

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY DURING CONFLICT

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I'm not arguing. I'm just talking to myself.

Nicholas Eisaguirre Evans, Age 4

Preparing to Listen

When we're arguing during a conflict, most of us are not listening; we are, as my son says, "just talking to ourselves." Clearly, one of the most important conflict resolution skills is listening. In order to listen well, we need to prepare.

Most of us understand the importance of preparing ourselves to speak, but few of us think about preparing to listen. We take for granted that we all know how to listen. We may also assume listening is a passive activity, yet it is actually hard to do and we are rarely prepared to listen well. The Indian philosopher Krishnamurti put it this way:

I do not know if you have ever examined how you listen, it doesn't matter to what, whether to a bird, to the wind in the leaves, to the rushing waters, or how you listen in a dialogue with yourselves, to your conversation in various relationships with your intimate friends, your wife or husband. If we try to listen, we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate, we hardly listen to what is being said. In that state, there is no value at all. One listens and therefore learns only in a state of attention, a state of silence in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems me, it is possible to communicate.

In order to listen, we have to quiet our minds, to silence what my friend, Caryle, calls "the rock band in our heads." Most of us have a habit of taking our constant mind chatter seriously. We never stop to think about whether that makes any sense for us. Emerson once joked that 95% of what goes on inside our minds is none of our business!

This doesn't mean that we have to retreat to a cave or spend our lives meditating; it means that we have to consciously create a space where listening can occur, especially during conflict.

Part of the problem is our lack of understanding about how our minds work and how the mind and our senses interact, especially what we hold in our mind as "truths." Our hearing is ever present. There is no switch to turn it off. We can close our eyes, but not our ears. We live in a culture where we're constantly bombarded by sounds; our sense of balance is tied to our hearing. It's no accident that so many of us feel constantly out of balance because of the bombardment of information from inside our minds as well as external sounds.

My grandmother, Viva, became hard of hearing as she aged. At 90, her doctor gave her a hearing test and pronounced her hearing excellent. Family members continued to complain, however, that she frequently did not hear what they said or that they had to repeat themselves.

The doctor tested her again and pronounced: “She does not have a hearing problem, she has a listening problem.”

And no wonder! Approaching 90, my grandmother had raised seven children on a limited income, buried three of them (including one suicide) as well as her spouse and was the sole caretaker for my 60-something invalid aunt. She remained the interested matriarch of a large family that included dozens of grandchildren and several great grandchildren. Viva kept up on current events, still tended her own roses, did her own cooking and house cleaning and supervised various grandchildren who mowed her lawn (“mow it horizontal one week, alternating diagonals the next”).

Viva had heard enough! She had earned the right to be selective in what she took in and what she didn’t. Most of us, however, have not earned that right. Most of us have never bothered to *really* hear anyone. We live in a culture that has forgotten how to cultivate the art of listening. Unlike my grandmother who was born before television and spent most of her life telling and listening to stories around the kitchen table, we are dominated by sight. Thousands of images flash across our minds in an hour of television or the Internet. Bombarded by rapid visuals, we’ve come to expect our information instantly. But listening operates on a different tempo.

We see through light. Light moves at 186,000 miles per second as opposed to sound, which travels at 1,100 feet per second. To listen, then, we must slow down far below the speed of light, far below the flickering changing images of videos and computers.

Our impatience gets in the way of our listening and of skillful conflict resolution. We want the world and we want it now! Yet, if we have the patience to listen, we’ll learn more. In his book, *Nada Brohmn: The World is Sound Music and the Landscape of Consciousness*, Joachim-Ernest Berendt points out that the ear is the only sense that fuses an ability to measure with an ability to judge.

