

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Module 4: Sharing your Perspective

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Special Education Resolution Center, Oklahoma State University
Written by Greg Abell, Sound Options Group, LLC

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Module 4: Sharing your Perspective

Seek first to understand . . . then to be understood.

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We stated earlier that effective collaboration is contingent on the ability to “balance advocacy and inquiry.” In the previous module, Listening for Understanding, we focused on supporting inquiry. In this context, our energy is primarily focused on understanding what the other party wants and needs to have understood. We shared from the classic, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey where he encourages us to:

Seek first to understand . . . then to be understood.

Engagement in collaboration that is committed to mutual purpose and gain requires that we also be able to advocate our interests in relationship to the shared issue(s). This, at times, can be experienced as the most challenging aspect of a difficult conversation. Too often, the person, to whom we have

been listening, experiences the sharing of our perspective as a rebuttal to what they have been sharing. We want to share our thoughts in a way that increase our shared pool of meaning, rather than arguing the veracity of our individual perspectives.

In this module, you and your team will:

- Learn the keys to creating safety in a challenging conversation.
- Learn to sort facts, interpretations, and interests.
- Identify strategies for sharing perspective in a way that makes it “easier” for the other person to hear.
- Know when to “loop back” to listening in order to continue to balance advocacy with inquiry.



Creating Safety While Sharing Your Perspective

It is my experience that many who are uncomfortable with conflict are also uncomfortable requesting what they need, or sharing what they think. We assume that by initiating a request or sharing a divergent opinion, we run the risk of seriously upsetting the other person. Depending on the nature of the request, it might be perceived as critical of that person and serve to upset the relationship. There is also the risk of having the request denied, the opinion ignored, and a subsequent conflict may develop. Maybe it is just easier not to ask or share. The consequences just seem too risky.

Too often, we face the question: “Is this **context safe**, and is this a **safe person** with whom to share my needs, thoughts, and ideas?” At a basic level, we engage in a cost/benefit analysis. What are the risks of sharing my perspective on this topic? What is possible, or what are the potential benefits of putting forth my ideas? While these questions may be valid, our analysis of the situation does not always provide a complete or accurate understanding of the situation. Too often, we focus on the risks and lose sight of the benefits.

Asking the question, “Should I share” may be appropriate. However, the fundamental question needs to be: “How do I put forth what I need to share in a way that will make it easy for the others to hear, understand, and respond?” There are a number of basic, yet very effective, strategies that will support our success in this phase of collaboration.

In Module 2, we introduced the notion of shifting our overall orientation when engaging in a potentially challenging conversation. One shift suggested was from “either/or thinking” to “and” thinking. When engaged in “either/or thinking,” we can quickly become polarized around the notion of one of us being right and one wrong. As a result, we tend to adopt a defensive or adversarial posture, and spend little time in joint exploration. We believe that there is room for only one perspective on the table, ours. Shifting to “and” thinking breaks this paradigm. “And” is inclusive in that it seeks to hear



from and explore the multiple perspectives around what is typically a complex issue. “I want to hear and understand your perspective AND I want to add my perspective.” I am sharing my perspective, not as a rebuttal to your point of view, but in service of our shared learning and understanding.

All of this is in service of our primary objective for collaboration. We choose to collaborate because we are pursuing a shared objective, and are committed to an outcome that will be acceptable to all. In



the book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*, this is referred to as a “Commitment to Mutual Purpose.” The authors advocate the value in stating this commitment at the outset of the conversation, as a foundational element for creating safety. When parties recognize that we are seeking a mutually acceptable outcome, they are more willing to drop their defensiveness and begin a joint exploration of the issue(s).

While this commitment sets the stage, it does not make the conversation easy. We may still be talking about significant issues, around which there are often strong emotions. Therefore, it is essential that we maintain civility and respect in the conversation. A question identified above asks, “How do I put forth what I need to share in a way that will make it easy for the others to hear and respond?” Both what we say, and how we say it, are critical. We will learn more about this in the next section. Suffice it to say at this point that we want to share our perspective in a way that it neither negates nor disrespects the other person or their point of view. In summary, we are always looking to maintain a conversation that is safe, and supports our ability to fully explore the issues.

As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of putting forth your perspective in challenging conversations:

- In what contexts do you find it most difficult to share your perspective?
- Describe a situation when you experienced a conversation where people were able to openly share and discuss divergent points of view? What contributed to the success of this conversation?
- What do you need to feel safe sharing your perspective with those who may disagree with you?
- What can you do to increase the likelihood that people will openly share their ideas with you?

Differentiating Facts and Interpretations, Positions and Interests

The previous section focused primarily on **how** we will share our perspective. Our goal is to share our perspective in such a way that it is easy for the other to hear, understand, and respond. In this section we will focus more on what we will share. We will focus our strategies on a couple of key distinctions: facts/interpretation of facts and positions/interests.

