The Elephant in the Room:
How to Talk About the Difficult Issues that Impede our Lives and Our Work

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When there’s an elephant in the room, I...

- ...charge at it head on.  
  - CONTENDING

- ...get out of the room as soon as I can.  
  - AVOIDING

- ...do whatever the elephant wants me to do.  
  - YIELDING

- ...try to talk to the elephant and work something out.  
  - PROBLEM-SOLVING
What makes certain conversations difficult?

- They involve sensitive topics.
- They pose a threat to our needs, goals, image, or identity.
- They can be hard to manage or keep on task.
- Our emotions get the best of us.
- There are unspoken issues and histories.
- We sometimes feel trapped, pressured, cornered, or put on the spot.
- We have a hard time articulating our true feelings and desires.
- We have a hard time understanding others’ perspectives.
- We have to make quick decisions.
- We’re afraid the conversation won’t go well.
“Many of us are not very reflective about how to act in conflict situations. We just do what comes naturally.” Unfortunately, “one’s first reaction is often not the most constructive response. … The key to effective conflict management is to take a step back, look carefully at the process, and build a more effective framework in which to manage the difference.”

- Littlejohn & Domenici, *Communication, Conflict, and the Management of Difference*

A new framework:

- **Set** the tone
- **Listen** and acknowledge
- **Observe** and organize
- **Work** toward resolution
Setting the Tone

Think of a difficult conversation or confrontation from your recent past. Think back to the very beginning of the conversation.

Is there something you thought about, said, or did that helped the conversation go well?

OR

Is there something you wish you would have thought about, said, or done differently?
The essential question that too often never gets asked: **What am I trying to accomplish?**

What is the goal: to convey information, to receive feedback, to transform a relationship, to change behavior, to negotiate an agreement, to develop a plan?

Conflict occurs when differences become problematic.

**Paradigm shift:** Conflict is a problem to be solved collaboratively, not a battle to be fought and won.

**Practical tip:** Before the conversation begins, decide what the purpose is and what the ground rules will be. Consider communicating this information to the other parties if appropriate.
Setting the Tone: Examples

- **Target of persuasion / criticism:** “Your concerns are important to me. I’m just going to listen today, and I’ll get back with you in a day or two once I’ve had a chance to think things through.”

- **Offering criticism:** “You are a valued member of this department, and I appreciate _____. At the same time, I have serious concerns about _____. I hope that we can resolve these concerns and chart a way forward for the future.”

- **Troubled relationship:** “I know you and I have a lot of differences, and we’ve had trouble in the past managing and communicating about those differences. There are a lot of things we don’t agree on, but I think we can both agree that we need to find a way to work together on…”
“It has been said that the cheapest concession you can make to the other side is to let them know they have been heard. … **Understanding is not agreeing.** One can at the same time understand perfectly and disagree completely with what the other side is saying.”

- Fisher, Ury, & Patton, *Getting to Yes*

“One of the most common complaints we hear from people engaged in difficult conversations is that the other person won’t listen. And when we hear that, our standard advice is ‘You need to spend more time listening to them.’ … Because in the great majority of cases, the reason the other person is not listening to you is not because they are stubborn, but because they don’t feel heard.”

- Riskin et al., *Dispute Resolution and Lawyers*
Listening Exercise

Listen to Jane’s description of one of her employees.

In a sentence or two, reflect back to Jane what you hear her saying.

- What emotions are involved?
- What is the substance of Jane’s complaint?
- What do you think Jane would like to have happen?

It’s sometimes helpful to use a template like the following:

*It sounds like you’re feeling ________ because ________.*

*If I’m hearing you correctly, what you’d like to have happen is ________.*

*Does that sound about right?*
“Conflict tends to divert our attention from our real interests by creating another interest—surviving or winning. That more basic, instinctive interest may eclipse your other interests and make it harder to resolve a conflict. So, just step back out of the conflict and away from anybody else involved in the conflict and think about what you would want if you could have your wish. That’s your interest. Simplify the situation. What do you really want?”

- Dana, Conflict Resolution

- We don’t always know what we want, or even what the key issues are.
- What people say they want (their **demands**) is not always what they really want (their **interests**).
- The lenses through which we view conflicts are influenced by our own self-serving biases and psychological defense mechanisms.
- There are always other perspectives to consider. Find the **third side**.
Think back to Jane’s description of Jim. What do you think Jim is going to say?

