

# Having Conversations at Work that Work!

Presented by

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## Having Conversations at Work that Work

In order for any organization to be truly successful over time, its people must build and maintain strong, professional relationships with one another and that promote productive conversations about the work that is to be accomplished. Unfortunately, such relationships do not come easily or naturally. They require commitment, know-how, patience, *and* practice. Even then, successful outcomes cannot be guaranteed. Failure to develop them, though, usually guarantees frustration, conflict, and alienation between those who need to work together.

## Everyone Has a Story

Everyone has a story, that is to say, everyone has their own perspective on a situation. No matter what it might look like, most people who are difficult to work with usually have good intentions. More often than not, people do what they do because it makes sense to them to do it that way. If it doesn't make sense to you, it is probably because you have a different perspective on what happened or a different understanding of what was supposed to happen. If you ascribe negative intentions to the other person and act accordingly, and most of the time we do, the outcome will likely be unproductive and very unpleasant. While it is okay to make assumptions, it is essential to check them out before acting. Seek first to learn and understand the other person's story. When you do, you may find that they aren't as difficult to work with as you may have thought.

Pearson, 2003

# Purpose

Every behavior has a purpose, or an intent, that the behavior is trying to fulfill. People engage in behaviors based on their intent, and do what they do based on what seems to be most important in any given moment. There are four general intents that determine how people will behave in any given situation:

- Get the task done – When people want to **get it done** and fear it is not getting done, their behavior naturally becomes more **controlling** as they try to push ahead.
- Get the task done right – When people want to **get it right** and fear it will be done wrong, their behavior becomes more **perfective**, finding every flaw and potential error.
- Get along with people – When people want to **get along** and fear they will be left out, their behavior becomes more **approval seeking**, sacrificing their personal needs to please others.
- Get appreciation from people – When people want to **get appreciation** and fear they are not, their behavior becomes more **attention getting**, forcing others to notice them.

Taken from *Dealing With People You Can't Stand* by Rick Brinkman and Rick Kirschner

## Getting Emotional Desires Met in the Workplace

There are three fundamental emotional desires that people seek to get met in the workplace:

They want to feel included –  
happens when they are feeling recognized

They want to feel competent –  
happens when they have feeling of control  
over their work

They want to feel accepted –  
happens when they are feeling liked by  
co-workers

Note: When these desires are thwarted – or even when a person thinks that they might be – s/he is likely to feel angry, hurt, disappointed, sad, afraid, frustrated, rejected, resentful, ashamed. If the person does not/cannot/is not allowed to deal with these feelings in an adult manner, acknowledging them and speaking them directly, then s/he is likely to act them out as s/he did as a child.

Adapted from *Your Boss in Not Your Mother* by Brian Des Roches

## Strategies Available to People for Dealing with Uncomfortable Feelings

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Behavior</i>
*Fight	Contend: Try to impose one's preferred solution on the other party.	Insisting Blaming Criticizing Accusing Shouting Using force
*Submit	Yield: Lower aspirations and settle for less than one would have liked.	Giving in Giving up Agreeing, just to end the conflict Surrendering to what the other wants
*Flee	Withdraw: Choose to leave the scene of the conflict	Ceasing to talk Leaving physically, cognitively, or emotionally Changing the topic
*Freeze	Inaction: Choose to wait for the other's next move	Waiting Doing nothing
**Problem-solve	Problem-solve: Pursue alternatives that satisfy both sides	Talking Listening Gathering information Thinking Generating options Resolving

\*React - dealing with the here-and-now from the past

\*\*Respond - dealing with the here-and-now in the here-and-now

Adapted from *From Conflict to Resolution* by Susan M. Heitler, Ph.D.

# Conducting a Conversation

Note: If the matter to be discussed is important, do **not** be casual about it. Plan ahead.

1. What is it I want to say?
2. What are my reasons for wanting to say it? What do I want to happen as a result?
3. How do I think this conversation will go?
4. Meet at a mutually agreeable time and place.
5. State your concerns up front using “I” statements.

Note the following “rules of practice:”

- Use tentative language such as “It seems to me”, “It looks to me”, “It appears to me”, “It feels to me” to indicate your reason(s) for initiating the conversation.
- Stick to behavioral observations (initially treat them as perceptions, not as facts).
- Avoid drawing any final conclusions until the matter has been discussed.
- Check out any assumptions you have and also check for shared meanings – very important and necessary and helpful to have a “spirit of inquiry.”
- State/clarify your expectations.
- Invite feedback.

Identify contributions to the situation, **yours** as well as the other person’s.

Strive to mutually problem solve the situation.

Draw final conclusions as necessary and appropriate and plan for the future.

Do a final check for mutual understanding.

Follow up in writing with a summary of the conversation and especially any decisions made or agreed upon.

Monitor implementation of decisions as appropriate and necessary.

