

Master Your Difficult Conversations

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Understanding Assumptions

Explore how assumptions shape communication.

Write instructions that you can give to someone to follow.

- Tie a shoelace
- Make Toast
- Send a photo text message

1. Tie a Shoelace

2. Make Toast

3. Send a Photo Text Message

Reflection:

- What Assumptions did you make?

- Did you assume someone likes the same kind of toast you like?

- Are they standing in your kitchen? Assumptions can derail our communication.

- What conversation do you need to have?

- What is your viewpoint/ what might the other's viewpoint be?

- What emotions are likely?

- Why does this situation matter? Is it worth having the conversation? If so then you need to move forward and have the conversation.



Using “I” Statements

Learn to express feelings and needs clearly.

Practice writing “I” Statements

“You” Message	“I” Message
Your office/vehicle is really messy.	
You smell bad.	
You didn’t do that right even after I’ve told you 3 times	
You didn’t do your part.	
You tracked in dirt (or left a mess)	
That report you wrote was terrible.	

Use this structure to create a clear, non-blaming “I” statement:

“I (verb) _____ the behavior (describe what’s happening), and because _____ (explain the impact), as a result _____ (name the effect on the team, organization, reputation, or trust).”

Example Rewrite:

“You never listen to me!” → “I notice that you interrupt during team meetings, and because it prevents others from sharing their ideas, as a result it’s affecting the team’s collaboration and trust.”

Now try your own:

Your rewrite:

“I (verb) _____ the behavior (description) _____, and because _____, as result _____.”



Cheat Sheet

Language That Builds Trust

Use Language That Is:

- ✓ Descriptive
- ✓ Focused
- ✓ Specific
- ✓ Brief
- ✓ Simple

Avoid Language That Is:

- ✗ Judgmental
- ✗ Global/generalizing
- ✗ Stereotyped
- ✗ Lengthy
- ✗ Complicated

Common Traps → Better Alternatives

Judgmental Phrase	Trust-Building Reframe
"You're always late."	"I've noticed you've arrived after 9:00 several times this week."
"You don't care."	"I feel concerned because I haven't seen follow-through on this."
"That was wrong."	"Here's the standard we're aiming for, and this fell short."

Quick Tip:

Start with an "I" statement and describe the behavior, not the person.



Spotting Resistance

Recognize resistance and practice addressing it.

Instructions: Match the resistance behavior with its type.

Circle the resistance type you see and write how you'd respond using the 3-Step Model.

Behavior 1:

"I don't see why we need to change anything. My team is doing fine."

- Flooding
- Silence
- One-word answers
- Attacks

Response:

Identify:

State:

Silence:

Behavior 2:

(Shrugs and doesn't respond after being asked a direct question.)

- Attacks
- One-word answers
- Silence
- Flooding

Response:

Identify:

State:

Silence:

PRACTICE EXERCISE

In groups of 3

Teams of 3 will take turns working through the scenario. Identify what type of resistance is being displayed. Determine an appropriate response, then role play your conversation. Discuss how the speaker handled the resistance. Give praise and constructive tips for any suggested improvements.

Roles:

Supervisor: Use the scenario to practice dealing with resistance

Employee: Use the scenario and the named resistance to play the part of a resistor.

Observer: Observe the role play. Provide feedback at the end. Did the supervisor identify and name the resistance? How did they try to diffuse it and get the conversation back on track? Did they use silence to give the employee time to respond?

Supervisor

There are some processes that need to be changed in order to help your unit to achieve better quality and service. Last week the management team identified 3 new procedures that would be added to the end of shift routine. You have identified that one employee has not completed the new routine and checklist any of his/her last 5 shifts

You have called the employee into your office to discuss the situation

Employee

Your supervisor has called you into the office to discuss the new end of shift procedure. You have enough to do already in your job and you don't intend to add anything else. You are doing fine and your part of the department hasn't had any issues with the quality or the process. There aren't any issues with your work so you should not have to do anything extra because of your other co-workers' issues

Tone it down

It's Ann. She is efficient, organized, and knowledgeable and certainly passionate! You have no complaints at all about the quality of her work and her enthusiasm for getting things done. It is her interactions with others that concern you.

When Ann needs something or is focused on completing a task, she can be loud and demanding. Her tone and direct approach can alienate others, causing them to delay meeting her demands; she then gets more demanding and sometimes even rude.

If things don't change you are fearful Ann's interactions with others will alienate not just her, but your operation.

Pulling your weight

A couple of your employees were finally working well together on the farm. It took a while to iron out "who was responsible for what". You thought things were fixed and the guys were each handling their own responsibilities.

Lately, it seems that James isn't putting in the same effort and things are going undone. Ben hasn't said anything, but a few times you've noticed that he is picking up the slack, and doing things that James agreed to. Ben certainly seems more tense when he is around James and is shorter tempered than normal.

You don't want to upset the balance they seemed to find, but you know there's something brewing. You need to talk to both of them.

Dad Won't Let go

Kent has been in charge of this operation for so many years, he is having a hard time letting others in. He has been trying to let you "own" a few things, and he insists he is delegating those things to you, but in reality he isn't letting go.

Just last week he asked you handle the labor contracts for this year. You've been working through the process, but every time you see him, he asks for an update. Just this morning, you gave him an update on an issue, and not 30 minutes later, he asked if you have resolved it yet. His need to know every detail, every step of the way is exhausting and frustrating.

Not only do you feel his lack of trust in you, you could work so much more efficiently if it weren't for his constant follow up.

