Courageous Conversations That Work

4 Components You Must Get Right

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Is there an important conversation you need to have that makes you anxious just thinking about it?

The stakes are high.

If it doesn't go well, it could make the situation worse.

Maybe you need to give someone feedback and you fear they will get defensive and the relationship will become more strained, or if it's an employee, they will become less engaged.

Maybe you're having conflict with a peer that is getting in the way of you working well together.

Maybe it's the anxiety-producing "managing up" scenario, where you need to talk with your manager about something he or she is doing that makes it hard for you to do your job well.

For these important conversations—these courageous conversations—to work, you need more than courage. You need the skills *and* an effective process for effectively preparing for such conversations and, and then leading the other person in a productive dialogue.

In this report, we will explore four critical components of the Before You Have the Conversation part of the process, to help you lay the foundation for a courageous conversation that works.

The Four Components You Must Get Right

Your Stories

It is human nature to want to make sense out of why things happen and why people do what they do. In an effort to make sense, we "tell ourselves stories" that explain people's behaviors and events that happen. While this is natural, it becomes a problem when we believe the story we created is a fact, rather than our perspective, belief, and opinion. It becomes even more problematic when the story we create is disempowering—e.g. "There's nothing I can do about this because Jane always gets so defensive when you bring stuff up to her"—or leads to a suspicious, judgmental, or antagonistic approach to dealing with someone.

We can tell ourselves stories that assume the other person had malicious intent—like "She did that to get back at me because I didn't think her idea was a good one" or stories that label another person as bad or defective—"e.g. "That just proves how lazy and incompetent he is." We can also create unnecessary stress and anxiety by telling ourselves scary stories about what will happen if we have the conversation, such as "I know if I bring this up, she'll get really offended and then find ways to sabotage my getting ahead in this organization."

We can also tell ourselves productive, empowering stories to explain people's behavior, situations, and our options. So for instance, we could say to ourselves: "Yup…didn't like how Marcy talked to me AT ALL, and…because I don't possess magical mind reading capabilities, I don't know why she did that, so…I won't spend all kinds of time working myself into an angry frenzy by telling myself useless stories about why she did it. I'll focus my energy on how I want to deal with it, and what I need to do to get into a more productive, rational frame of mind."

We can also tell ourselves Give Them The Benefit Of The Doubt Stories, such as "I'm upset over what Sean said, and…since Sean is usually a really thoughtful, considerate guy, it's possible he was having a bad day or, maybe he spoke without thinking…I know I've been guilty of that. Or…maybe I misunderstood him…it wouldn't be the first time that's happened. Regardless…I'm not going to spend my time making up stories to explain why he did. I'm going to focus on how I want to

bring this up to Sean…"

Here are a few questions you can ask to identify and challenge counterproductive stories:

1. What am I telling myself about this person, and…
    a. …is it fact or opinion?
    b. …do I really have all the evidence required to make this assessment?

2. What might be a more benign, compassionate, "give them the benefit of the doubt" story I can tell myself about them?

3. How am I explaining to myself why they did or said what they did or said?

    a. Am I assuming I actually know their intent (called Mind Reading) and getting worked up over this "explanation"…which may be all wrong?

    b. Or…am I giving them the benefit of the doubt and assuming ignorance rather than malicious intent or…simply reminding myself that I can't know their intent and I would be better served focusing on what I want to do about it?

4. If I'm explaining their behavior using a negative story, what might be a more benign, compassionate, Give Them the Benefit Of The Doubt Story I can tell myself about why they did or said this?

5. Am I scaring myself about what will happen if I have the conversation, and if so, what might I say instead that would empower me and make me willing to have the conversation, like "this is a great opportunity to practice my courageous conversation skills so it will be easier next time"?

6. If I'm scaring myself about what might happen, what questions can I ask that will shift me into a curious, exploratory mode, such as "how might this conversation actually be a gift or opportunity for something amazing to happen?"

