

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Module 2: Starting with Self: Preparation

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Module 2: Starting with Self: Preparation

Between Stimulus and Response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.

Viktor Frankl

Module 2: Starting with Self: Preparation

It has been said that “the only person I really have any control over is me.” An essential characteristic of those skilled in effectively engaging conflict is self-awareness and self-management. What are my personal beliefs and experiences with conflict? What do I do when I perceive someone has a perspective different than my own? When do I find myself defending my perspective, and pushing my solution as the “right” answer? Stephen Covey, in his book *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, shares the following quote: *Between Stimulus and Response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In those choices lie our growth and our happiness.*

Viktor Frankl

It has been my experience that our default response when engaging conflict is often less than helpful. Morton Deustch, Social Psychologist, says that our choices determine whether we escalate or de-escalate conflict. Self-awareness and self-management then become critical to our effectiveness.



In this module you and your team will:

- Identify “styles” for engaging conflict, along with the pros and cons of each.
- Increase personal awareness of your current “ways of being” when engaging conflict.
- Expand your capacity for seeing conflict as a context for possibility.
- Be introduced to a structure for preparing yourself to engage effectively when conflict is likely to surface.

What is my Conflict Style?

Most of us have developed a “way of being” when confronting conflict. While, in many cases, our response is somewhat situation specific, we tend to have a “default response” or style. While the literature identifies a range of models for reflecting on this notion, this is not about differentiating a “right style” from a “wrong style.” For the most part, one

can identify both pros and cons of just about any style. The point is that our ability to be intentional in choosing a conflict-response style is dependent on a level of **self-awareness** as to what we tend to do. In fact, much of our preparation occurs in the context of increasing our personal reflection and self-awareness.

In their book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*, introduced in Module 1, the authors state:

As people begin to feel unsafe, they start down one of two unhealthy paths. They move either to silence (withholding meaning from the pool), or to violence (trying to force meaning in the pool).

They go on to say:

***Silence** consists of any act to purposefully withhold information from the pool of meaning. It's almost always done as a means of avoiding potential problems, and it always restricts the flow of meaning. Methods range from playing verbal games to avoiding a person entirely. The three most common forms of silence are masking, avoiding, and withdrawing.*

***Violence** consists of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control, or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into the pool. Methods range from name-calling and monologuing to making threats. The three most common forms are controlling, labeling, and attacking.*





What is my Conflict Style?

In his book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, introduced in Module 1, William Isaacs introduces a schematic for describing an unfolding conversation. He goes on to describe what he refers to as Fundamental Choice Points, which will influence the structure of the conversation and our ultimate experience with others. When engaged in a conversation where there are differences of opinion, strong emotions, and important issues at stake, we initially engage in deliberation. The word deliberation means to take careful thought, to reflect or to weigh out. In other words, we think about what is being said. In the context of this deliberation, we tend to make one of two choices: **suspend** judgment, or **defend** our point of view.

Suspending judgment starts with the awareness that I am making a judgment about your point of view. I choose to dis-identify with this judgment in order to “listen without resistance.” My goal is to more deeply understand your thinking and point of view.

When describing the choice to **defend**, Isaac says:

*The word **defend** comes from roots that mean “to ward off an attack.” This is a billiard ball model of conversations. In a discussion people see themselves as separate from one another. They take positions to put forth arguments and defend their stakes.*

A third, and well-known, model for reflecting on conflict style comes from the work of Kenneth Thomas. He proposes a two-dimensional model for assessing conflict style based on assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy his/her concerns, while cooperativeness is the extent to which an individual attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns. From this model, he proposes five different styles of conflict engagement. They are:

- **Competing:** is described as being assertive and uncooperative. When competing, an individual is more focused on addressing his/her concerns, sometimes at the expense of the other person meeting their needs. The competing person will often use any resources available to win.
- **Accommodating:** is described as unassertive and cooperative. It is considered the opposite of competing, and is sometimes described as self-sacrificial. When accommodating the individual neglects his/her concerns in order to meet the needs of the other person.
- **Avoiding:** is described as both unassertive and uncooperative. In this case, the individual does not pursue his/her objectives, neither those of the other. In many cases the conflict is denied.
- **Collaborating:** is both assertive and cooperative, and is fundamentally the opposite of avoiding. In the context of collaboration, the parties seek to find solutions and make decisions that address the concerns of all involved. In this case, the parties are committed to achieving mutual gain or mutual benefit for all involved.

