

Challenging Conversations— Strategies for Turning Conflict into Creativity

“Our present challenge is to change the culture of conflict itself, within our workplaces, our communities, and our world. We must create a culture where even the most serious disputes are handled not on the basis of coercion or force, but from mutual respect and coexistence. Far from eliminating differences, our challenge is to make the world safe for differences.”

—William Ury

It is an understatement to say that we are living in times of great turmoil, polarization, and change. It is a time when unresolved conflicts permeate our lives, our workplaces, our politics, our community. Very few systems are immune from the tension conflict generates. We watch helplessly, as countries use war as a strategy for settling disagreements. Our news sources are glutted with escalating reports of physical violence used as a method to mediate disputes. Our schools have become battle grounds as students grapple with ways to handle conflicting emotions and divergent points of view. Our airlines sometimes get diverted due to a passenger who does not have the skills to deal with their anger. And tragically sometimes our workplaces break out in violence.

Most of the time, conflicts come to light when the people involved are so reactive that they generate strong emotions in everyone involved, even those witnessing the conflict. Whether those emotions are hot and violent or simply the cold chill of disconnected relationships, most of us shy away from conflict because we don't know how to get beyond the fight-or-flight response our brains are hardwired for. Some of us can't imagine another way. We're not comfortable witnessing conflict, or experiencing it, nor is it our first impulse to dive in and address it. And for those of us who are drawn to conflict, we still may feel that we lack the skills to handle conflict effectively. Generally, our associations with conflict aren't positive and we either stuff our reactions or overreact and complicate matters. But conflict can actually have an upside, whether it's in a personal or professional setting. Properly worked with, conflict can spur innovation, creativity, and a better understanding of issues and people. Having the capacity to deal with conflict is the key to maximizing its upside.

Whether the focus is delivering a difficult message, diffusing a tense situation, giving tough performance feedback, or confronting insensitive behavior, most of us feel some reluctance when faced with having challenging conversations that have the potential to escalate into conflict, according to Eryn Kalish and Pat Zigarmi, coauthors of The Ken Blanchard Companies® Challenging Conversations training program.



Conflict Escalation ...



... or Conflict Resolution

Whether you run a multi-million dollar corporation or a small not-for-profit organization, the ability to have honest, open conversations on controversial topics is a vital skill for leaders. In our Situational Leadership® II program we address the fact that, human beings respond differently to circumstances, management styles, and information. Because of this, conflicts often arise.

We believe it is possible to disagree without being disagreeable and to care about and connect with each other no matter what we are discussing. That's why we've added Challenging Conversations to our line of programs that support leadership development. This module provides the steps, skills, and practices that can make any organization more collaborative, engaging, and alive.

We only have to look at our politics, schools, and workplaces to see how much time, money, and energy are wasted in unresolved conflicts. It's time to master the art of compassionate communication and create a more peaceful, productive world. Ken Blanchard.

While this feeling of reluctance is normal, in the business world, managers have to be on guard that it doesn't lead to a managerial behavior that Kalish describes as "the avoidance syndrome." When this happens, a manager will shut down or withdraw from a situation instead of confronting it directly. While this strategy may keep the lid on a situation in the short term, the long-term damage is usually substantial—with drops in productivity and morale due to ongoing conflict and disagreement.

As Pat Zigarmi explains, "When managers avoid a sticky situation, it usually escalates. It gets stickier and messier and more complex. Also, emotions build. Both parties can feel guilty, threatened, and resentful." The result is damaged relationships and damaged projects, and decreased motivation, creativity and energy."

"The issue becomes a crisis, and decisions are then made with very incomplete information. So the wisdom gets lost because people become so triggered when dealing with the situation when everybody is really overheated and upset. When decisions get made from our survival mentality (the fight or flight response), they are not the best decisions," says Kalish.

Zigarmi believes that the fast-paced demands of today's workplace coupled with the extraordinarily intense environment we live in—politically and socially—make it increasingly important for managers to be able to effectively address sensitive subjects in the workplace. As she explains, "The longer the situation is left alone, the more both parties look for clues to prove their perceptions, to make themselves right. That only makes the conflict more challenging."

Two Myths of Challenging Conversations

People often have misconceptions about components of handling conflict:

#1 – *The best thing is to be objective and stick to the facts.* While objectivity and facts are important, many times during a challenging conversation, our feelings surface whether we want them to or not. Feelings are a component of any situation whether it's personal or professional. Simply sticking to the facts can block the opportunity to deal with both thoughts and emotions. Recent research shows that people often harden their position when only dealing with the facts anyway. To effectively deal with a difficult situation we need to talk about our feelings and reactions in a healthy way and without blaming the other person.

#2 – *If you show empathy, it means you agree with the other person's point of view.* There is a difference between empathy and agreement. It's good to let the other person know that we understand what they are saying and to acknowledge that we understand their position is true for them. But acknowledging that is simply respecting the person, not implying that you agree. Using phrases such as "I understand what you're feeling, but I have a different perspective than you," allows you to honor the person's point of view without yielding to it. While it is difficult to acknowledge the other person's point of view when you are angry or hurt, there are communication tools that can allow you to keep your cool, even in the most emotionally charged situations including detaching personally from what's being said to minimize defensiveness and optimize empathy in a way that inspires trust.

