Communication Skills for Challenging Conversations

Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not easy. *Aristotle*

Many of our most challenging conversations have some level of conflict as an integral component. We tend to think of these conversations as messy, hostile, and exhausting encounters. Often at the core is a clash of perceptions and expectations that have not been clearly or mutually defined. This state often leads to feelings of hurt and anger.

The challenge in these situations is to find a way to speak about the issues as well as the feelings that arise. This takes some skill and awareness of communication tools, skills, and styles. It is about finding what is appropriate in the circumstances and how to achieve a win-win solution for all involved. The most important component in arriving at such an outcome is good communication skills. Coupled with good conflict resolution skills, there is an excellent chance of a mutually beneficial resolution.

**Self-Awareness**

One of the best tools with which to supply yourself—for life and not just for difficult conversations—is self-awareness. It is key because it allows us some level of self-control. Learn to be aware of your emotional state and the wide variety of human feelings that you experience.

Why is this important? Well, if your day starts badly, you may wind up feeling grouchy all day without knowing why. Once you become aware of this state, you have a better chance of handling it and choosing how to express or discharge it. Know your mood and you have a better chance to avoid acting out on it inappropriately.

Moods are often disguised, layered, or hidden. You may be aware of feeling sad after the death of a friend, but you might not be aware that you could also be angry at the friend for dying. It might be difficult for you to recognize this anger as it seems inappropriate.

Anger frequently arises out of a sense of being trespassed against—the belief that one is being robbed of something that is rightfully yours.

**Positive Assertiveness**

Assertive individuals handle challenge and conflict very well, often attempting a win-win situation. While this is the most difficult result to achieve, with practice, you can become an assertive communicator. Being assertive means:

- Standing up for your rights and beliefs.
- Conveying sensitivity to others.
- Showing that you understand others’ feelings. ("I know you’re in a hurry, but...")
- Confronting conflicting behavior. ("I said you could use my lawn mower in my absence if you asked first. Now I’ve found you did so without asking me. What can we do about this?")

Contrary to popular belief, the most important skill in communication is not talking but *listening.* If we don’t listen carefully and empathically, we might miss a key piece of information and compose our response without having the full picture.

**Three Components of Good Listening**

- **Active Listening:** be attentive, use nonverbal communication to let the speaker know you are paying close attention and are not distracted. Nod, smile, and use small comments such as, "I see," or "uh-huh" to indicate comprehension and interest. You know how a dog’s ears perk up
and he focuses on you? That's the feeling you want to emulate.

- **Empathic Listening**: try to get a sense what the person is feeling as he or she speaks to you. Sometimes the unspoken communication is more revealing than the overt statements. If you can recognize these messages it can give you a wealth of information about the speaker and help you formulate your response to what is not being said as well as what is being said.

- **Reflective Listening**: show that you've heard the speaker by summarizing what you've heard. Ask for confirmation that you've heard the message correctly and ask for clarification if you are uncertain.

Active listening involves hearing and validating what a person is communicating. It also allows you to state your opinion without your listener feeling attacked.

Allow the other person to talk. Give the other person room enough to respond to what you have said. Ask, "What do you think?" if you feel they need a prompt. Pausing and questioning signals to the other person that you value hearing his/her point of view.

Reflective listening involves demonstrating to the speaker that you have heard her or his message, and not merely the words. Focus on hearing what the other person is saying. It is perfectly OK to say, "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying. Could you say it a different way?" Validating and reflecting demonstrate that you have understood a point, and involves the following:

- **Paraphrasing**, or repeating a summary of what you think the person said.

- **Confirming**, or asking for confirmation that what you think the person meant is accurate.

The main benefit of good listening is that we can respond better if we have perceived the speaker's viewpoint or position accurately. It also cuts down on misunderstanding or distortion. We can also demonstrate respect for the other person by taking time to understand her/his point. This helps people to feel more confident in expressing their thoughts.

**Empathic listening** is related to the emotional content or undercurrent of the words being spoken.

Pay attention to **HOW** someone speaks. This requires that you give the other person the full attention of all of your senses. Listen to tone of voice, watch expressions and gestures, feel what the speaker might be feeling, and be aware of qualifiers, such as, "I guess I can do all that in the incredibly short amount of time you've given me."

For example: you visit a relative and are told, "It's so nice to see you. This is such a treat." Does the speaker mean:

- It's really great to see you.

- You don't visit much.

- I want you to feel guilty for all the times that you haven't stopped by.

Ask yourself, "Does the way he or she says something match what he or she has said?"

**Components of Good Speaking**

"I" statements: Use "I" statements regarding the actions and/or behaviors you find troubling and convey how the action impacted on you. This keeps the focus on you and your experience and avoids placing blame on the other person.

For example, rather than saying, "You were rude to me yesterday," say, "I felt disrespected by the way you spoke to me yesterday."

The first approach accuses the other person of being rude. This will most likely evoke a defensive response. The second approach informs the other person how you felt about the way the other person spoke to you without defining or labeling the speech. This will most likely open up a dialogue.

Skillful negotiation involves:

- Stating an opinion ("I believe..."), rather than a fact ("I know...")
- Avoiding insulting the other person ("If you had listened to what I said in the first place..."")
- Not responding to anger in an angry way. Instead, try to neutralize the situation ("You seem to be angry about this. Would you like to...")
• Putting aside your views and really listening

The goal is persuasion, not winning. Victory implies a battle fought and won; persuasion implies two parties coming to a shared agreement.

Through good listening, effective speaking, and skillful negotiation, we can become more successful communicators, even during life's more challenging interpersonal situations.