We can discern different colors, but we can give a precise *number* to different sounds. Our eyes do not let us perceive with this kind of perception. Even an unmusical person can recognize an octave. Berendt points out that there are few “acoustical illusions”—something sounding like something that, in fact, is not—while there are many optical illusions. The ears do not lie. The sense of hearing gives us a remarkable connection with the invisible, underlying order of things. Through our ears we gain access to vibrations, which lie below everything around us. The sense of tone and music in another’s voice gives us an enormous amount of information about that person, about his or her intentions and stance toward life. In fact, if we want to resolve a conflict and improve our relationship with someone, we might focus on the definition of resonance. In sound, energy *resonance* is transferred between objects that vibrate at the same frequency. Slowing down enough to listen well helps us develop resonance with the person with whom we have a conflict.

For example, I can be flip and glib. If you just read my words in an e-mail communication and don’t hear my tone and emotion, you may think I’m seriously attacking you.

This is why it’s so important to talk face to face when we’re having a conflict or anticipate that we might have a conflict with someone. If we communicate via e-mail or letter, we miss the subtle nuances that we might otherwise hear that reveal someone’s true intentions. We also miss, of course, the visual clues that might help us understand someone, their facial expression and intention. Clearly, the ideal during conflict is to meet face to face.

We can learn to listen. We need to start with recognition of how we're listening now. Generally, we don't bother to think about how we listen. In addition to listening well to others, we need to listen to our own feelings and ourselves in order to communicate effectively during conflict.

Sometimes listening well during a conflict *is* enough. Sometimes all we need to do to miraculously resolve an issue is to make someone feel truly heard.

Ghosts In The Room

If we thoughtfully focus on how we listen, especially to our own thoughts and feelings, we will begin to identify what I call "ghosts in the room," when we're in conflict with someone.

To understand what I mean, think about a person you care about. When you do, you'll notice a flood of emotions and memories. To listen well is to understand that much of our present experience doesn't come from our current experience; it comes from our memory. And frequently, it's not even a memory of the person we're talking to right now, but a memory of someone long ago. We're reacting from stored responses, not fresh reactions. These are the *filters* through which we all listen. We hear everyone through our own filter of memory, desire, perceptions and predispositions. Especially when we're upset during conflict, we'll find that we're rarely upset for the reason we think.

These filters that we all have are limited, even unintelligent, in the sense that they cannot respond in a *new* way to what is happening. We are busy responding to something in the distant past.

We need to learn to listen as *witnesses*. This means to learn to listen to what is objectively there, as opposed to our messy stew of memory and desire. This is not easy to do. We are often unaware of the extent to which we assume what we see is what is there. Yes, if we think of ourselves as listening as a witness, we listen better.

When I use the term "witness," I mean it in two senses: both as a witness in court—an objective, sworn witness for the truth, not for the plaintiff or the defendant—and to learn to listen as the Quakers use the term "witness." In a Quaker fellowship, they practice a way to really be present for the other person and wait to speak until they hear what they call the *still, small voice inside*.

Listen For and Check Out Misunderstandings

Many times, conflicts escalate because of misunderstandings, especially about the meaning of language. For example, I was having dinner with several business colleagues and one woman's spouse. The two people in the couple were both retired Army Majors who had been in charge of large facilities. They were talking about their experiences during Vietnam and someone asked me if my husband had served during that war. I said that my husband was a C.O. They asked

me of what unit. In their language, that phrase meant *commanding officer*. In fact, my husband, who was raised as a Quaker, was a conscientious objector during the war. We all had a good laugh about the different meaning we automatically ascribe to the term C.O.

We need to take care to check our misunderstandings—indeed, to assume misunderstandings—before we assume that someone is directly attacking us or trying to escalate the conflict.

In order to do this, we have to listen as a witness. We need to distinguish between the inferences we make about experience and the experience itself. One way to do this is called the ladder of inference, developed by Chris Argyris, a professor at Harvard. He suggests that we process and create inferences about our experience at lightening speed, without noticing that we are doing so. We don't notice the difference between a direct experience and our assessment of it.

We draw conclusions like this all of the time. Our conclusions take the form of reasoning that “this is the way it is.” Yet, our first impressions are rarely accurate, as we can see from the examples above.

