DISCERNING LEADERSHIP

MINISTRY FOR SERVICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Skills for Transforming Difficult Conversations

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How do you tell someone they are not performing well? How do you communicate to someone if they hurt your feelings? How do you let someone know you won't be supporting their initiative? At the heart of each of these questions is the concern with telling someone something they do not want to hear, or telling someone something that could hurt their feelings or their relationship with you. These messages are all examples of difficult conversations. Most communication interactions contain both content and relationship elements, and the relationship dimension is what makes these messages difficult because it involves feelings as well as facts.

Many books and frameworks exist to help us communicate difficult messages, but most of these frameworks are based on creating clarity in the situation. They focus on the content. Since I can't read your mind and you can't read my mind, a critical element in a challenging or difficult conversation is making sure the other person understands your message. Clarity can be especially challenging during a difficult conversation because of something that Chris Argyris (1982) calls the Ladder of Inference. The Ladder of Inference describes the disconnect between the data you observe and the conclusion you make about that observation.

For example, let's say I am concerned that a colleague named Joe is not responsive as a communicator because he takes 48 hours to respond to emails. I can say "Joe, you are not responsive." But Joe might believe he *is* responsive because he does not think a 48 hour window is unreasonable. The Ladder of Inference says that I need to be clear about the data I am seeing and the assumptions I am making that form my conclusions. So I might say, "Joe, when you wait 48 hours to respond to my email request, it makes me think you are unresponsive because I expect emails to be answered within 24 hours." Here, I am telling Joe the data I observed (he waits 48 hours to respond to emails) and my expectation about responses (I expect emails to be answered within 24 hours).

Many communication frameworks focus on helping people understand how to create a message that addresses the disconnect between observations and conclusions. One framework, created by William Torbert (2003, 2004) is called The Four Parts of Speech. Within his approach, he suggests that there are four key elements to consider when communicating in a conversation for the interaction to be genuinely mutual, that is, to be more than a series of one-way statements. These include framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring. I will define each briefly and then share an example.

- Framing sets up the conversation and provides context.

- Advocating provides a specific viewpoint or direction.
- Illustrating provides an example of the rationale behind what I am advocating based on the data being observed.
- Inquiring invites the other person in the conversation to respond with facts that may challenge our assumptions, their point of view, and their questions.

So using our example with Joe, I could say: "Joe, I would like to talk to you about your email communication (FRAMING). I am concerned that you are not very responsive (ADVOCATING). Yesterday, I waited 48 hours for your response and I expect emails to be answered within 24 hours (ILLUSTRATING). Can we talk about this? (INQUIRY).

This message communicates the content of my perspective clearly to Joe. It addresses the data I am looking at, why I am forming the conclusions I have made, and I am asking for his response. It also invites him to challenge my assumptions, which can help us both come close to mutual understanding about our shared reality.

But we are missing a critical element - the relationship part of the message. Imagine you are Joe. *You are frustrated by the message. You are working long hours and trying hard to manage the many projects you have been assigned to. No one ever told you that there was a 24-hour turn around expectation on emails. This conversation is just another example of how you are not appreciated for everything you do, and the organization is just being controlling and micro-managing.*

Do you think Joe will respond positively just because you asked him for his input?

In my research on invitational presence, my colleague Sonja Foss and I found that the only way to create an ongoing dialogue is to create an environment of safety, value, and freedom (2018, 2022). Safety means that communicators feel like they can say something and not be punished. Valued means that communicators feel valued in the relationship and that they are valued for the contribution that they make to the team, organization, task, and mission. And freedom means that they can say anything, regardless of whether the person that they are talking with agrees with that comment. Amy Edmondson (2018) who researches psychological safety reinforces the importance of creating an environment conducive to dialogue. To create this environment, the relationship needs to be nurtured so that the person feels valued.

So back to the conversation with Joe. He may be clear about my perspective as it relates to his email communication, but he also might be frustrated or mad by my perspective. I need to find a way to not only communicate my message but also manage my relationship with him so he feels comfortable engaging in a dialogue with me. I might revise my earlier message to say, "Joe, I would like to talk to you about your email communication (FRAMING). I am concerned that you are not very responsive

(ADVOCATING). Yesterday, I waited 48 hours for your response and I expect emails to be answered within 24 hours (ILLUSTRATING). I really appreciate all the work you are doing (VALUE), and maybe I haven't been clear enough about my expectations (I MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS CONFUSION). Can we talk about this? (INQUIRY).

In addition to framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring, we need a fifth part of speech. This fifth part is focused on valuing the communicator and recognizing the interdependence of both communicators on each other. Conversations and conflict can be challenging because we don't see the world the way someone else does about an important issue. But what makes these conversations difficult is that we are interdependent with those individuals and we need their help (resources, time, or attention) in some way. Naming that interdependence and showing the person that they are valued helps to contribute to the relationship part of the message and encourage dialogue. I call this element – VALUE - the fifth part of speech. Without communicating about value in a difficult conversation, we are not honoring people's feelings or creating an invitational presence for the person to respond. And while VALUE is critical to developing and nurturing the relationship, it is also integral to performing the task.

Communication can be hard – especially when emotions are running high, people are stressed, and everyone does not see the world in the same way. But remembering to focus on the humanity in other people and reminding ourselves that we are in a relationship with each other, we can find a path to dialogue. And with dialogue, learning can happen.

References

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