Types of Conflict

One of the keys to managing conflict is to identify what the conflict is about. Generally speaking conflict occurs regarding:

- Different interpretations of facts or information
- Lack of clear goals
- Unclear processes or procedures
- Low trust or broken relationships
- Diverging values
- Issues over ownership and control

It's far easier to find solutions to the first three than the last three because of how identified we are with our relationships, our values and our sense of control. These last three become quite personal and have the potential to evoke more hurt, anger, and anguish than we think we can cope with. Still, any conflict, even seemingly simple situations, can evoke deeply personal feelings and painful emotions. In fact, if there are no emotions connected to the situation, it's more than likely that you're dealing with a problem to solve rather than a conflict that needs a challenging conversation!

Why Managers Avoid Challenging Conversations

Considering the importance of successfully addressing sensitive issues in the workplace, why do some managers choose avoidance as a strategy when faced with a challenging situation? While avoidance may be an appropriate course of action in some select cases, often it is a managerial default position because the skills, or willingness, are not there to have the conversation that is needed.

As Kalish explains, "People are concerned that they will do more damage to the relationship or to the project by addressing an issue openly. Because they feel that they lack the skills to manage the process successfully, managers often choose to avoid the problem and hope it clears up on its own. It rarely does."

Kalish believes that this can be traced back to a managers' past experience with conflict.

"Most of us grow up learning how to deal with conflict at home, school, and the workplace, which teaches us some form of either fight or flight. Neither fight nor flight really works when you're having a challenging conversation. You want to be able to be centered and state your deep truth, and also listen to the other's deep truth, with an open, engaging, curious orientation and a willingness to resolve something in a way that works for all stakeholders."

Stepping Up to the Challenge

To help managers improve their skills in dealing with challenging conversations, Kalish and Zigarmi teach participants how to speak up without alienating the other person and how to listen even if they are "triggered" by what they are hearing.

About The Ken Blanchard Companies*

The Ken Blanchard Companies® is one of the world's leading training and development experts. We create lasting behavioral change that has measurable impact on the organizations we work with. We provide training that makes a difference.

Our programs are based on behavioral models that add a situational context to the training experience, so individuals learn to be more productive in real-world scenarios and make the shift from learning to doing more quickly and effectively.

As the innovator of the most widely used leadership development system in the world, Situational Leadership® II, we provide groundbreaking thinking and a memorable learner experience. We begin with a collaborative diagnostic process identifying your unique needs and business issues, then develop an appropriate leadership strategy.

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The concepts are easily understandable, explains Kalish. “But it can be emotionally challenging to get beyond our learned mindset of win or lose and really trust the process that we can create solutions that work for everyone involved. We’ve developed a five-step model in our training about stating your concerns directly, probing for more information from the other person, engaging people by really listening with your full heart, attending to their body language, watching for cues, tuning in at a subtler level, and also keeping forward focused in order to resolve the situation when the timing to move on is appropriate.”

Deciding Whether or Not to Engage in a Challenging Conversation

While we generally advocate the value of surfacing conflict and resolving it, there may be times when it’s best to put some distance between you and the person or situation creating the conflict. Sometimes we’re better off working through the situation on our own, especially if the other person has a personality disorder, if there are strong risks associated with confronting the issue, or if office politics could put your job at risk.

Even though it is not ideal, there is value in working through the issue on your own. It can allow you to do some soul searching about the issue as well as prevent possible escalation rather than resolution of the issue. In addition, it allows you to process rather than stuff down your emotions, which can be detrimental to your health.

By working through the issue on your own, you identify and acknowledge your feelings. You can make a conscious decision to move through the feelings by exercising, journaling, venting, etc. These outlets help transform negative emotional reactions into healthy and productive ones by allowing you to resolve your feelings, accept the situation, or find ways to change it without actively involving the other person. Working through the process on your own might not be as gratifying as coming to resolution face to face because you don’t have the opportunity to repair the relationship or build trust, but sometimes it can be the best option. Whenever possible, work it through with the other person. When that is not possible, work it through alone.

Conclusion

One of the greatest skills managers and individuals can build is the art of listening well—to listen to themselves and their instincts about difficult situations and to the other person in order to really understand their point of view and perspective.

For managers willing to step up to the challenge, the results can be far-reaching, including quicker resolution of performance issues, better work relationships, fewer grievances, reduced tension, and fewer corporate crises.

Kalish believes that we really must build the capacity to have the challenging conversations we have often avoided. “In these challenging times, the more we can master and model for others how to have challenging conversations the better our workplaces, our families, and our society will be. The choice seems really clear: do we build the capacity to deal with each other in healthy ways, or do we see the world we care about deteriorate in unresolved conflicts and violence?”

While it can seem daunting to learn these skills, Kalish and Zigarmi believe that the alternative is far more daunting and that it is well worth learning how to effectively engage in challenging conversations. It is far more rewarding and far less stressful to have vibrant, rich, honest conversations about the things we care about at work, at home and in our communities, while working to make our world a better place.