We form conclusions and then do not check them out, treating our initial conclusions as fact. We fail to investigate the roots of our own thinking. And even more damaging in the heat of conflict, we invest ourselves in an opinion and seek evidence that we are right and avoid evidence that we are wrong. This sends us into the *negative spiral of conflict*. We progress from our conclusions about subjects to assumptions that we invent about them and finally to belief. These beliefs tend to become dogma and resistant to change. We then see the world through the filter of our beliefs and, in fact, seek evidence that supports our opinions.

We can learn to listen in a way that challenges our automatic formation of beliefs that differentiates between the stories we make up about a set of facts from the facts themselves.

Listening well resolves conflicts. Yet, slowing down our thinking and listening in this way is not easy because the landscape is not neutral. Our memories and the resultant *ghosts in the room* can be quite painful. If I say something to you that you don't like, e.g., *you're stupid*, you may flash on a memory of an old teacher or parent who said the same thing. It will be difficult for you not to react emotionally, to respond from the present moment rather than from the pain of your memories. This is what we mean when we say that someone “pushes our buttons.”

These ghosts from our past memory tend to cloud our listening. We listen mostly for evidence that our view of the world is right and that others are wrong.

There is another way. We can listen instead at a deeper level for the *source* of the difficulty—whether it is in others or ourselves.

We can be passionate in our listening. Instead of listening for evidence that confirms our point of view, we can listen for the source of the difficulty—both in ourselves and in others. We listen for what challenges our view to begin to see how others see the world. This way of listening is not easy, yet it can create extra-ordinary success in resolving conflict.

Then we can take the final and hardest step: we can begin to listen for disconnects, especially disconnect between what we say and what we do. None of us are 100% consistent. Most of us intend to do what we say we want to do, but few of us manage to do so. Frequently, if

we listen hard enough to the rock bands in our own minds, we'll be surprised to realize that we're guilty of something similar to what we're accusing the other person of doing.

To grow in our own ability to listen, we need to be still, to listen to our own minds. We need to know when our own ghosts are in the room. If we do this long enough by ourselves, we'll find we're capable of really hearing others. We will have created a clear stream in which to be present for them.

To listen well, follow these guidelines:

1. *Remember Filters.* We all hear what is said through our own filters. Filters can include our assumptions, biases, our own history, experience, etc.

2. *Listen as a witness.* Ask, "how would I listen to this person if I knew I were going to be called as an objective witness in court?" How can I listen well enough to hear the still, small voice inside of me?

3. *Clarify.* Before you speak, make sure that you understand what the other person is saying. Ask open-ended (non-leading) questions until you do.

4. *Restate.* Ask "I think you said ' . . . ' Is that accurate?" Continue restating until your partner agrees that you heard him or her accurately.

5. *Pause before you speak.* Ask yourself which conflict style you're using and why. Is it the style that will serve you best over the long term of this relationship?

6. *At the end of a communication, summarize the conversation and clarify the original reason for the communication.* Did the speaker want your advice,

feedback, a sympathetic ear, action or a solution to a problem? Be sure you know *why* you were asked to listen and what you're expected to do—if anything—about the communication. Many of us jump in too quickly to give advice or fix a problem before even bothering to ask if the speaker wants advice.

7. *Assume 100% of the responsibility for the communication.* Assume leadership in your communication. Assume that it is your responsibility to listen until you understand and to speak in a way that others can understand.

8. *Check out misunderstandings.* Assume miscommunication before you assume someone is trying to undermine your efforts.

Conflict And Culture Clash

Sometimes a conflict is actually a clash of cultures. We need to realize that different cultures have very different approaches to conflict and communication. If you're trying to resolve conflicts, you need to recognize when this happens. Communication will stall if there is a culture clash and you're not aware that it is happening. For example, the dominant culture in this country values a conflict resolution model that is rather confrontive. We see ourselves in the John Wayne mode: we talk straight and we shoot straight. Yet, this model is different from that used in many cultures where direct confrontation is considered rude. Instead, those cultures value the use of *mediators*. Conflict resolution is accomplished through a third party—a trusted family friend, priest or advisor.

