

Having tough conversations

To be the best you can be you must be able to deal with conflict – or how you deal with different views and attitudes that lead to judgement and blame. Anger is not an answer, nor is taking an ‘eye-for-an-eye’. Running away isn’t the answer either as it fails to deal with the ‘toxic waste’ that remains after unresolved arguments. Conflict can grow in the mind from simple misunderstandings to major incidents, just by brooding on something said in the wrong way at the wrong time. There is also potential for these conversations to go right if you change the way you think about them. In this session you will explore how things can go nasty and how to deal with them. Gandhi for example, chose nonviolent communication. We explore how to manage tough conversations interpersonally and in large groups.

“Leaders do not avoid, repress, or deny conflict, but rather see it as an opportunity for learning and positive change” Warren Bennis

When faced with real conflict a compromise will only leave you feeling aggrieved. The best solution comes from finding “a third way” – a higher position that is better than either of the two dominant options. Stephen Covey refers to this as a ‘win-win’ solution.

Dealing with conflict can involve:

- ? creative effort
- ? openness
- ? a willingness to listen
- ? a desire to search for new possibilities

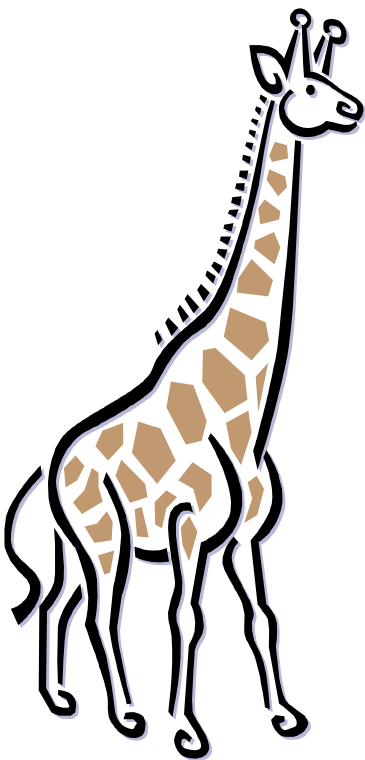
The conflict is often the interplay between your personal inward struggle and your interpersonal relationships. To be good at dealing with conflict there is a lot of ‘internal work’ to be done. It requires one of the parties to show mutual respect and mutual benefit.

Let’s look at the principles and techniques behind a technique developed by Marshal Rosenberg, known as Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

Nonviolent Communication

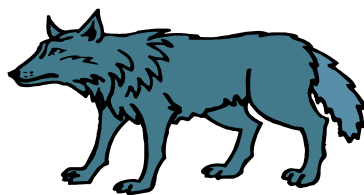
Communication is without question the most important and most difficult skill to do well. It involves reading, writing, speaking and listening. Listening represents over 50 % of our communication time, yet we receive little or no training in its use. To establish rapport you need to engage in empathetic listening which involves making sense of things from the other person's reference point. Other forms of listening are engaged in from your own frame of reference – this means you interpret what you hear from your own set of beliefs, values and emotional state at the time.

Marshall Rosenberg explains NVC through stories. In one he refers to it as “Giraffe Language”. He compares Giraffes (representing the language of **REQUESTS**) with Jackals (representing the language of **DEMANDS**).



He wants to teach Giraffe language to people who find Jackal language gets them into trouble. Giraffes realize **they** cannot change people, just provide opportunities for Jackals to change themselves - willingly. Giraffes do this by removing the fear, guilt and shame from conversations in the words they use.

Giraffes make **REQUESTS** in terms of what they want Jackals to DO in the present moment, not what they want them to FEEL. Jackals **DEMAND** what they want, not what they need from anyone else. Nothing creates resistance to change more than telling people what they should do or feel. The language of command and control is no longer acceptable in today's workplace.



Giraffes realise that they should not project their feelings onto others. They take personal responsibility for them. If they feel angry it's because they choose to feel that way.

They cannot blame others for how they decide to feel. They appreciate that the **anger comes from an unmet need inside themselves**. Giraffes seek a connection that enables each person to feel a sense of well-being, so no one feels forced into action by blame, guilt or punishment. They seek emotional connection and want to create harmony.

It is a four part process rooted in personal integrity and honesty. Practice it, It works.

- ? Describe your **OBSERVATIONS** – of what you see, hear, imagine in yourself/another
- ? Acknowledge your **FEELINGS** – in relation to what you observe in yourself/another
- ? Explain the reason for your feeling in terms of your **NEEDS** – the values, desires, expectations or thoughts you believe are creating these feelings in yourself/another
- ? State your **REQUEST** – of what you would like yourself/another to do without criticism

Coping with conflict

Conflict happens all the time. We create it when things are said that rub up against what we think is right. They display the strength of attachment we have with our underlying beliefs. Not until you are aware of your beliefs and how they stop you from **being the best you can be** will you realise what you can do to deal with conflict effectively. Caustic comments or sarcastic questions arise because of the way the sender is feeling or perceived depending on the receiver is feeling. Phrases such as, "I thought we came here to enjoy ourselves?" This may be seen as criticism or innuendo and could get a pithy response. Lose your attachment to being right and care about the other person. What does it cost you? **Would you rather be right or happy?**

Try and see things from the other person's point of view and then let it pass.

