

The Art of Having Challenging Conversations

Paul Atkins & Robert Styles

Most of us have at least one conversation that we know we ought to be having but we are putting it off because it is likely to be challenging for us. Even though only a small proportion of our total relationships involve challenging conversations, they determine our effectiveness and consume a great deal of our energy in planning, worrying, regretting, griping, talking with others and so on. To the extent that we have effective ways of dealing with difficult conversation we have more mental and emotional energy to do our work and live our lives with vitality and engagement. Being able to speak and listen in ways that build engagement, commitment and learning with *anybody* gives us tremendous power to shape our own lives.

One way to understand the skills required for success in challenging conversations is outlined by Jentz (2007) in the attached reading. These notes have been prepared to give you a quick overview and reminder of the content of that chapter but the chapter itself is worth reading. The three skill sets are:

1. *Structuring the conversation* (facilitating the purpose, process and timing of the conversation)
2. *Giving good information* (giving information assertively and openly)
3. *Listening reflectively* (listening deeply for meaning and testing one's understanding of the other's perspective)

We will be discussing how to more effectively structure, speak and listen in our time together but to help you get started with preparing for your own challenging conversations we have prepared the following summary of some of the skills we will be discussing.

Structuring for an Open Agenda

At the beginning and throughout the conversation, you can be much more effective if you are able to openly discuss the *purpose, process and timing* of the conversation. Even for really challenging conversations, this is your best opportunity to get engagement from the other party by giving them the opportunity to have input into why and how the meeting is conducted.

1. **Purpose** is the outcome one hopes for from the conversation (e.g. a) for me to hear your point of view, or b) for you to hear my point of view, or c) to come to a shared perspective, or d) to decide on what to do next).
2. **Process** is the way the conversation occurs (e.g. "how about I speak first about what's on my mind, then I will listen while you tell me your perspective, then we will see if we can develop a way forward.")

NB: “to have a discussion” is not a purpose, it is a process. To get to purpose ask “why am I really having a discussion?”

The beginning of a challenging conversation should almost always involve a structuring statement. However structuring can occur at any time *during* a conversation to bring it back on track or defuse strong emotions.

Preparation for Effective Structuring

- What is my real purpose?
- What is my procedure?
- What is my time period?
- Can I get this information out early in the interaction and confirm it?
- Can I give this information without using judgmental language or tone?

Giving Good Information

Challenging conversations almost always involve speaking assertively about your own experience of the situation. The most critical thing to remember in order to do this effectively is to keep separate the ‘facts’ you are perceiving and the sense that you are making of those facts. For example, “I am tired of your laziness” mixes up the facts and your interpretation, whereas “when you show up to work late, I get annoyed because it interferes with me getting my work done” keeps the facts and the interpretation separate. Keeping these aspects separate is sometimes hard to do because we *assume* others see the world the same way we do. However, the #1 reason for conflict is because people *do not* see the world the same way. Keeping facts and interpretations separate helps lower defensiveness and allows new learning.

For example, saying: “Because you have been avoiding me I have felt less like working here” assumes that the other person has been avoiding you. This statement is likely to evoke defensiveness, particularly if the person has other reasons why they have not spent time with you.

Some people argue one should not report feelings in the workplace. Of course, you have to decide what is most useful and appropriate for your circumstances and there are no rules about this. But it is important to remember that feelings carry information, and if you do not report your feelings to others then they will not report them to you and you will miss that information. Imagine that a subordinate of yours is feeling dissatisfied with their work. Would you prefer them to share their feelings with you openly or keep them hidden? Why?

So giving good information is about *reporting your OWN observations and experience/interpretation (e.g. feelings, consequences, interpretations, wants/needs and goals) separately*. It is about reporting your OWN meaning making as provisional and open to alternative perspectives.

Preparation to Give Good Information

- What are the facts, related both to the context and my concern?
- What sense do I make of these facts in terms of feelings and consequences to others and myself?
- Do I need to consult with others about my facts and related sense before the interaction?
- Can I give this information assertively (not judgmentally) while seeking to test it, learn, and change if I get better information?

Listening Reflectively

The *most* important thing you can do to have more successful challenging conversations is to listen in a different way. Most of us think listening is a passive activity, but as you will see from our work together, listening reflectively is *hard* work. As with structuring and giving good information, effectiveness comes more from your *attitudes and willingness to take the perspective of another* than from specifically what you say.

Listening reflectively involves two parts. The first part is to closely track what the other person is saying to *see if you can determine the sense that they are making of the situation*. To build trust and understanding, it is particularly useful to deliberately listen (and watch) for three things: a) intentions, b) feelings and c) requests for action. The second part is to *check and play back your understanding in your own words* to the other person to make sure that you have correctly understood their perspective. Listening to gain an understanding naturally involves *asking questions that naturally arise from your curiosity* about what they're saying – what they meant by a phrase, what they seem to be puzzling about, what they are feeling about the situation. Asking questions will increase awareness and clarify perspectives by bringing into the conversation what is “between the lines.” This not only allows you to proceed on the right information, it builds trust and caring in the relationship because everybody wants to know that they have been heard. ***Listening reflectively is a life changing skill and is the most important thing you can do to build influence and relationships.***

So listening reflectively involves listening for the sense the other person is making: THEIR observations and experience, **then reporting back to check understanding.**

Preparation to Listening Reflectively

- The most important preparation for listening well is to examine our attitude or orientation towards the other. How can I develop and sustain an attitude of real curiosity and interest in the other's point of view?
- What might be the interests and intentions of the other person here?
- How will I know if I stop reflectively listening?
- How can I listen to understand, rather than dismiss the other person's views reactively with arguments or reassurance?

Technical Orientation	Adaptive Orientation
What's the problem? What's wrong? What am I going to do about it? What needs fixing?	What is this person actually trying to say to me? What is their intention? What tacit hope, or fear is the person trying to communicate? What do I hear in the tone, and what does it seem connected to? What reasoning is the person offering to explain his/her behaviour?

This has been a brief introduction to some of the core skills involved in having challenging conversations and a guide to some of the things you can do to prepare for them. While these skills may seem obvious, in practice they are profound, far-reaching, and very hard to do authentically. There is always more to learn about doing this well and developing your own unique style, so we will spend time together practicing them.

One of the best resources to support learning about how to have challenging conversations is the book "Talk sense: Communicating to lead and learn" by Barry Jentz. Two sections of that book have been excerpted to give you more information about the key skills we have discussed above. The first section (Jentz (2007) Are you calling me a liar part 1.pdf) is a short case study of a difficult conversation that does not go well. The second (Jentz (2007) Chapter 3 Getting Prepared) starts with a more effective version of this same case and then proceeds to describe the core skills in detail. It is helpful if you read the ineffective version first to get the context. Although this is about a context (management of an underperforming employee) that may not be part of your world, it is useful to read it with a view to better understanding the power of structuring, giving good information and listening well.

We look forward to working with you to make these ideas real. Our experience of working with a *lot* of people is that finding an effective way forward on challenging conversations is usually enormously satisfying and energising.

Reference

Jentz, B. (2007). *Talk sense: Communicating to lead and learn*. Acton, MA: Research for better teaching, Inc.