Now listen to Jim’s perspective. If you were Jane, how would you reflect back to Jim what you’ve heard him say? What do you think would be most important to acknowledge?

What’s the third side here?

What are Jim’s and Jane’s interests?
“Party should be firm about its basic interests—yielding only when it is clear that they cannot be attained—but also conciliatory toward Other in the sense of seeking out and being responsive to Other’s basic interests. An important aspect of being conciliatory is for Party to be flexible about how its interests are achieved, in order to be open to new ideas about how to reconcile its interests with Other’s.”

- Pruitt & Kim, *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement*

“If you and the other side cannot reach first-order agreement, you can usually reach second-order agreement—that is, agree on where you disagree, so that you both know the issues in dispute, which are not always obvious.”

- Fisher, Ury, & Patton, *Getting to Yes*

“Not all conflicts resolve in transformative ways. Sometimes, achieving a solution with which we can live is a huge accomplishment. … Not every situation ends with ‘win-win’—more than we might think end in ‘mostly ok—mostly ok.’”

- Lebaron & Pillay, *Conflict Across Cultures*
Working toward Resolution

- **Remember what you are trying to accomplish.** What resolution looks like depends on the type of conflict or conversation you are having.

- **Look for solutions that meet both parties’ interests.** Defend your interests, but be flexible about how they are met.

- **Keep your BATNA in mind.** Sometimes we would rather not negotiate or problem-solve with someone who has offended us or who we perceive to be unreasonable. Before you give up, however, ask yourself what the effect of this decision will be. In particular, decide what your “best alternative to a negotiated agreement” (BATNA) is.
  - What will you do if you can’t come to agreement?
  - Your BATNA is a major source of power in difficult conversations.
Problem-Solving Exercise

- Consider again the conflict between Jane and Jim.
- What are some solutions that Jane and Jim might consider? (Just brainstorm here. Don’t try to decide whether the solutions are good or not.)
- What solutions are most likely to meet both Jane’s and Jim’s interests?
Dealing with Difficult Emotions

“There are four major responses a negotiator can make to an offensive comment—ignoring, confronting, deflecting, or engaging. … But the question of most significance in these situations is: **What is your purpose in responding and what do you hope to achieve?**”

- Riskin et al., *Dispute Resolution and Lawyers*

“How can you prevent the cycle of action and reaction? *Do not push back.* When they assert their positions, do not reject them. When they attack your ideas, don’t defend them. When they attack you, don’t counterattack. **Break the vicious cycle by refusing to react. ... A good negotiator rarely makes an important decision on the spot.**”

- Fisher & Ury, *Getting to Yes*

“The capacity for flexibility means suspending judgment and perceiving with a spirit of inquiry. Suspending judgment is not to abandon our beliefs or values, but to **create a space for curiosity** inside ourselves and between us and others.”

- Lebaron & Pillay, *Conflict Across Cultures*
The most difficult time to manage emotions is in the heat of the conflict.

Accept the fact that your judgment is going to be compromised in conflict situations. Identify someone you trust who can help you process the situation.

Decide in advance how you are going to respond. Prepare yourself for triggers such as offensive comments, disrespect, etc.

Establish ground rules for yourself.

- “I’m only going to listen. I’ll respond later.”
- “I’m not going to make any decisions on the spot.”
- “I’m not going to raise my voice.”
- “I’m going to give myself a way out if I find myself in fight-or-flight mode.”

SLOWER Conflict
Emotions and Reflexivity go hand-in-hand. Reflexivity refers to an intentional self-awareness and an ability to reflect on our own successes, failures, and contributions to conflict situations.

Ask yourself some SLOW questions:

What do I want to accomplish? What rules do I need to set for myself, and what is the best way to approach this conversation?

What emotions am I experiencing, and why?

How have I contributed to this conflict? What are the main issues of importance to me here? What interests do I need to defend most vigorously?

What would my ideal resolution look like? What will I do if the conversation doesn’t go well or doesn’t result in the outcome I am hoping for?
“I’ve been doing this for years, and I’m far from an expert. If I’m an expert on anything, it’s on enjoying the learning experience.”

- Gustavo Demoner, expert negotiator