

Leading Difficult Conversations Series #3: Creating a Safe Conversation Environment¹

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Introduction

This publication series is intended for leaders who bear the responsibility of having difficult conversations as part of their professional responsibilities. There are many components to consider before and while engaging in a difficult conversation. For the purposes of this *Leading Difficult Conversations* series, difficult conversations are described using criteria from Patterson et al. (2012): (1) two or more individuals have opposing opinions; (2) strong emotions are present; and (3) the stakes related to the outcome are high. Due to the difficulty of these types of conversations, leaders may prefer to avoid them altogether, assuming avoidance will lead to a stronger outcome than addressing the issue (Farrell, 2015). However, if done correctly, difficult conversations can strengthen relationships and create an environment for continued open dialogue (Farrell, 2015).

Earlier in this publication series, the foundational principles of preparing for difficult conversations were established: (1) defining the issue and (2) determining your motive for the conversation. Once those principles are put into practice, the next phase of having a difficult conversation is creating a safe environment for the conversation. Components of creating a safe environment include recognizing a conversation's content and conditions, understanding the threats to a safe environment, and utilizing skills to overcome threats to restore safety.

Creating a Safe Environment

A safe environment refers to a space created by the leader that promotes feelings of physical and emotional safety. Ultimately the goal for this environment is one where “all participants believe they will be respected and treated fairly” (Overton & Lowry, 2013, p. 261). A basic principle of a safe environment is having the conversation in a private, neutral setting, with an appropriate time allotment to avoid unnecessary interruptions (Overton & Lowry, 2013). Additionally, when appropriate, leaders may invite third parties to the conversation to help mediate the discussion or to serve as witnesses to the dialogue. Ground rules relating to confidentiality and final decision-making can also serve as tools to create a safe environment and set appropriate expectations for all involved (Overton & Lowry, 2013).

Recognizing Content and Conditions of Conversations

In addition to logistical considerations, leaders must also make the conversation dialogue safe. Within each difficult conversation, there are two distinct components: the content of the message and the conditions of the conversation. Content is what is being said, while “conditions” refers to how the dialogue is being said. Body language and tone of voice are examples of conditions leaders should notice (Patterson et al., 2012).

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Leaders must pay attention to their own conversation conditions as well as those of the other party. The “tone and attitude of the leader are essential to creating a learning environment” (Farrell, 2015, p. 307). If the leader notices emotional and/or physical cues indicating conditions have negatively shifted in the conversation (e.g., the other party backs away from the table or the leader raises their voice), the leader should address the conditions before attempting to move the content forward. Negative conversation conditions indicate the conversation is no longer in a safe place for dialogue to occur. Leaders must also realize the potential negative conditions they are bringing into the conversation. More about leaders’ style under stress will be discussed in the fourth publication in this series.

Understanding Threats to a Safe Environment

When a conversation’s conditions reveal to a leader that the dialogue is no longer safe, the leader must quickly determine the cause of the dialogue breakdown. The two primary reasons dialogue becomes unsafe are perceived breakdowns in mutual purpose or mutual respect (Patterson et al., 2012). Mutual purpose refers to both parties perceiving they are working toward a shared goal, while mutual respect is described as each party appreciating the other’s inherent worth (Patterson et al., 2012). The first step at restoring a conversation to a safe dialogue space is to determine if the conversation breakdown is related to mutual purpose or mutual respect.

Mutual purpose is considered the entry condition for dialogue. For productive dialogue to occur, others must believe they are working toward a common outcome with the leader (Patterson et al., 2012). Remember, the goal of dialogue is not necessarily agreement. Instead, leaders are working to create a safe space so that all important information gets out in the open for discussion.

For example, Mary is a local 4-H agent who is approached by a group of frustrated parents. They are upset because they do not feel their students are competing well at 4-H events. Both Mary and the group of parents may have differing opinions as to *why* the students are not competing well. However, it is most beneficial to begin a conversation around *what* they have in common, which is a shared purpose of wanting the students to compete better at 4-H events.

On the other hand, mutual respect is the key to ensuring the conversation continues. Once a shared purpose is established, mutual respect keeps all parties in the conversation.

“The instant people perceive disrespect in a conversation, the interaction is no longer about the original purpose—it is now about defending dignity” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 79). Additionally, Reynolds (2014) notes “your regard for the person is critical to the outcome. Even if you disagree with his perspective, you have to honor the human in front of you...” (p. 33). Mutual respect is promoted when a leader focuses on similarities they share with another individual. “Feelings of disrespect often come when we dwell on how others are different than ourselves” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 80).

