

# *Working Through Conflict*

*Navigating Your Way Back to Comfortable Conversation*

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# Today's presentation:

- Why conflict feels so stressful
- How to handle difficult conversations
- Resources
- Q & A and B.Y.O.C.

# *Why Conflict Feels So Stressful*

“Why are they doing that?”

Understanding how your brain works can help you respond to conflict more effectively.



# UNCERTAINTY = THREAT

Conflict is full  
of uncertainty!



# What is the workplace?

## Financial Endeavor



*Vs.*

## Social Endeavor



# When does the brain react in a survival mode:

When it perceives  
threats:

- Dinosaurs
- Caveman with a club
- Not being invited to lunch



# SOCIAL CONNECTION = SURVIVAL

The brain connects  
“social” with  
“survival”:

being ostracized and  
being hungry activate  
similar negative neural  
responses.





It's also about **communication styles**.

**“Impersonal”**

- Direct
- Linear
- Intellectual engagement
- Detached
- Concrete

**“Personal”**

- Indirect
- Circular
- Relational engagement
- Attached
- Abstract

## *So what does this all mean?*

- It's not about you.
- It's about your brain . . . and theirs.
- It's about your communication style . . . and theirs

# *How to Handle Difficult Conversations*

(with reasonable people)



**Do not use email!**

*“You can have steps, a model, a game plan you think you’ll be working from, but after the first ten minutes, the bull’s going to leave the chute and you just need to hang on.”*

Plan ahead, then prepare to just hang on.

# “What do I say?”

- Plan your opening & your objective.
- Focus on the problem - not the person.
- Start from the middle.
- Ask for their perspective, opinions, ideas.
- Explain relevant history.
- Reveal how you feel.
- Admit your contribution to the problem.
- Point out what you share.

# Can you de-personalize the issue?

- “You’re not pulling your weight on the committee.”
- “I’d like to get your thoughts on how we can try and divvy up equitable workloads for everyone on the committee.”

# Conversation Starters & Stoppers

- “Do you have some time to share your thoughts?”
- “Help me understand...”
- “It sounds like that’s important to you...”
- “What do you think?”
- “I see this from a different perspective.”
- “I need to talk to you.”
- “Can you get to the point?”
- “Don’t you get it?”
- “What’s the big deal?”
- “I don’t care what you think!”
- “You’re crazy!”



# THE BIG EVENT

- Your goal: Conversation, not confrontation.
- MAKE IT SAFE!
- Listen, listen, listen some more.
- Inquire → acknowledge → empathize.
- Be prepared for ebb and flow.
- Share problem solving.
- Decide together what's next.

# BE PREPARED

## Anger/Defensiveness

- Can be productive (“Help me understand why you feel that way.”)
- No need to respond to everything they say.
- It’s okay to draw the line.
- Remind them of alternatives.

## Tears

- Hand them a tissue.
- “Would you like a few minutes of privacy?”
- “I’m sorry ... this is painful to talk about.”
- “Would it be easier if we met later?”
- Invite questions.
- Consider your timing.

# *How to Handle Difficult Conversations*

(with difficult people)

“*What I think about your intentions will affect how I think about you, and ultimately, how our conversation goes. The error we make in the realm of intentions is simple but profound: **we assume we know the intentions of others when we don't.** Worse still, when we are unsure about someone's intentions, we too often decide they are bad.*”

Difficult Conversations,

by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen

**Don't make assumptions!**

*“Never attribute to malice  
that which is adequately  
explained by stupidity.”*

*Robert Hanlon*

# What can you do?

- Recognize (and fight) your own preconceptions
- During the conversation:
  - What bothers you about him/her?
  - Give credit where credit is due
  - Combine candor with grace
  - Ask him/her to share in problem-solving
- If all else fails, let it go.

# Unexpected difficult conversations in a very public place

- Same principles apply.
- Set boundaries.
- Make it a big conversation.
- Identify/reject bad behavior.
- Help people save face.



To avoid conflict: stop the gossip.

Gossip: Comments made about others who aren't present to correct the information presented or defend/explain themselves.





# Best Practices

- Don't avoid dealing with the problem.
- Plan, plan, plan some more -- and then just hang on.
- Do make it a conversation (& not a debate).
- Do make it safe.
- Don't make assumptions.
- Don't pass judgment.
- Don't gossip.

# Resources on Conflict Management

- Mediation training (Iowa Mediation Service)
- Ombuds Office Resource Guide
- Parks Library
- Difficult Conversations by Douglas Stone, et. al.
- Crucial Conversations, by Kerry Patterson , et. al.
- Research articles -- I'm happy to share links & citations



Any Questions?

Anyone Care to share?