Pearson 2003

## Keys to Good Listening

1. Answer the other person's questions as openly and honestly as possible.
2. Sit calm and stay calm, even when s/he raises uncomfortable questions or uses an angry, hostile, or suspicious tone.
3. Listen patiently, and be reassuring.
4. Be present and attentive - or explain if you aren't able to pay full attention.
5. Listen for feelings as well as content.
6. Reflect back what you are hearing.
7. Use nonverbal listening responses to show your interest and empathy.
8. Ask questions to clarify what you are unsure about or don't understand.
9. Ask open-ended questions to encourage further discussion and explanation.
10. Check/re-check for understanding.
11. Reassure him/her that your goal is to be successful in performing your job duties and to have a productive work relationship.

Adapted from *Work With Me!* by Gini Graham Scott

# Working Together

Teamwork on any formally or informally defined team must be built on a foundation of agreements in the following areas:

- Goals: What are we going to accomplish?
- Roles: What is expected of each member of the team?
- Procedures: How will we coordinate our work with each other?

Whenever people have a problem working together, paying attention to their goals, roles and procedures is almost always the surest and safest avenue to a solution. When everyone on the team shares the same understanding of the team's goals, roles, and procedures, things get done. Once we start focusing on our working relationship and reach greater clarity about goals, roles, and procedures, our personal issues with other people (usually) begin to resolve themselves.

NOTE: Agreements regarding goals, roles, and procedures are subject to the following kinds of problems: (a) ambiguity; (b) incompatibility; (c) overload; (d) disagreement, and (e) resistance.

## **Identifying Goals**

If people are going to work together, they need to share the same understanding about what they are to accomplish. Sometimes all that is needed for things to start moving in the right direction is for one person to step forward and start a conversation about the right thing – in this case, goals.

## **Defining Roles and Expectations**

For people on a team to work effectively, each person must understand what is expected of him or her and what other members of the team will be doing to ensure that the team achieves its goals. Clearly defined roles are important to both individuals and groups within the team. Disagreement about roles is a frequent source of intensely emotional and disruptive conflict.

## **Establishing Interpersonal Procedures**

There are two kinds of procedures that enable teams to function: technical and interpersonal.

For teams to work together, they need to have procedures that tell them how information is to be shared. They need to have agreements about how their resources are deployed so that every member of the team knows what is available and how to tap into the supply when it is needed. These interpersonal procedures represent a complex web of communicating and coordinating functions that enables a team to work as a unit.

Both technical and interpersonal procedures are subject to one source of confusion. Procedures are often defined in two ways – formally and informally. They may not always be the same and oftentimes may be in direct conflict with one another.

### **Professionalizing Conflicts**

When we personalize an issue, we assume that the source of the problem resides in the personality or competence of the other person. We also end up focusing on feelings of hurt, anger, resentment, and fear. If we talk about the issue at all, our feelings and assessments of the other person often end up derailing the conversation.

Listen for at least two things:

1. Where have the relationships broken down due to personalized conflicts that have left team members feeling estranged from each other?
2. How can these conflicts be resolved by reaching agreements about the team's goals, roles, and procedures?

To professionalize a conflict is to remind ourselves that the most likely cause of the problem isn't personal at all. The problem can best be understood as a breakdown in our teamwork.

Remember this crucial point: if the issue is interfering with your ability to work collaboratively with another person or team, the resolution almost always lies in some conversation about your mutual understanding of your team's goals, roles, or procedures.

Taken from *Working Relationships: The Simple Truth About Getting Along With Friends and Foes at Work* by Bob Wall

# Ground Rules for Collaborative Conversations

The following ground rules are especially useful for promoting productive conversations in situations where members of a group are trying to reach high-performance goals, introduce change, or deal with complex issues or problems:

Share all relevant information.

Agree on what important words mean.

Suspend your own opinions and assumptions while listening.

Test all opinions, assumptions, and inferences by asking for examples.

Make statements explaining your reasoning, then invite questions.

Focus on interests, not positions.

Make decisions by consensus.

Feel free to disagree openly with any member of the group.

Jointly design ways to test disagreements and solutions.

Discuss the undiscussable issues.

Avoid taking cheap shots or otherwise distracting the group.

Keep the discussion focused.

Do self-critiques; it's not over until you have learned something.

Taken from *Masterful Coaching: Extraordinary Results by Impacting People and the Way They Think and Work Together* by Robert Hargrove

## Signs of a Healthy Workplace

1. People receive credit for the good work that is done.
2. Individuals take responsibility for their actions/behavior rather than making excuses or blaming others.
3. Individuals are committed to keeping each other informed and trust each other to pass along information appropriately.
4. People collaborate on important issues by seeking out each others opinions and expertise.
5. People talk in terms of “we” instead of creating “us and them” distinctions.
6. Individuals focus on the main issue or mission and don’t get sidetracked by differences in detail.
7. Individuals respect organizational structures and roles and don’t use them as weapons.
8. Individuals value each other’s background and experience rather than discrediting each other’s competence.
9. Concerns, criticisms, and conflicts are openly raised, are focused on methods for accomplishing the work, and are discussed in a respectful manner.
10. People speak positively about their work, the organization, and the future rather than negatively or expressing cynicism.

Taken from *Driving Fear From the Workplace* by K. Ryan and D. Oestreich