Your State

One of the things that peak performers in all walks of life know is that "state determines performance." In other word, our ability to perform at our best is largely determined by the emotional/physiological state we are in. If an elite athlete or musician is feeling anxious, angry, or despondent, they are unlikely to perform as they would if they felt excited, joyful, and determined.

Our state has a huge impact on both our thought process and how we enter a conversation. If we are angry, resentful, or hurt, that will color our thought process. It will affect how we perceive the situation and the other person, and will color our strategy for addressing the situation.

If we are angry and filled with self-righteous outrage, we will choose very different words for bringing up the issue than if we are in a calm, empowered, compassionate state. Also, because of the phenomenon Emotional Contagion, if we go into this conversation in an angry, self-righteous state, we are likely to trigger the same in the other person, thereby ruining our chances of achieving the outcome we had hoped for. Thus, we want to learn the skills and engage in behaviors that enable us to shift ourselves into a more positive, productive state. Here are a few actions you can take to shift yourself into a more productive state:

1. Challenge your counterproductive stories, as discussed above.

2. Vent to a trusted friend or advisor until you have discharged the negative emotions, and feel calm.

3. Ask your trusted friend or advisor to share their perspective on the situation. Because they aren't engaged in the drama, they can see it from a more rational perspective, which can help you rise above a small-minded, self-righteous, or hurt emotional state.

4. Give yourself some time for the sharp pain to soften. Often slights and other behaviors we find hurtful seem far less significant with just the passage of a little time. In this calmer, less triggered state, we can approach the person more rationally and benevolently, or…we might just decide it's

not important enough to bring up.

5. Ask yourself "What response by me would be for the Highest Good?" This question can often shift us out of a small, petty, anger-fueled state into a more benevolent, spiritually wise state.

Your Intention

Our intention is our reason for having the conversation. You can also think of it as the outcome we hope the conversation will achieve. If our intention is unreasonable—like changing someone's personality—or hurtful to the other person—like trying to make them feel bad about themselves—we are setting ourselves up for failure. Even if we use the "right" words, if our intentions are unkind or punishing, the other person will pick up on our agenda and respond accordingly. Here are a few questions to help identify your intentions:

1. Is my intention to show them they are wrong and I am right?

2. Is my intention to make them feel bad about themselves?

3. Am I trying to get them to be someone different than who they are?

4. Am I expecting something from them that they probably don't have the capacity to give?

5. What outcome would I like from this conversation and is it possible, reasonable, and truly desirable?

Your Verbiage

All the prep work outlined above makes it more likely that you will come up with the words needed to engage the other person in a productive conversation. That being said, there is obviously a whole body of knowledge and skills just around language patterns that foster candid, constructive conversations and prevent the triggering of defensiveness. Here are a few recommendations to get you started:

1. Ask yourself "What is the least intense, confrontational way to bring up this issue or state my case?" You can always escalate if the person dismisses your initial message, but it is really hard to de-escalate once you've triggered another person.

2. Examine the words you are thinking of using and remove any that are judgmental, sarcastic, or accusatory. Replace them with descriptive words—i.e., words that describe what happened rather than label or judge (e.g. "unprofessional").

3. Use the Declaration/Invitation format to briefly "declare" what you want to talk about and then "invite" the other person into a dialogue…versus you making it a monologue. For more information on that, see Here's a Way for Difficult Conversations to Be Less Difficult

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See the Short Video

"What's the ONE Conversation You Need to Have?"

Courageous Conversation Self-Assessment

Directions: Take a separate piece of paper or your computer and answer these questions. This will help you get clearer on the impact NOT having these conversations has on you and will hopefully help you increase your desire to become more skilled at having these conversations.

1. What conversation would make THE biggest difference in your effectiveness and happiness, if you had it and it went well?

2. What other conversations either have not gone well for you, or you have been avoiding because you don't believe they will go well?

3. What price do you and your employer pay for you not having these conversations or these conversations not working out well?

4. What difference would it make to you—both professionally and personally—if you were more skilled at having these conversations?