CONFLICT STYLES

WHEREVER TWO OR MORE PEOPLE COME TOGETHER,
THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF CONFLICT.

<https://survey.justiceleadership.com/conflictstyle>



For each conflict style:

- When is it most appropriate to use this style?
- When is it least appropriate to use this style?

YOUR STYLE PERSONAL REFLECTION

My Style Is:

Using your Style

How do you find that you use your style most often?

Are there difficulties?

Are there times when this style has caused you problems?.

To Develop:

Which style might be one to develop or to try?

Comfort?

Which style is most uncomfortable for you?

Situation 1

John and Ann need to talk to Kent and Vicky about making some changes at Brown Family Farm. They are gathering data to make a business case for their ideas, but know that Kent hasn't been particularly open to change in the past. Robert, the one John calls on to help mediate difficult conversations hasn't been able to be involved this fall and has made it clear that John needs to take the lead on this discussion and not to count on him to be there. He is supportive of John's ideas and has offered his finance knowledge, but his own work and family demands have removed him from many of the discussions recently.

Situation 2

John knows that Ann can be passionate in her ideas and spouts off without thinking, in her enthusiastic way. This usually causes Kent to react with "you don't have enough experience to know what you are talking about" look which pushes Anne's buttons and causes Vicky to retreat in her shell. She usually ends up leaving the room when the conversations get a little "spirited".

Situation 3

The last thing John wants to happen is for his dad to get frustrated, Ann to throw her hands up in frustration and have his mom to leave the room yet again. Yet John has a hard time holding his emotions in check when the family starts to disagree. In the past he has deferred to his dad's demands and things settle back down emotionally, although the health of the farm isn't addressed. He doesn't want to be disrespectful to his parents, yet he knows that things can't continue without some change. He just doesn't know how to even think about approaching this conversation.

Brown Family Difficult Conversation

What conversations do the Browns need to have:

What is making it “difficult”?

What communication Styles might be present. What do they need to keep in mind about these styles?

Write “I” statements regarding what you think, feel, believe and want from this person and/or situation:

What forms of resistance do you anticipate with the Browns? What should they keep in mind to handle it?

What “heart” items do they each need to keep in mind?

What “stories” (Victim, Villain or Helpless) do they need to be aware of and wrestle under control?



Start with a Heart

To begin every difficult conversation with the right intention and focus on mutual purpose.

Avoid the Fool's Choice: Tell the truth and preserve the relationship

Is there a situation that tempts you to make the fool's choice?

What do you want?

For
yourself: _____

For the other person:

For the
relationship: _____

For the
organization: _____



Master Your Story

Instructions:

Reflect on each question and write your honest responses about the story you're telling yourself.

What story(ies) might I be telling?

1. What's the story I notice myself telling about this situation?

2. Which parts are facts, which are assumptions?

3. What emotions come up as I look at this story from another perspective?
(Could this be a signal to pause, reflect, or choose differently?)

4. How can I reframe this story to focus on what I can control and what's true?
(What strengths can I lean on right now?)

5. What do I know to be true: how can I turn this story into a true statement.

YOUR STORY RESET TOOLKIT



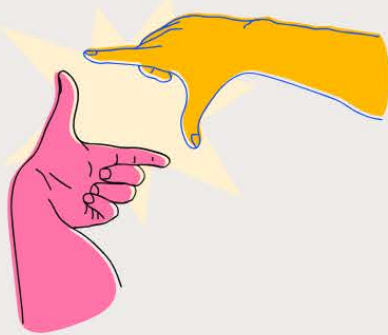
Spot

Notice the story you're telling yourself. Is it helping you grow or holding you back?



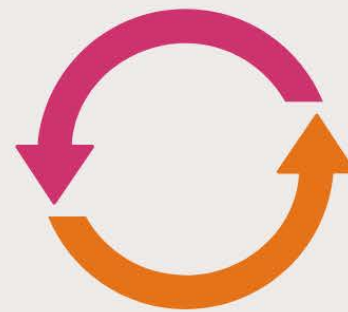
Pause

Take a breath before reacting. Space creates choice.



Reframe

Shift perspective. Turn limiting thoughts into empowering ones.



Practice

Repeat daily. Small resets create lasting change.



Finding Common Ground

Clarify Needs

What do you want what do you need, What do they want/ what do they need (you will ask them to clarify during your conversation)

- I want..._____
- I need..._____
- They want... _____
- They need..._____
- What is your common ground?

- What are you willing to give up in order to achieve some compromise



My Conversation Blueprint

Prepare for a high-stakes or emotionally charged conversation with clarity.

Step 1: What is the difficult conversation? Describe the situation briefly.

Step 2: What is making this difficult? Is it high emotion, differing views, past conflict, unclear expectations, etc.?

Step 3: Best & Worst Outcomes

Best possible outcome:

Worst possible outcome:

Step 4: What are you willing to compromise on?

Step 5: What do you want?

- For yourself: _____
- For the other person: _____
- For the relationship: _____
- For the organization: _____

Step 6: "I" Statements

What do you think, feel, believe, or want to express in this conversation?

- I think..._____
- I feel... _____
- I want..._____
- I believe..._____

Step 7: What story might you be telling yourself?

- ☐ Victim — "It's all their fault."
- ☐ Villain — "They're the problem."
- ☐ Helpless — "There's nothing I can do."

How can you reframe the story?

Step 8: Anticipated Resistance

What pushback might you get?

How will you respond using the 3-Step Resistance Method (Identify > State > Silence)?

Choose a time and place that supports clarity and privacy.

Step 9: When & Where Will You Have the Conversation?
