

Effective Communication during Difficult Conversations

Wilton Schools / Parent Advisory Board / 3-29-16

Introduction (What's at stake?)

- Ⓢ Parental involvement enhances academic performance. The more intensely the parent is involved, the greater chance of academic success.
- Ⓢ Parental involvement leads to better classroom behavior.
- Ⓢ A parent's interest/encouragement can affect a child's attitude towards school, classroom conduct, self-esteem, and motivation.

([Effective Communication Between Parents and Teachers](#); Center for Assessment and Intervention Fischler School of Education and Human services Nova Southeastern University)

Topics to be covered

- Ⓢ **Improved Self-awareness and Knowing the Pitfalls** when faced with a difficult conversation
- Ⓢ **Strategies for Effective Communication** in an effort to build collaboration despite disagreements



Definition of a Difficult Conversation

- Ⓢ The conversation can be confrontational
- Ⓢ We tend to dread it and may avoid this type of conversation.
- Ⓢ The experience can be very unpleasant
- Ⓢ We may fear the consequences: Things might not improve or even get worse as a result of the conversation.

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Self-awareness and Knowing the Pitfalls

- Ⓢ Because Parents love their children, they will do anything to protect and raise them. When Parents feel that they don't have **control** over their child's well being, **anxiety** often sets in. Heightened anxiety can lead to a Fight/Flight response but when it involves one's children, the Fight response is the more likely outcome.



The layers of Anxiety:

ANGER <i>Fight response leading to offensive/defensive posturing</i>
ANXIETY <i>Loss of control</i>
FEAR <i>Of things not getting better or even worse; Of one's ability to protect one's child</i>
A sense of LOSS <i>What could have been; what will never be</i>

- Ⓢ The process of Triangulation is a subconscious effort to *reduce* anxiety
- Theory: The smallest stable unit/relationship is a unit of three. In order for a relationship to achieve stability over time, it must consist of at least three members.
 - The involvement of a third person decreases anxiety within the twosome by spreading it through three relationships
 - Triangulation *can* set the stage for difficult conversations during the IEP/PPT process. (Triangulation as a predictor of aversive communication patterns; Refer to *Bowen Family Systems Theory*)

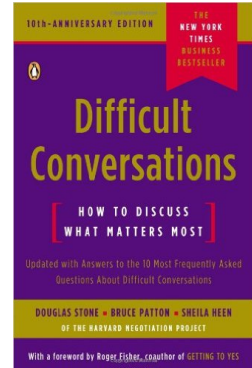


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② Understand that there are three levels within a difficult conversation:

- **Level 1:** Each person's account of what is happening (or happened)
- **Level 2:** Each person's emotional state during the conversation
- **Level 3:** Each person's self-image or identity that gets challenged




② The pitfalls of **Level 1:** What is happening/had happened

- The Truth Assumption: My understanding of events is more accurate or complete than your understanding. 
- Our belief that we know the other person's intentions: We misunderstand each other's intentions and believe that they are bad or harmful. 
 - WHY does this happen? Because we typically decipher one's intention by how their behavior *impacts us*.
 - Example: *We feel that we can trust them; therefore they must be hiding something.*
 - Example: *We feel mistrusted; therefore they do not trust us or do not think we are being truthful.*
 - ***CONCLUSION: We [might even] connect their (presumably) bad intentions to also having a dose of bad character.
 - ***But the FACT is: Truly bad intentions are rarer than we think.


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@ The pitfalls of **Level 2**: Everyone's emotions get played out throughout the conversation.

- Common emotions during a difficult conversation: 
Hurt, Anger, Misunderstood, Anxious, Not in Control, Hopeless
- Indirect Verbal: Tone of voice can be sarcastic, aggressive, impatient, etc.
- Indirect Nonverbal: If your emotions don't come out verbally, they will come out nonverbally (body language, facial expressions, detachment)
- ***CONCLUSION: When we do not directly communicate our emotions, we are not able to listen and be curious (two characteristics that are needed to more effectively communicate).

@ The pitfalls of **Level 3**: The difficult conversation can touch on our understanding of who we are as a person and our self-worth.

- Leading to an internal debate about whether we are competent/incompetent, a good person/bad person, etc. 
- The answers to these questions will have us either be "balanced" during the conversation, or off-centered which leads to anxiety.
- And - when we perceive that we are under attack our energy goes into defending ourselves and fighting back.
- ***CONCLUSION: What gets farther away or more difficult to see are the issues that are actually causing the child's problems along with the number of possible solutions

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Strategies for Effective Communication (by and among *all* parties)

Strategies for Level 1: Each person's account of what is happening (or happened)

1. To address the Truth Assumption: Shift our focus from proving we are right (and therefore they are wrong) to understanding the other person's perceptions, interpretations, and priorities.
 - a. *Be curious – “I wonder what information they have that I don't?”*
 - b. Active Listening technique: Ask School Personnel to paraphrase information back to you. *Model this approach too* by doing the same when potentially complex and/or decisive information is verbally shared with you during a meeting.
 - c. Be ready for the people to have differences of opinion. It is only human that even after seeing the same thing, people can often have a different conclusion due to perspective taking. *** The OBJECTIVE is not to pretend or feel like you have to accept their story, just understand it.
 - d. Ask more open-ended questions while avoid using questions to cross-examine.
 - i. *“Can you say a little more about how you see things?”*
 - ii. *“What information might you have that I don't?”*
 - iii. *“Are you reacting to something I did or say?”*
 - iv. *“How do you feel about all of this?”*
 - v. *“Please say more as to why this is important to you.”*

