

Turn Your Difficult Business Conversations into Productive

Problem-Solving

By Manya Arond-Thomas

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How many times do you walk away from a conversation wondering whether you've gotten your point across, been understood, 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?

Robust, high-quality conversation is the linchpin to productive work relationships in high-performing teams, organizations and businesses. 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. 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.

Generally what occurs is a cycle of non-agreement 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.

How do you actually change the course of a difficult conversation, whereby both parties engage in new learning that leads to productive action? While many factors come into play, one foundational practice can profoundly shift the course of a difficult conversation:

The Power of 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.

To transform a difficult conversation into productive problem solving, uncovering assumptions provides 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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