”

Both-And thinking and speaking is the fine art of being able to have two very different positions or even “facts” be true at the same time. Both-And thinking allows you to be true to your own facts and story AND completely understand the other’s, even when the two are entirely different. Both-And thinking allows you to fully appreciate the important contributions a staff person has made in the department AND be willing to talk to them about a specific performance problem.

How to do this? A first step is to avoid using the word “but” and start using the word “and” when talking about paradoxes that are almost always part of hard conversations. This can help keep conversations stay open and positive. More important is your willingness to cultivate the ability to accept these paradoxes as a normal part of business as well as personal relationships.

Be free with “I.” Limit “You.”

An interesting exercise is to have a hard conversation not using the pronoun, “You.” In an emotionally difficult situation, the word “You” can easily be heard as judgmental, critical, and patronizing. Using the word “I” demands that I talk about my own facts and my own story and leave it to the other person to talk about theirs. This usually eases the way through a hard conversation.

Contrast to clarify intent.

Contrasting is a powerful tool in any hard conversation. A simple example is the best way to illustrate:

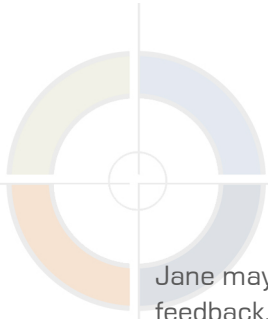
- Fred: “I feel like you are saying that I failed because we received two complaints last month.”
- Jane: “That was not my intent. Let me try again to see if I can more clearly state my thoughts.”

In this interchange, Jane may have felt she was perfectly clear and has no idea how Fred could have heard what he heard. But that is not the point! Instead, she is willing to acknowledge that for whatever reason Fred did not get her point and her objective is to be clearly and accurately heard. So she uses contrasting to move the conversation forward.

Apologize when called for.

Apologizing is a lot like contrasting. Here is an example:

- Fred: “I feel like you never acknowledge what I do well. All I hear about are things like the few complaints my department receives each month.”
- Jane: “I apologize if I have not acknowledged the great work that your department is doing. Let’s spend some time today looking at how to make sure that does not happen in the future. I do know that your department is doing a good job of meeting most customers’ needs. And I need to discuss the



two problems that came up last month. What is your take about how these problems came up?”

Jane may actually know that she needs to work on doing a better job on giving positive feedback. If so the apology may be easy to make. On the other hand she may feel like Fred is over-reacting or sending up a smoke screen. In any case, her objective is to resolve the issues surrounding two problem cases. Consequently making a simple apology is a good way to keep the conversation on track.

Maintain respect.

Respect is a poorly defined word in the management lexicon. For hard conversations, respect has three important elements:

1. Feeling and expressing the value you feel for the contribution the other person has made and will make in the future.
2. Being willing to listen in order to understand the other person.
3. Showing empathy for the other person’s situation by standing in their shoes.

The harder conversations get, the easier it is for respect to go out the window. When it does, it is usually difficult to recover. One key to having a hard conversation is to maintain your respect for the other person and to ask them to maintain their respect for you.