When things go wrong we are tempted to find others to blame. Don't. Be generous of spirit and let it go. If you must blame something, blame inanimate objects – they can't argue back.

If there could be misunderstanding ask the other person to explain their views

Your factual comment can even be taken as exaggeration by someone else in order to raise the stakes. Be careful.

Resist the temptation to be drawn in. Move on.

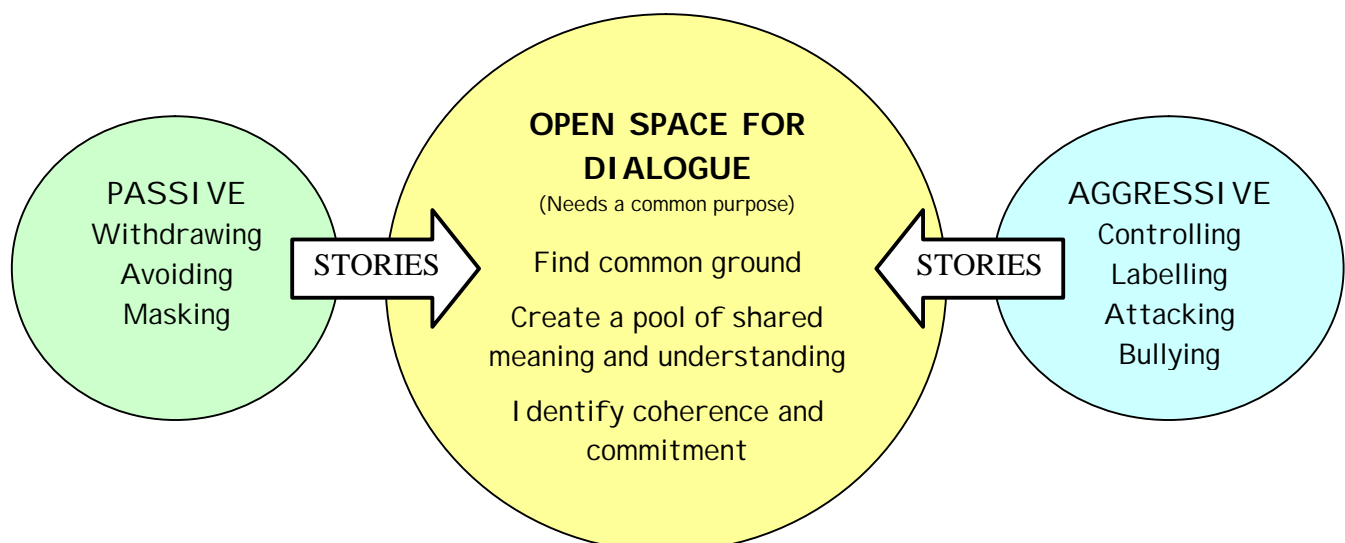
People often exaggerate the causes or the consequences of failure, even what's needed to resolve the problem - just for effect. Even worse what is said can be dismissed as not important.

Focus on what you want the outcome to be, rather than your need at that moment in time.

Sometimes there is no right or wrong, it's just that people see the world differently.

Try and understand the issue from their point of view before expressing your own

When there are irreconcilable differences then you must create space for a deeper conversation to take place where the parties can tell their stories and commit to an agreed way forward where all parties feel listened to, their needs are taken seriously and respected.



Appreciative Inquiry

This technique for engaging in tough conversations was created by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at the Taos Institute in 1987. It uncovers the possibility of "what could be" to build on existing strengths and passions within people. You ask questions such as . . .

- ? Who are we at our best ?
- ? What attitudes and processes are at the heart of what we are good at ?
- ? What do we do well and why ?

What we appreciate and anticipate often determines what we look for in ourselves and others, and therefore what we find. When we are positive we see the bigger picture so we have more options for change. The process can be collaborative because it is based on dialogue and affirmative questioning - collecting, responding and celebrating 'good news stories' within the group. The stories serve to enhance and respect cultural identity, spirit and a shared vision. Participants become energised by the atmosphere of feeling valued and appreciated. Who wouldn't feel negative in a culture that is only interested in eliminating problems and finding route causes in order to blame someone rather than learn from them.