- **Compromising:** is seen as moderately assertive and cooperative. In this case, the parties are looking for expedient, mutually acceptable solutions that may only partially meet the objectives of those involved.

Discussion: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conflict style:

- Where do you typically find yourself on the silence/violence continuum? What triggers you from one to the other?
- In what situations do you find yourself defending yourself? In what types of situations are you more likely to suspend judgment?
- What conflict contexts prove most challenging for you? Which of the five styles described above might be considered your default response?
- Reflect on the five styles of conflict engagement described by Thomas, and identify three pros and three cons of each.



Conflict as a Context for Possibility

In Module 1, we introduced the notion that “the free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solutions no one individual would have come to on his own.” It would seem this potential is rarely experienced by teams and groups. When asked to define, and/or describe, their experience of conflict, people will often use such descriptors as stressful, exhausting, futile, scary, dangerous, polarizing, etc. When asked to describe life without conflict, one will often hear responses ranging from peaceful to stagnant and boring.

The point is that conflict is neither good nor bad; it simply is. As stated earlier, at the heart of conflict is a “perception of incompatible difference or threat” to our resources, needs or values. It is how we **interpret** these differences that create our experience. It could be said that our

experience in conflict is embedded in the stories we tell ourselves about the situation, or the people with whom we are engaged. Even the language we use as professionals to describe the experience reflects these stories. We talk about conflict as something to be managed or resolved. We see conflict as something to be fixed, so that we can get on with things. Too often, we see conflict as what stands between us and our objectives.

Recently, a new term is surfacing that I believe reflects a shift in our thinking. As an alternative to Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution, one is beginning to hear the term Conflict Engagement. This begins to hint at the potential that exists if, and when, we choose to not avoid conflict, but rather to engage perceived differences with an expectation of possibility.

If, at a fundamental level, it is our beliefs about (and orientation to) conflict which create our experience, what is our choice? How do we impact what is often a deeply embedded belief system? At the heart of preparation is a shift in orientation to a conversation in which we have found ourselves stuck. For example it is a shift from:

- **Certainty to Curiosity:**
How would a better understanding of your point of view expand my perspective on the situation?
- **Debate to Exploration:**
Rather than argue between our two current perspectives, let’s expand our shared understanding of the issue(s) at hand.
- **Simplicity to Complexity:**
My hunch is that this issue is more complex than we are willing to admit. Rather than engaging in simplistic thinking, let’s acknowledge and engage the complexity.
- **Either/Or thinking to And thinking:**
Polarizing around the issue is not useful if we want to achieve mutual gain or benefit. Let’s expand our range of options.





Increasing our effectiveness in the context of conflict is not simply about learning new skills or strategies. While this is essential and will be addressed in subsequent lessons, these skills and strategies must be built upon a shift in who we choose to be in these challenging situations.

Models for reflecting on this choice can be found in the emerging field of coaching. Coaches assist people to increase awareness of how choices related to personal being are impacting their achievement of some goal or objective. One paradigm is found in the distinction between being “**at effect**” or “**at cause**”.

When operating “**at effect**,” we feel helpless in the face of some set of circumstances. We often seek out others’ to commiserate about how bad things are. A colleague of mine refers to this as “recruiting third-party warriors” to our view of the situation. We take fewer and fewer risks, and are content to just try to get through another day without being a complete victim. Our conversations are what runs our lives. These conversations focus on what we can’t do because of the actions of another, or the situation, as opposed to what we can do. Being at effect is not particularly satisfying, but it is predictable and familiar.

