

Charged Conversation with a Colleague
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Work with anyone long enough and you're bound to encounter a difference of opinion. Most of the time, these disagreements are resolved amicably. But if you're like most people, every now and then you find yourself immersed in a conversation so emotionally charged it seems to have nothing to do with the issues you're supposedly discussing.

What do you do when a conversation is spiraling out of control? When you've tried all the patient listening you can muster and the other person still won't budge? How do you get the conversation back on track?

Anthony Suchman has invested a good portion of his career in searching for an answer. A charming physician with a profound intellect, Suchman has been studying the dynamics of human relationships for more than three decades, publishing his results in some of the world's leading medical journals.

According to Suchman, every workplace conversation operates on two levels: a task channel and a relationship channel. Occasionally the two get fused, which is when disagreements intensify and collaborations break down.

Here's what he means: Suppose you and I are working together on a project. Along the way, we have a difference of opinion about our next steps. Perhaps I think we should use PowerPoint to deliver an important presentation, and you see PowerPoint as a poor communication tool. When I express a point of view that's different from yours, you may take our disagreement at face value by saying, "Hmm, I guess Ron sees it differently." But if we're new to working together, or if we've had a few run-ins in the past, you're likely to read beyond my suggestion, using it to draw inferences about our relationship. For instance, you may misinterpret my suggestion as a lack of trust, a sign of disrespect, or even proof of competition.

It's at this point, Suchman argues, that our task-focused disagreement becomes contaminated with concerns about our relationship. And when that happens, things escalate. Fast.

Neurologically, what Suchman is describing is the activation of a fear response. When we perceive danger, our hypothalamus sends a signal that releases adrenalin and cortisol into the bloodstream. That triggers a fight-or-flight response that sends our bodies into overdrive, short-circuiting our ability to concentrate or think creatively. We experience tunnel vision.

In the evolutionary past, having an automatic reaction to fear was quite useful. It helped protect us from oncoming predators and kept us alive long enough to reproduce. But in today's workplace, an involuntary fear response can interfere with our ability to work collaboratively with others. It's one reason why the greater the emotional charge, the harder it is to get either side to listen.

To defuse an emotionally volatile situation like this, Suchman believes the first step is to disentangle the task and relational channels. “When people disagree, it’s often because one party misinterprets the feedback they’ve received as a personal attack,” he says. “So it becomes: ‘If you like my idea, you like me,’ and ‘If you don’t like my idea, you don’t like me.’ That puts a huge encumbrance on the task channel and makes it really hard to speak openly.”

Our mental capacity is limited, Suchman points out, which means we can attend to either the task channel or the relationship channel. It’s when we get the two channels crossed that our ability to collaborate constructively suffers. One approach to reducing tensions during disagreements involves deliberately attending to the relational channel and reaffirming your commitment to the relationship. This way there’s no confusion about what the argument is really about. By momentarily focusing on the relationship, you disentangle the personal from the business.

Suchman recommends using a specific series of relationship-building statements to make the conversation more productive, which are represented in the acronym PEARLS:

Partnership:

“I really want to work on this with you.”

“I bet we can figure this out together.”

Empathy:

“I can feel your enthusiasm as you talk.”

“I can hear your concern.”

Acknowledgement:

“You clearly put a lot of work into this.”

“You invested in this, and it shows.”

Respect:

“I’ve always appreciated your creativity.”

“There’s no doubt you know a lot about this.”

Legitimation:

“This would be hard for anyone.”

“Who wouldn’t be worried about something like this?”

Support:

“I’d like to help you with this.”

“I want to see you succeed.”

Using relationship-building statements can feel unnatural at first, especially when you’re not accustomed to complimenting others. I know they did for me when I first started using them in workplace conversations. The key, I’ve discovered, is to employ them sparingly at first and to only say the ones that genuinely reflect how you feel.

Almost immediately, you’ll notice that inserting a well-timed PEARLS statement can dramatically alter the tenor of a conversation. Because no matter how far up we climb on an organizational ladder, we are still stuck using an emotionally-driven brain. When fear enters the equation, it’s impossible to get people to do their best work, which is why restoring confidence in the relationship can be a powerful tool.

The value of relationship-building statements extends far beyond the workplace. They're as effective with spouses, children, and friends as they are with colleagues. The reason is simple: anytime you attend to people's psychological need for connection, you have the potential to improve the quality of an exchange. The more heated the argument, the more vital the statements become.

Ron Friedman, Ph.D. is the host of the Peak Work Performance Summit, a free online conference on health, happiness and productivity airing January 5-12, 2016. He is also author of *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace*.