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- e. Ask about obstacles: What does everyone think or feel is getting in the way of the child succeeding in specific areas. *** The OBJECTIVE is to get concrete!
 - i. *Jake comes in and he seems so tired. He has very little energy.*
[Not concrete enough]
 - ii. *During morning meeting Jake will put his head on his desk and not look toward the Teacher. Sometimes he also fidgets with items in his desk, which may further keep him from understanding what the upcoming transition/expectations will be about.* **[Concrete]**
 - iii. *Sally has a hard time settling down. She does not stay focused long enough to complete her work.* . **[Not concrete enough]**
 - iv. *Sally periodically tries to engage her classmates during independent work by showing them items or materials that do not pertain to the work at hand. Sally will get up multiple times to sharpen her pencil or ask to use the bathroom.* **[Concrete]**
- f. Get organized
 - i. List your concerns and ideas on possible solutions
 - ii. For the Parent to bring data: In any format, such as grades, work product, a log of homework behaviors, etc.
- g. Work with the team to craft a meaningful communication system so that the Parent stays informed. *** The OBJECTIVE is to develop a system that results in *Good Communication* – and that requires a continuous flow of high quality information. ([How Strong Communication Contributes to Student and School Success: Parent](#))


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[and Family Involvement](#); *National School Public Relations Association*; 2006)

- i. Daily log or checklist
- ii. Copies of lesson plans or at least a list of *key terms* that are used within Social Skills Groups, Speech sessions, Prompts for Reading Skills, Emotional Management Techniques, etc.
- iii. Generalization Strategies for Home and the Community
- iv. *** Another OBJECTIVE is for the Communication System to be two-way with daily or frequent input from both School and Home.

2. Our Beliefs vs. their Intentions

- a. Try to disentangle the impact of their behavior on you and what you believe their intentions may be. 
- b. The more we relieve the other person of the need to having to defend themselves, the easier it is for them to hear what we are saying.
- c. Build understanding by demonstrating *empathy*
 - i. Strengthens the working relationship between Teacher and Parent
 - ii. Deescalates the possibility of an Anger/Fight Response
- d. There is a strong likelihood that we all have the same overall and true intention to *do good*.
- e. Reaffirm everyone's intention to *do good* by refocusing on possible solutions.

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- f. Try to have and communicate the following outlook: *We all share some responsibility in things not going as well as we would like. And (not 'but') we can all share in finding and starting up the solutions.*
- g. *** The OBJECTIVE is to LOOK FOR and INSTILL **Hope!** The Parent has the most power to lift morale and to motivate the team. Remaining hopeful (even cautiously optimistic) can be very uplifting (Nolan, C. and Stitzlein, S.M., [Meaningful Hope for Teachers in Times of High Anxiety and Low Morale, Democracy & Education, 19, n1, pp. 1-10, 2011](#)).

Hope spurs...

- i. Reflection
- ii. Intelligent action
- iii. Imagination
- iv. Courage
- v. Gratitude



The opposite of hope, **Doubt** and **Despair** bring about negative cognitive and behavior patterns

- vi. Anxiety
- vii. Self-doubt
- viii. Fatalism
- ix. Passivity
- x. Indifference



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Strategies for Level 2: Each person's emotional state during the conversation

1. Objective: To be aware of when our own emotions actually inhibit us from managing a difficult conversation.
2. Accept that having strong feelings about our children's success and quality of education is both normal and natural.
3. The best way to express our emotions is directly by identifying the feeling and the events behind such feeling.
 - a. Use the *I statement* but with "**because**" to force yourself to process what is behind the emotion while offering clarification for other.
 - b. "*I feel _____, because _____.*"
 - c. Use the **SOLER technique**

SOLER Listening

- ✓ **S** - Square up to the person you are listening to.
- ✓ **O** - Open your posture
- ✓ **L** - Lean in
- ✓ **E** - Eye contact
- ✓ **R** - Relax and Respond

To listen effectively to another person, you must "listen with your ears, eyes, and heart...with your undivided attention"



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Strategies for Level 3: Each person's self-image or identity that gets challenged

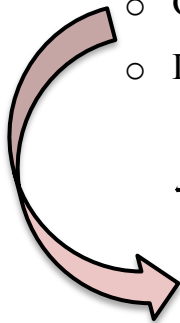
1. Objective: To be aware of when our identity is at stake.
2. We cannot **effectively communicate** until we are aware of what is going on and how it is affecting us.
 - a. Become aware of our identity issues
 - b. Know where we are at risk / what makes us vulnerable.
 - c. How would it feel if what we fear comes true?



Conclusion

🌀 In learning to effectively communicate within a difficult conversation, we *move from*

- Wanting to prove a point
- Getting them to do what we want
- Delivering a message



To

- Sharing information and asking questions
- Expressing your emotions and understanding
- Developing a group solution.

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☉ The Difficult Conversation can become a *Learning Conversation*.

☉ This process of changing how we converse is not easy.

It requires us to take an honest look at how we do things.

It will be awkward.

It will take work.

It will work.

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