When operating “**at cause**,” we don’t spend a lot of energy figuring out how things got to be the way they are, who is to blame, or who happens to be right or wrong. Instead, we focus on effective action toward mutual purpose. We are more concerned with having a situation or relationship work than the reason it will not. The situation or relationship

is not approached as though something is wrong, rather that there is something missing. There is a belief that the actions we choose to take will influence a situation, and can move us toward a satisfactory outcome. We take responsibility in achieving what we are committed to, both in the relationship and the situation.

Discussion: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of conflict as possibility:

- How and where were your beliefs about conflict formed?
- How do your beliefs about conflict serve you in collaboration and teaming?
- In what ways do your beliefs about conflict not serve you well?
- What assumptions are these beliefs built on?
- What are you committed to creating around your capacity for engaging conflict?
- What specific action(s) might you take to become more “at cause” in challenging conversations?

Becoming “At Integrity” with a Commitment to Mutual Purpose

This module is designed to support intentionality when preparing to engage in a conversation in which conflict is likely to surface. Lawrence Susskind, negotiation theorist and practitioner, has said that when preparing to negotiate, 70% of your overall time should be spent in preparation. Fundamentally, preparation is about bringing our intentions, speaking, and actions into alignment. We are said to be “at integrity” when this is the case, and “out of integrity” when out of alignment in one or more areas. Being “out of integrity” does not mean we

lack, or do not value integrity. It basically means that we are currently “not walking our talk.” And if we want to increase our effectiveness, we need to take action.

When preparing to engage in challenging conversation, it is useful to focus our attention in three areas:

- Personal Preparation.
- Substantive Preparation.
- Procedural Preparation.

Personal Preparation: takes place in the context of self-awareness and self-management. It is about owning responsibility for our choices, and bringing them into alignment with our commitments. It is about assessing our orientation to the conversation, and intentionally shifting it when appropriate. It was once described to me by an instructor as “shifting from judgment and fear, to curiosity and compassion.”

Some questions to support this reflection are adapted from the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*:

- What is our purpose for having the conversation?
- What am I committed to:
 - for myself?
 - for others?
 - for this relationship?
- What does my behavior tell me about what my motives are?
- How do I bring my behavior in line with these commitments?

Substantive Preparation: focuses on the content of our conversation. Too often, we enter challenging conversations with a set of assumptions regarding the purpose and objectives for the engagement. We are often unclear as to what the “real” issues are. We are also unclear as to our real interests around the issue(s), in addition to having no real clue as to what is important to the other person. Our perspective may also be tainted by “stories” others have shared with us regarding the situation.

Some questions to support substantive reflection and preparation include:

- What are the issues?
- What is my story? What assumptions am I operating from?
- How might I test these assumptions?
- What are my interests? Theirs? Common?
- What information is needed to engage the conversation intelligently?
- What are possible options based on interests and mutual gains?

Procedural Preparation: focuses less on the “what” of the conversation, and more on the “how.” What agreements might we want to make prior to engaging the issue(s) that might support our effectiveness? When choosing to engage particularly challenging conversations, we might want to talk about “how” we might proceed, before actually proceeding.

Some questions to support procedural reflection and preparation include:

- How do we maintain a positive tone?
- How will we maintain safety?
- How do we sustain our commitment to mutual benefit and gain?
- Do we need to clarify shared expectations?
- Logistics: time, location, who needs to participate in this conversation, etc.

Discussion: As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of effective preparation for engaging conflict:

- Identify a challenging conversation you have had recently in which you were insufficiently prepared.
- What was the outcome?
- What was missing based on what has been shared in this modules
- Identify a challenging conversation that you and/or your team is anticipating.
- What will you do to prepare to engage this conversation with maximum effectiveness?





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