

Managing Challenging Conversations

Webinar think sheet

Managing challenging conversations well is no longer just a good idea – it is integral to the success of all relationships and the quality of an early childhood program. When conversations are handled well, collaboration and productivity are enhanced, morale goes up, and better decisions result.

Why do we find ourselves in a situation requiring the management of challenging conversations?

- Clash of values
- Diverse ideas about what constitutes quality practice
- Slippage in communication which leads to misunderstanding
- Personality differences ...and more

'wouldn't it be great if everyone was just like me...maybe NOT...it is the differences in our workplaces which make them so rich and diverse' (Anthony Semann, 2020)

Why are some conversations so difficult?

- It is important to reflect on the enablers and often the disablers in a conversation.
- We hold our views as truth.
- We are conditioned to self protect.
- We have a peripheral bias.
- We like to be right. ('wrong can often feel like being right')

Effective communication can be a challenge:

- Why? Because it means many things to many of us.
- It's no secret that effective educators are also good communicators.
- And those effective at communicating have learned that effective communication is as much about authenticity as the words they speak and write.

The mistakes we make:

- Avoid
- Attack
- Preach
- Gossip

'we all come with pieces attached to us' (Loris Malaguzzi)
'and we all leave pieces on each other' (Anthony Semann, 2020)

The Dilemma: Avoid or Confront. If we try to avoid the problem:

- we will feel taken advantage of
- our feelings will fester
- we will wonder why we didn't stick up for ourselves, and
- we will rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things.

But if we confront the problem, we are unable to predict what might occur.

For many people, challenging or difficult conversations are a bit like the common cold: we all get them, they can be a real nuisance, but there seems to be no cure. It's never about wrong or right, it's often about values. Communication is the building blocks for any relationship, and these relationships are often tested in early childhood settings. We have a communication bias. Trying to find a common ground between parties who disagree allows us to create a space for reasoned, just and respectful discussion.

Amanda Sinclair, teacher in leadership, change, ethics and diversity and author of Leadership for the Disillusioned encourages us to take off our armour and let the world see us, as we really are... (Anthony Semann, 2020)

Strategies

1. Mind the say-do gap.
2. Make the complex simple.
3. Find your own voice.
4. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.

Consider the following

- *Mind the say-do gap.* This is all about trust. If your actions don't align with your words, there's trouble.
- *Make the complex simple.* Simplicity has never been more powerful or necessary. Effective communicators distil complex thoughts and strategies into simple, terms that colleagues and families can grasp and act upon.
- *Find your own voice.* Use language that's distinctly your own. Let your values come through in your communication. People want real. People respect real. People follow real. Don't disguise who you are. Be genuine, and people will respect you for it.
- *Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.* Stop, look and listen. Remember that effective communication is two-way. Good communicators know how to ask good questions, and then listen with both their eyes and ears.

'Why do we forget so easily that in order to talk, we first had to learn to listen?'

(Eulalia Bosch)

Each difficult conversation is really three conversations

- ***the 'what happened' conversation***

The Truth Assumption – we often fail to question one key assumption – I am right, you are wrong. There's only one hitch: I am not always right.

Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what is true, but about what is important. The Intention Invention – the error we make is simple: we assume we know the intention of others when we don't. Intentions are invisible. We make them up.

The Blame Frame – the third error we make is that most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who's to blame for the mess we're in. Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong and how we might correct them going forward. Focusing instead on the Conversations System allows us to learn about the real causes of the problem, and to work on correcting them.

- ***the 'feelings' conversation***

An Opera Without Music – difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings. They are an integral part of the conflict.

Understanding feelings, talking about feelings and managing feelings are among the greatest challenges of being human. Talking about feelings is a skill that can be learned.

- ***the 'identity' conversation***

This conversation offers us significant leverage in managing our anxiety and improving our skills in the other two conversations.

The identity conversation is about what I am saying to myself about me. Something beyond the apparent substance of the conversation is at stake for you.

'Forgetfulness is necessary for creation — because creators must learn to forget things in order to create new things including those things associated to relationships.'

(Fredrick Nietzsche)

Moving to a learning conversation

Once you understand the challenges inherent in the Three Conversations and the mistakes, we make in each, you are likely to find that your purpose for having a particular conversation will shift. You come to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved, the reality of joint contribution to the problem, the central role feelings play, and what the issues mean to each person's self-esteem and identity.

Instead of wanting to persuade and get your own way, you want to understand what has happened:

- from the other person's point of view
- explain your own point of view
- share and understand feelings, and
- work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward.
- Moving to a learning conversation

Stop arguing about who's right and explore each other's stories.

- Arguing blocks us from exploring each other's stories – it inhibits our ability to learn how the other person sees the world. We tend to trade conclusions but neither conclusion makes sense in the other person's story.
- Arguing without understanding is unpersuasive – it inhibits change. People almost never change without first feeling understood. To get anywhere in a disagreement, we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within it.

We all see the world differently

- First, we take in information.
- Second, we interpret what we see, hear, and feel; we give it all meaning.
- Then we draw conclusions about what is happening.
- At each step there is an opportunity for different peoples' stories to diverge.
- In difficult conversations, too often we trade only conclusions back and forth, without stepping down to where most of the real action is.
- We have different information.
- We have different interpretations of the same information.
- Our conclusions reflect self-interest.

Move from certainty to curiosity

- Curiosity: The way into their story. There is only one way to come to understand the other person's story and that is by being curious.
- What's Your Story? Get curious about what you don't know about yourself too.

The cost of blame

- When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty.
- Focusing on blame hinders problem-solving.
- Blame can leave a bad system undiscovered.

The 'gold standard' here is working for mutual understanding, not necessarily mutual agreement.

Keep the following three purposes front and centre in your consciousness:

- Learning their story
- Expressing your views and feelings

In a nutshell

- Listen to understand, don't listen to respond
- Problem-solving together

Empathy is a journey, not a destination.

'The deepest form of understanding another person is empathy. Empathy involves a shift from my observing how you seem on the outside, from my imagining what it feels like to be you on the inside, with your set of experiences and background and looking out at the world through your eyes'. (Stone et al. 2010)

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