

The President's Message

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Difficult Conversations

I had an occasion recently to have a difficult conversation with a friend whose husband is dying and she is firmly entrenched in denial. Due to the denial she was wearing herself out taking care of him when calling in hospice would be very beneficial to both of them. Being a healthcare professional that has been a caregiver to someone with a terminal disease I know what this is like and wanted to help her. It was a necessary conversation but a difficult one for both of us as denial is sometimes a nicer place than reality. But.....we had the conversation and it went better than expected on my end. She now has hospice to help and she is facing the hard truths associated with this situation and making necessary plans. This started me thinking about some of the difficult conversations I have had in the past and how learning to handle this type of conversation is not as hard as it sounds.

Difficult or crucial conversations are defined as a discussion between two or more people where the stakes are high, options vary, and emotions run strong. Now, we have all had and/or avoided these conversations. Don't feel bad, it is human nature to avoid this type of discussion that we immediately assume will hurt us or make things worse. We're taught "don't rock the boat" or "don't open that can of worms." Instead of confronting issues, we retreat.

I suspect everybody on the planet has a difficult conversation "To Do" list – the list of difficult conversations we really should have, but keep putting off. We put these difficult conversations off because we dread the reaction, we don't want to start a fight, or don't want to handle it badly or sound petty. Interestingly, the way we bring things up (or respond to their attacks) actually makes it more likely that we'll do damage.

We send emails or leave phone messages to avoid these conversations or change the subject quickly or 'remember' a meeting we are late for. But we know we need to learn how to have these conversations and handle them well. When handled calmly and with respect for the other person, even the most difficult conversation can lead to an improved state of affairs for all involved. Before you begin, give yourself a little room. The conversation may or may not go as you would like. If your heart is in the right place, people know. They may not like what you have to say, but they will appreciate that you said it to them. There are a few things that I have learned along the way that may help you avoid some typical conversational traps and have a real conversation when you know you need to do so, but really, really hate the thought of it.

Don't ease into the conversation. Instead, be direct. When we are anxious about a confrontation we often approach the topic sideways, and this is bound to leave the other person feeling ambushed. Making indirect suggestions or using leading questions will only make it worse. You're communicating: "what I want to say to you is SO BAD... I

can't even say it directly.” Stating the issue more directly actually makes it less of a big deal: “Hey, do you think you could keep it down? I've just got to focus to get this out the door.....” or “By the way, if I remember right, you still owe me some money. Any idea when you might be able to pay it back?”

Stop their “hit & run” attack with humor. Sometimes you're skipping along happily through your life, and someone else lobs a sarcastic remark in passing and “bam!” you are left feeling ambushed and abandoned. You can fume. You can cry. Or you can speak up. I'd speak up, and with a bit of humor. Humor can go a long way to diffuse a bad situation.

Realize the issue you are discussing isn't always the real issue. Whatever the argument is about – where you'll spend the holidays, who forgot to call the electrician, what you're having for dinner – chances are this isn't the real issue driving the dispute. If the conversation becomes difficult, what you are really fighting about is how you're each feeling treated by the other.

The real issues need to be managed but not necessarily always resolved. Marriage researcher John Gottman of the University of Washington says that 64 percent of the fights married couples have are the same fights they are having five years later. This is either really depressing, or really liberating. In other words, most of the things we fight about aren't actually resolvable. It's a process of managing differences in preferences, habits and personalities – differences that aren't going to go away, so we might as well quit getting worked up about “how they are” and instead focus on working out ways to get around those issues.

Talk backwards as well as forwards. Since so much of what we fight about is really surface reflections of deeper differences, put your energy into understanding those differences. What are your worst fears? This is helpful even when the topic seems more mundane.

Below are some guidelines that will help you to confront challenging conversations and situations, and if you use them your results will improve and your ability to influence others will grow along with their respect for you. Keep your goals for the conversation realistic. You cannot solve everything at once. And never, never, never make the other person think that you think you know it all or have all the answers. They will get defensive and stop listening.

1. Be prepared for bad reactions. Finger pointing, denial, arguments, tears are all possible outcomes of difficult conversations. You cannot control the other person's reaction but you can be ready for it. Be safe and know when to stop the conversation.
2. Choose the right time and place to have the conversation. Take the “emotional climate” into consideration and don't hold the conversation while the other person is upset or angry. Make sure you are not overheard and do not do this over the phone if at all possible.

3. Use a respectful tone. The tone is as important as what you say. Speak calmly with kindness and respect and this will increase the likelihood that your message will be received in the manner it is presented. Being condescending will cause the other person to tune you out.
4. Watch for body language clues. Much about a person's attitude is conveyed through body language. How are they sitting in their chair? Is their posture open or closed? Are their arms crossed over their chest? Are they making eye contact? These clues can be a great indicator of whether or not the conversation is going well. Realize that many aspects of etiquette have military underpinnings. For example, shaking hands shows the other person that you're not holding a weapon. If you're both sitting down during the conversation, there's less chance that tension will arise.
5. Go ahead and acknowledge that you might not both be on the same page. The person you are talking to might have a different interpretation of the facts and judgment about what is right and wrong. What seems so logical to you might not be so logical to others.
6. Make sure you really want a win-win situation before you begin. If you begin the conversation trying to win the other person completely over to your point of view you might be disappointed. It is best to aim for a compromise or resolution that satisfies your goal and the needs of the other person.
7. Be empathetic. Try to understand the other person's point of view as much as possible. Understanding their point of view helps you to make better decisions on how to address the situation. When you show genuine interest in their point of view then you are more effective with your argument.
8. Maintain eye contact. Nothing says evasiveness like shifting your focus behind, above, or around the person you are talking to. Remember, where attention goes, energy flows.
9. Stay in control of the conversation. If you show anger then the other person will respond in kind.
10. Write it out ahead of time. If possible, put the details of the conversation in writing as doing so gives you an opportunity to consider all views of the situation.
11. Do not interrupt! When the other person is speaking, never interrupt. Show the same courtesy you would like to receive in the same situation. If you cannot wait to speak then that means you are not listening.
12. Don't team up on anyone. Never say "everyone feels the same way." This is an exaggeration and if it is not then it just makes the other person stop listening to you. And....if "everyone" really does feel that way then "everyone" "needs to be in on the conversation.