One way to find out if a conflict is culture related is to ask the following:

- Have several attempts at resolving this conflict failed?
- Is the present conflict one of a series?
- Does the conflict seem emotional beyond what you would predict based upon the immediate problem?
- Are the people involved in the conflict from different cultures? Are there obvious differences in race, gender, education, age or work groups?

In addition to normal conflict resolution tools, the following can help resolve a cultural clash.

Gain Agreement That:

- There is a conflict.
- We share a common goal to resolve it.
- What we've tried so far hasn't worked.

Identify Hot Buttons.

Say something like: "There seems to be something that 'x' says or that I say that always sets you off. What is it?"

Clarify back to the person: "It seems that what sets you off is"

Look for a Cultural Source.

Say something like: "With your background, is that an important concern?" Ask something like: "With your background, how would you expect someone to act in this situation?"

CAUTION: Do not say: "With your background as an African American, woman, generation Xer, etc., is this an important concern?" There are many different aspects of our background that create our culture. Allow the co-worker (if he or she chooses) to bring up exactly what factors in his or her background drive the reaction.

Summarize the Conflict as a Cultural Difference.

In your own words, emphasize to the other people involved: "Where you come from, you expect"

Negotiate a Resolution.

Say something like: "We all agreed we want to resolve this conflict. We've begun to understand what the conflict is about. Because you two have to work together, what do you suggest we do now to finally resolve it?"

Keep asking until both of you can focus on specific behaviors—words and action—that you need from the other person to work together.

Get a commitment from each side to live up to or reject the others' request. Agree to monitor the situation to make sure it is resolved.

If you are the conflicted parties' manager or supervisor and you're trying to mediate a resolution, emphasize that you need everyone to work together effectively as a team in support of the organization's goals. If they cannot learn to work together as a team, you will have to explore other options, including discipline. Work to make conflict resolution skills a part of *their* job requirements.

Communication And Power

Most leaders agree that good communication is essential to a productive workplace. As the workplace becomes more diverse, good communication is even more important. What many leaders miss, however, is an understanding that our perceptions of the amount of power we have in any interaction influences our communication style.

Linguists tell us that if we perceive we have less power than the person or group that we're communicating with, we will engage in what linguist Deborah Tannen calls *rapport talk*. This is talk designed to improve and build relationships. It is conciliatory, polite and friendly. When using *rapport talk*, we say things such as, "You might be unaware that . . ." before delivering a negative message. We may also say things such as, "I'm not sure if this is right, but maybe we should . . ." We ask permission before we do things: "Would you mind if I . . .?" We tend to ask for the other person's advice and approval.

If we believe that we have more or equal power with the person we're talking to, we tend to use what Tannen calls *report talk*. This is communication that focuses on delivering information and accomplishing tasks. This talk tends to sound like orders. When we use this talk we tend to start our sentences with "I (or we) need to do 'x'." "I want or need 'x'."

Some linguists, such as Tannen in her book *You Just Don't Understand*, believe that women tend to use more *rapport talk* and men tend to use more *report talk*. Others point to the difference in power as the key. Because women have tended to have less power in most workplaces, they tend to use more *rapport talk*. Studies have found that other groups that historically have had less power, such as African Americans, also use more *rapport talk*. Significantly, a person may use one kind of talk in the workplace and another kind of talk at home where they may believe they have more power.

The importance for diversity and conflict in the workplace is that the group that tends to use *report talk* may view other groups as weak or ineffectual or wasting time because they use so much *rapport talk*. Conversely, the group that tends to use communication to develop rapport, may view the group that uses *report talk* as brusque, cold, angry, rude, etc. Many conflicts result from this difference of perception.

Ask yourself the following questions:

Which of the two styles do you see yourself using at work?

With whom do you use a different style?

What is the primary style you observe people in power using at work?

What would the benefits be to you of using a different style?

What benefits to the organization would there be if you used different styles as appropriate for different situations?

There is no right or wrong style in all situations. The key to skillful conflict resolution is to stop and think before you speak in order to determine which style is most appropriate in any given situation.