Back to the earlier example with 4-H agent Mary and the group of frustrated parents, one way Mary can foster mutual respect is by reminding parents of their shared appreciation for the benefits of 4-H. However, if the parents perceive Mary as disrespectful to them during the conversation, they are likely to abandon the shared purpose of creating more competitive 4-H teams and begin to defend against a perceived threat to their dignity.

If Mary’s conversation with the frustrated parents becomes an unsafe dialogue, Mary should (1) examine her motives and determine what she really wants from this conversation; (2) consider if her words or physical/emotional cues are aligning with her motives and desired conversation outcomes; (3) determine if the conversation became unsafe due to a breakdown in mutual purpose or mutual respect—was something said or insinuated that could lead the parents to feel the conversation’s purpose was no longer mutual or to feel as if they had been disrespected?—and (4) choose a solution.

Overcoming Threats and Restoring Safety

Once there is a breakdown of mutual purpose or mutual respect, leaders must work toward a solution. A leader should not ignore the breakdown of mutual purpose or mutual respect. Ignoring a conversation breakdown of purpose or respect makes it very difficult for any meaningful dialogue to move forward. These breakdowns contribute to negative feelings about the conversation, and if not dealt with directly and honestly, they can contaminate the entire communication (Stone et al., 1999). Patterson et al. (2012) suggest three solutions to overcoming breakdowns of purpose and respect: apologize, contrast, or create a new mutual purpose.

Apologizing is asking for forgiveness when your actions have purposefully or inadvertently caused pain or difficulty to others. An example of when an apology makes sense is if

a leader has misunderstood the intent of a message and has reacted based on a misunderstanding. “It is not unusual, especially when tempers flare, for one person to hear a message very differently from what the other expressed” (Lasley, 2005, p. 15). An apology must be sincere and should result in a change in motive (Patterson et al., 2012). Apologies often require giving up “saving face” and “being right” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 84).

Contrasting is best utilized when a misunderstanding has occurred, but it is not appropriate to apologize. If the other person misunderstands the leader’s purpose or intent, it is not appropriate to apologize for something that was not meant. In difficult conversations, it is possible for others to perceive a leader’s words as “bigger or worse” than intended (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 87). Contrasting statements are a tool that provide clarity to the conversation and allow the conversation to stay on topic.

Effective contrasting consists of a two-part statement. The first part is clarifying what you are not saying. The second part is confirming what you are saying. This statement “addresses others’ concerns that you don’t respect them or that you have a malicious purpose...[and] confirms your respect or clarifies your real purpose” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 85).

One example of when a contrasting statement could be used is when providing constructive feedback during a performance review. The leader tells the subordinate to be mindful of email etiquette. Often the subordinate is emailing the team at all hours of the night and expecting an immediate reply. The subordinate replies with “I’m so sorry, I’m not doing anything right. I’ll try to do better.” In this example, the employee has perceived the leader’s words as worse than intended. At this point, the leader could use a contrasting statement to provide context and proportion (Patterson et al., 2012). A contrasting reply sounds like two statements. The first is the clarifying statement: “No, I did not say you are doing everything wrong. In fact, overall, I am pleased with your performance.” The second statement is the confirmation statement: “However, for you to excel as a team player in our office, you do need to alter your email habits to avoid consistently emailing during nonworking hours.”

A third solution for overcoming breakdowns of mutual purpose and mutual respect is to create a new mutual purpose. This is the correct strategy when two opposing purposes exist. In difficult conversations where purposes are in opposition, leaders should consider “a third choice is out there” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 91). One way to determine if a third choice exists is to investigate “why” someone

wants what they want. Through recognizing the “why” behind the purpose, leaders may find commonality and new options may emerge (Patterson et al., 2012). Recognizing new options rebuilds safety and allows for space to brainstorm new strategies to seek a mutual purpose. “The goal is finding commonality and acceptable compromises that allow for all participants to feel like their needs are met” (Overton & Lowry, 2013, p. 263).

When determining which solution to use to restore the safe environment, leaders should revisit their authentic motive and their intended goal for the conversation. Refocusing on the intended outcome provides the necessary guidance to both create and maintain a safe conversation space.

Summary

Creating a safe physical and emotional space is essential to the success of a difficult conversation. Through intentionally considering both the physical logistics and monitoring the conversational conditions, leaders are more equipped to navigate perceived breakdowns of mutual purpose or mutual respect. The next publications in this series focus on identifying a leader’s communication style under stress and exploring the topics of conversation tactics and listening well.

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