About The Author

David Lee, the founder of HumanNature@Work, works with employers who want to improve employee engagement, productivity, and customer service through his consulting, coaching, and training.

He has worked with organizations and presented at conferences both domestically and abroad.

An internationally recognized thought leader in the field of employee engagement and performance, he is the author of over 100 articles and book chapters published in the US, Europe, India, Australia, and China. He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, published by MEMIC, and *Powerful Storytelling Techniques*, published by ATD Press. The second edition of the business classic, *The Talent Management Handbook*, features a chapter of his about the topic of Onboarding.

Much of David's work over the years has involved comparing employers and managers who know how to bring out the best in their people with those that don't, and extracting those core principles and practices. David Lee's work also focuses on helping managers and leaders benefit from the research on human nature that typically is not known in the business world. By translating this research into practical strategies, his work helps managers and leaders improve their ability to boost employee productivity, engagement, and overall effectiveness.

To capture the impact understanding human nature makes, David borrows from the popular TV show *The Dog Whisperer,* and explains "Understanding human nature helps you become a People Whisperer, and by doing so, dramatically improves your ability to get the best results from others (and yourself)."

Recently, his work on what makes organizations resilient and employees perform at their best has focused on the central role productive relationships and productive conversations have on these outcomes, with this being the take away message:

"Every better business result you want requires having a better conversation."

Related Articles By David Lee

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Is Relationship Friction Causing Operational Friction in Your Organization?

Managing Up: How to Bring Up a Difficult Issue With Your Boss

Three Critical Conversations that Boost Employee Engagement

You can find all of these articles, plus a recording of "Let's Talk for a Change", as well as video excerpts at this resource page made for seminar participants.

To book a complimentary 30 minute consult to help you achieve "better results through better conversations", or...

For information about coaching, consulting, and training around productive workplace relationships and the conversations that make them possible, or...to

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Comments from Clients and Program Participants

Your program on Constructive Conversations was THE most memorable seminar I've ever attended, and I've been to a lot of training and a lot of school. It amazed me how you engaged the audience for four hours without PowerPoint.

> *Ingrid Lederman, DDJ Capital Management, LLC, Waltham, MA*

Your seminar Constructive Conversations was fabulous! I got so much out of it.

> *Jayne Allison, GPC Biotech, MA*

The value David provided our organization went far beyond the actual classroom experience. In addition to the wealth of information he provided during class, David provided a broad support system to further the development of our senior management team…

Specific elements included working with the team to articulate a behavioral vision, one-on-one coaching, individualized professional development plans, and a variety of other support services that enabled us to build a culture of teamwork, accountability, and excellent customer service. While everyone says they will help you be more productive and get better results from your people, David is the only one I've worked with who really helps you get there.

> *Eric Henry, CEO and Chief Investment Officer, Hershey Trust Company, PA*

David Lee facilitated our senior leadership retreat recently. I was most impressed with how well and how quickly David engaged with the team, and the members with him. It provided for a very smooth and effective transition into what was an open, honest and valuable discussion. David's facilitation skills put people at ease and at the same time allowed for broad participation. At the end of the day, there was unanimous agreement to bring him back for our next retreat!

> *Jim Donovan, CEO and President of Lincoln County Healthcare, ME*

I recently attended a meeting at which David Lee spoke about employee engagement and retention, and could not have been more impressed by his enthusiasm, subject matter expertise and ability to draw the audience into his topic.

He is truly passionate about what he does, and it shows in his ability to engage participants across different levels of an organization, which made his seminar extend far beyond the bounds of a traditional presentation.

He is a fantastic listener and is attuned to the interests and issues faced by his audience, quickly shifting gears to address individuals while still holding the attention of the larger group - no small task! His break-out sessions were also terrific; well executed and thoughtful, without seeming like run of the mill icebreakers. I could not recommend him more for a fun, innovative approach to employee onboarding and engagement!

> *Sarah Canapari, Human Resources Generalist at Nixon Peabody LLP, MA*