



April 4th 2020

Critical conversations: Strategies for effective and caring conversations

By Peter Jensen and Karen MacNeill

There is a lot of detailed information about having critical conversations. What is being presented here are ideas and tips.

Let's start here

What you say doesn't have to be perfect. What really is important is that the other person knows that your intentions are good. They will cut you a lot of slack if they know that you have good intentions under what you are saying. The purpose of this document is to provide you with a few ideas to consider when having critical or sensitive conversations.

If you're about to have an important conversation with someone it's a good idea to have a map to follow. To be clear there are other maps, this is just one of them. Susan Scott in her book *Fierce Conversations* has a slightly different, but excellent, map.

Preparation is Key

You need to prepare yourself for the conversation so that you can stick to your intended course and you need to prepare your opening statement, which is focused on how you are going to start the conversation. In a sensitive conversation about 80% of your work is done ahead of time.

Your opening statement:

Your opening statement should be no longer than 45 seconds and should be an 'I' statement. It is a statement that should be about observations highlighting what I have seen or what I have heard and how I feel. This is true of feedback of any type. Evaluative feedback leads to defensiveness and often reactivity on the part of the person receiving it. For example, saying that someone was disruptive in the meeting isn't as effective as saying "You interrupted John three times during his prepared statement at the start of the meeting and I must admit I felt a little frustrated by that." This is straight observable behaviour they can't argue with, but they can sure argue with your *interpretation* they were disruptive.

So what have you observed that you want to talk to this person about?

Explore the resistance/reactivity/response:

The number one derailer that can blow you off course are the emotions coming from the other person. Each of us will have our own reaction to that emotion. Once you open the conversation with your observations you will get some reaction from the other person. Sometimes it's very subtle, they go quiet, and sometimes it's anything but subtle. At this point you temporarily drop your agenda and you ask them questions about their reaction. "I see that you have gotten very quiet, what is that about?" Or "I ask you about your plan to stay fit through this disruption and your face has gotten red and you raise your voice. What's that about?"



When dealing with others reaction, if it is emotional many of us want to back away because we don't like dealing with that. Alternatively, if the person is denying the issue, other people tend to throw gasoline on the fire and get upset with their reaction. Neither of these are effective ways to respond. Remember, that whatever reaction you get from them, after you've open the conversation, is an **ally**, that you can use to go deeper and hear their story, to really understand their experience and the issue.

You are really moving from giving feedback in your opening statement, to active listening when you get their reaction. Good questions will be of tremendous benefit to you here. If they tell you they don't know what to do, you might ask, "if you did know what would the answer be?"

Here are some questions that could be helpful:

- What is the one thing that if you did it different or better would make all the difference in the world right now?
- If this hasn't changed and we are still having this conversation two months from now how will you feel?

Your basic goal, from a leadership position, is most often to try to build self-awareness and self responsibility in the other person and questions are tremendously helpful in doing this. If you simply tell people how to do things... they listen, but when you ask questions they think and thinking is more developmental. Most of the data that you need to move this person forward is inside them. Most often it's not an external issue, it is an internal issue and you will only get access to that data if you learn to ask really good questions otherwise you're stuck in a Bob Seger song "working on mysteries without any clues."

Create an action plan/options:

Once you have clarity on their story and a better understanding of the situation, you move to planning. Framing it by saying "this is something we need to resolve," with resolve being the key word.

It is important to start by exploring what are all the possible options. Try to get as many options as possible from the other person and once they are dried up ask, "Would you like another suggestion?" This creates space to provide any ideas you may have. Then plan with hem how they will proceed.

Closing thoughts

This map is a suggested guideline on how to navigate the territory you will find yourself when having critical conversations. Just like in a physical map you will find unpleasant territories like a swamp that smells, has weird critter and bugs. The map is not the territory, rather a means for how to navigate the territory. Having a plan to manage yourself during emotionally charged and sensitive conversations can help you stay on course.



Communication guidelines for acute phase

As we navigate the ongoing response to this pandemic we will cycle through an acute/ crisis phase, working through phase, and aftermath phase. The following are guidelines recommended by Dr. Jeanne LeBlanc, a disaster response specialist, and should be considered when providing communication during the acute phase (i.e., sudden and quick disruption of current situation)

Level of detail	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accurate, concise. Use first hand information vs. passed on from another source• Information given in “doses.” And also consider what information needs to be presented at what time. Allow for appropriate digest of information vs overwhelm• Remind everyone (often) that details can and will change from moment to moment. Updates will be provided as information changes• Be well organized and follow same format each time if possible.
Frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide updates as needed depending on urgency (i.e., 24-48 hours, quicker if needed)• Have a central hub for updates (electronic or written)• Plan for ‘what-if’ electronic communication is NOT available or consistent
Media/ social	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Media plan will be under the direction of your communication director• Should ask members for your community to refrain from posting any content regarding the situation on social media unless with specific purpose to communicate facts.• Appoint a specific individual to manage rumor control and communicate facts
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accurate and timely information helps to manage rumors (escalates anxiety)• Keep communication personal, empathetic and caring. Ensure social support is available• Pace yourself and take care of basic-self care needs. Watch for signs of stress, excessive behaviors, and psychosocial impacts.• Provide important information in clear written form