

# Having Difficult Conversations

Adapted from Conflict Resolution materials from the Sustained Dialogue Institute, 2019

## Understanding the Cycle of Conflict

Most conflicts arise when there is a different in worldview, however it doesn't always appear that way on the surface because we only see the behavior of someone and then the response of ourselves or others. We will use two roommates in college as an example.



- **World View** – based on the experiences, values, and understanding you have at this moment in time.
  - *Example:* I grew up with siblings and had to share a room for part of my childhood. I'm extremely used to having to share space, resources, food, etc. I didn't get to the grocery store this past weekend because of homework, and so I've eaten a few of my roommate's yogurts because I can replace them at the end of the week when I get to the grocery store.
- **Stress** – when something does not align with your world view, this causes mental and emotional stress.
  - *Example:* My roommate is an only child. I don't know it, but they are extremely upset that I'm stealing and eating their yogurt. I have no idea because they haven't said anything and they don't know how to deal with this situation.
- **Feelings** – when you are stressed, this causes different feelings of anger, sadness, etc. Everyone may experience this differently.
  - *Example:* My roommate is feeling taken advantage of, and also angry about the fact that I haven't replaced any of the yogurts after three days.
- **Behavior** – your feelings of sadness or anger, etc. may lead to specific behaviors.
  - *Example:* My roommate yelled at me when I got back to the room on the third day of eating their yogurt and told me I'm a terrible roommate.
- **Response of others** – your behaviors then lead to a response from other people around you whom you have effected.
  - *Example:* I told my roommate that it was really rude of them to yell at me over yogurt and that I thought they were being unreasonable because I was going to replace them in another day. Now I think people who are only-children are kind of selfish and overbearing.

Your behavior effects others' world view, and in turn their behavior effects your world view. If we have an understanding of where the conflict starts (our world view), we can start to have a conversation about the issue and work to resolve it, find a compromise, come to an agreement, etc. Remember, the only thing we can control is our OWN behavior.

## **Getting Out of the Cycle of Conflict:**

1. Assume best intentions of the other person(s).
  - Active listening
  - clarification questions
  - recognizing emotions
2. Make sure the other person is okay.
  - Perception Checking
3. Make sure you and the relationship are okay.
  - "I" Messages that share impact
4. Work to understand not just what each of you wants but also why you want those things.
  - Positions vs. interests

### **Active Listening**

Active listening, both verbal and non-verbal, enables us to:

- Hear what the participant is **saying**
- Hear what the participant is **feeling and thinking**
- Let the participant know that they have really been heard
- Be empathetic
- Gain trust
- Create an atmosphere of suspended judgment and impartiality

By being active listeners, we model behavior that encourages people to express themselves and listen more openly to the entire group.

### **Components of Active Listening (verbal): QRRST**

- Question - ask open ended or clarifying questions.
- Respond - affirm verbally ("ok") or non-verbally (head nods)
- Reflect - Verbally reflect back any emotion the speaker mentions, or ask about feelings.
- Summarize what the person has just told you. Check in to see if you have heard it correctly.
- Thanks! ("I'm glad you told me this.")

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### **Body Language (non-verbal): SOLER**

- S – Squarely facing speakers
- O – Open stance
- L – Leaning forward
- E – Eye contact\*
- R – Relaxed posture

\*Note: Eye contact is perceived very differently around the world!

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## **Perception Checking**

When you notice something is not going well, say one of these things.

- A. "I noticed \_\_\_\_\_ (situation/behavior). Tell me more about what you were experiencing."
- B. "Hey, I noticed \_\_\_\_\_ (situation/behavior). Is everything okay?"

## **"I" messages**

Using "I" messages means you're speaking only for yourself and from your specific experiences and perspectives instead of assuming the experiences and perspectives of others. "I" messages also help keep the conversation productive by helping people refrain from projecting, blaming, etc.

The best way to set up your "I" message is stating the situation, the behavior you see, the impact it is having, and what your desired outcome is. Explaining "I" messages to others whom you are helping through a conflict can be helpful to helping mediate. They should include stating the situation, the behavior seen, the impact it has had, and the desired outcome.

**Situation:** I am noticing that some of my yogurts are gone.

**Behavior:** I believe you have been eating my yogurts without asking me for permission.

**Impact:** This has made me feel taken advantage of.

**Desired Outcome:** I would like you to replace the yogurts and in the future, ask for permission before eating my food.

## **Positions vs. Interests**

A POSITION is WHAT someone wants - Ex: I want a burrito

An INTEREST is WHY someone wants it. - Ex: I'm homesick so I want a food that reminds me of home

When you understand the WHY behind someone's behavior, it becomes much easier to have a conversation about the conflict and to find a remedy. This is helpful when helping others work towards a conflict resolution.

## **The 4 C's: Questions to Intervene in Tense Conversations**

**What can I do when someone states a controversial opinion or makes someone upset?**

**Clarify** the speaker's comment to get a sense of what they are actually saying.

"Tell me more about what you mean when you say \_\_\_\_\_."

**Change the conversation** to experiences.

"What experiences from your life are important for helping us understand what you're sharing?"

**Create space for others** to react.

"How do others react to this statement? Does anyone have thoughts or feelings they want to share?"

**Challenge** the statement with a **credible counterpoint**.

"I've heard others say that statements like that sometimes make them feel their identity is less important. How does that influence or not influence your thoughts about this?"

## **Intent versus Impact**

Imagine you are facilitating a group discussion in which a participant says one of the statements below. These are common dialogue stoppers that require a facilitator to consider the speaker's intent as much as the impact on the group. Read each statement, consider the intent, the impact, and think about what you might do. (Adapted from Stirfry Seminars & Consulting.)

- I don't see color. We're all human.
  - What is the possible intent from the speaker?
  - What is the possible negative impact on others? Is there any possible positive impact?
  - What would you do using the skills from above?
- You speak such good English. Where did you learn it?
  - What is the possible intent from the speaker?
  - What is the possible negative impact on others? Is there any possible positive impact?
  - What would you do using the skills from above?
- You're so great, I don't understand why you're single!?
  - What is the possible intent from the speaker?
  - What is the possible negative impact on others? Is there any possible positive impact?
  - What would you do using the skills from above?
- While we are talking about Islamophobia, I'd like to bring up anti-Semitism, too.
  - What is the possible intent from the speaker?
  - What is the possible negative impact on others? Is there any possible positive impact?
  - What would you do using the skills from above?
- Oh, you look so pretty. You should wear dresses more often!
  - What is the possible intent from the speaker?
  - What is the possible negative impact on others? Is there any possible positive impact?
  - What would you do using the skills from above?