The main elements of the Appreciative Inquiry process are:

1. To DISCOVER - appreciating and valuing the best of what is
2. To DREAM - envisioning what might be (future perfect)
3. To DESIGN - using dialogue to get at what should be
4. To DELIVER - innovating and organising to agree what will be

The full Appreciative Inquiry process can take place over an extended period of time and involve quite large numbers. It enables managers to secure full engagement and includes:

1. Selecting a focus area or topic(s) of interest
2. Interviews designed to discover strengths, passions and unique attributes
3. Identifying patterns, themes and/or intriguing possibilities
4. Creating bold statements of ideal possibilities known as "provocative propositions"
5. Co-determining "what should be" through consensus based around principles and priorities
6. Taking and sustaining action

Common questions used during an Appreciative Inquiry process are:

Describe a time in your working life when you felt alive and fully engaged? What do you value most about yourself, your work and your organisation? What are the core factors that energise you/your group/organisation? What are the unique attributes that define you/your group/organisation? What three wishes do you have to enhance the vitality of yourself/your group/organisation? I imagine this group/organisation five years from now, healthy and vibrant - what does it look and feel like to work in?

Opening the Possibility Space

Harrison Owen developed an open way of talking, listening and creating new realities through what he called **OPEN SPACE TECHNOLOGY**. It uses a simple method to get people to work together to solve problems that we have created or contributed to. This realisation remains hidden until we see how our actions are connected and how we contribute – even when we decide to do nothing.

Open Space and Future Search techniques are effective in involving large numbers of people in addressing tough issues in their service, organisation or community. It takes a bit of courage and a large dose of trust to use the techniques, but the benefits are well worth the effort as they shift people's mindsets. The principles are designed to allow order to emerge from what appears to be chaos. All you need is a well stated issue that all the participants want addressed then

- ? **Whoever comes are the right people**
- ? **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened**
- ? **Whenever it starts is the right time**
- ? **Whenever its over, its over**

The information is collected, integrated and disseminated effectively and purposefully by getting “the whole system in the room” and getting their commitment to act, thereby decentralizing the decision-making and engaging them in reflecting on the results it achieved

Progress in Northern Ireland and South Africa, emerged from the shared understanding generated through the sharing of knowledge. Otto Scharmer talks about 4 ways of listening to tap into the wholeness of people – their thinking, feelings, personal desires, history and spiritual needs. If we really listen to each other to try and understand and value the diverse range of views a rapport develops from which new possibilities, creative ideas and both/and solutions are generated.

Otto Scharmer's **FOUR WAYS OF LISTENING** are

- **Downloading** – when we say what we always say, and don't listen to others
- **Debating** – when we listen fairly and objectively
- **Reflective Dialogue** – when we listen with empathy, subjectively and from the heart
- **Generative Dialogue** – listening not only from within ourselves and from within others, but co-created from different perspectives

Steve Trivett and Peter Arnold, from the Corporate Organisation Development & Training Team, have worked with Open Space in Birmingham. For example, representatives of the whole community in Small Heath came together to look for ways of supporting Carers in their community. The approach is now taught to City Council Officers through a 3 day experiential learning event on new approaches to Consultation & Engagement. Ring: 0121-303-2843 for more information about the course and how to run an Open Space Event.

Taking action

This exercise was developed by Peter Senge and more information can be found in his "Fifth Discipline Fieldbook" There are reference copies in the Training Library on the 3rd Floor of Norfolk House.

- Step 1: Choose a problem you've been involved with during the last month or two, the sort of tough little interpersonal difficulty that many of us try to ignore. For example, you can't reach agreement, someone isn't pulling their weight, you are being treated unfairly, your views are being ignored, etc.
- Step 2: Divide an A4 sheet of paper into two columns. At the top of the left-hand column write "WHAT I'M THINKING" and at the top of the right-hand column "WHAT WAS SAID".
- Step 3: Now recall a frustrating conversation you had over the situation identified in Step 1. or a conversation you would have if you brought up the problem. In the right-hand column, write out the dialogue in outline that you are pretty sure would occur. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished.
- Step 4: Now in the left-hand column, write out what you were thinking and feeling – BUT NOT SAYING.

You can now ask yourself some powerful questions. You can work with a friend and encourage each other to answer

- ? What has really led me to think and feel this way ?
- ? What was my intention ? What was I trying to accomplish ?
- ? Did I achieve the results I wanted ? If not, why not ?
- ? How might my comments have contributed to the difficulties ?
- ? Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column ?
- ? What assumptions are you making about the other person(s) ?
- ? What are the costs to me of operating this way ? What are the benefits ?
- ? What prevented me from acting differently ?
- ? How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve my communication or coaching techniques ?

Try this exercise in pairs

1. Think of a real conflict or difficulty that you have right now with someone. Describe it. Show both sides.
2. Coach your partner to play the opponent and take your own side strongly.
3. Notice when you feel uncomfortable in your own position
4. Now go onto the other side and argue the case against yourself
5. Go back to the original position and notice if anything has changed
6. Continue until the conflict disappears or until you can agree a win-win position.