Let's start with differentiating facts from interpretation of facts. Chris Argyris, business theorist and a key thinker around the notion of Learning Organizations, developed the "Ladder of Inference" as a model of how people process information. Visualize a ladder as we start on the first step in our process of making meaning out of experience:

- **At the base of the ladder:** We start with data and experiences. We are experiencing our world almost as a camera would see it.
- **First rung:** We select certain data and experiences to pay attention to. We can not possibly attend to everything, so we are selective. Our selection is influenced by our past, our expectations, our values, etc.
- **Second rung:** To the data selected we add meaning. This is a critical shift from facts (actual events) to creating interpretations of facts.
- **Third rung:** Assumptions are formed on the basis of the meaning we attach to the events.
- **Fourth rung:** Conclusions are drawn as to what this means for us.
- **Fifth rung:** Beliefs are adopted or reinforced.
- **Top of the Ladder:** We act on these beliefs, the results of which become the foundation for new experiences and data.

This model clearly delineates the point at which we move from fact (data and experience) to interpretation of fact. Some additional things to consider in looking at this model include:

- The time it takes to get from the ground to the top of the ladder may only be nanoseconds.
- This is not meant to discourage us from making assumptions about events because that is impossible.
- An assumption is basically an untested hypothesis or a hunch.
- The critical point to become aware of is when our interpretation of the facts become, for us, the facts. At this point, we shed curiosity and take on certainty. We are no longer interested in what else might be important to understand. We know what the real story is.

When sharing your perspective, how often are you sharing it as fact? How often are your "facts" simply your interpretation and understanding of a situation? How often do we become so committed to our interpretation that we are unwilling to acknowledge and explore the perspective of another? It is essential that we are clear, both to ourselves and with those to whom we are sharing, when we are describing facts and when sharing interpretation.

The second distinction to make is between positions and interests. Roger Fisher and William Ury, in the paradigm-shifting book, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, provide an elegant structure for understanding what needs to be done. The model in a nutshell looks like the following:

- When we come together to make decisions around difficult “*issues*,” we typically bring our “*positions*” to the conversation.
- Our positions usually include our perspective (interpretation) on the issue(s) along with our preferred solution(s).
- As stated in previous lessons, when positions are perceived as compatible, there is no problem. However, when our positions threaten each other, we open ourselves to the “dark side” of conflict. This is where self-awareness and choice become critical.
- The choice is between defending our positions or suspending judgment and seeking to understand the “*interests*” driving the positions of each of us. In this context, where a person’s positions express “what” they want, their underlying interests are “why” this is important to them.
- A wise and effective decision is not found in a compromise between our positions, but rather in a solution that meets as many of our shared and independent interests as possible.

In the context of this model, the question when sharing is, “Am I sharing my positions or my underlying interests (needs, values, objectives, etc.)?” Sharing our positions is similar to sharing our interpretation; it leaves little room or inclination for broader exploration. We become committed to these proposed solutions as if they are the truth or facts that must be defended or advocated at all costs. Fundamentally, the conversation is most productive when we are focused on advocating and inquiring into our underlying interests.

When balancing advocacy and inquiry, we are seeking to develop a shared understanding of a situation.

The questions we are seeking to address jointly include:

- What is the current situation? (Facts)
- What does the situation mean to us? Individually? Collectively? (Interpretation)
- What are we working toward in this situation? Individually? Collectively? (Interests)

As a group, use the following questions to increase your shared understanding of the distinctions between facts/interpretation of facts and positions/interests:

- Identify conversations you have been in where lack of shared understanding of facts/interpretation of facts and positions/interests was problematic.
- Identify and describe a current situation where you see evidence of this confusion.
- Describe examples of the “Ladder of Inference” at play.
- Identify a current difficult conversation in which you may be involved. Where might you be confusing facts and interpretation of facts? What are equally viable alternative interpretations to the facts as you see them?
- Identify a current difficult conversation in which you may be involved. What are the issues at the heart of this conversation? What positions have you adopted regarding the issues? What are your interests?

Additional Strategies: What Then Do I Share?

In the previous section, we identified some critical distinctions between facts and interpretation of facts, and between positions and interests. The questions at this point could be, “Okay, I understand the distinction. So, what do I share when putting my perspective out there?” The answer is all of it. Once again, the critical consideration is in the “how” of sharing.

When sharing in the context of facts and interpretation of the facts, it is essential that I share both if you are truly going to understand my perspective. I want to start by sharing the data and/or facts that are informing my perspective. I may want to describe specific, observable events or behaviors that have drawn my attention. Again, it is critical that we delineate that which we can observe from our interpretation of it. There is no judgment attached.

To this we add our interpretation of what these events or behaviors mean to us. It is at this point that the “how” becomes most critical. I am sharing my interpretation as a hunch. As a hunch, it has not become fixed in my mind as fact but remains open to discussion. I am sharing in such a way

that says I am open to consider alternate interpretations. I am open to the possibility that I may have misinterpreted a situation where a radically different interpretation might make more sense. Fundamentally, I am open to learning.

What does this look like? In a meeting with a parent, I might describe a significant change in a child’s behavior on the playground. I might share behavioral **data** that indicates a significant increase in aggressive behaviors by the child. I might then state that it is now obvious (**interpretation**) that we, as a team, need to review the issue of medication for this child. By using the word “obvious,” I have elevated my interpretation to the level of fact about which I have adopted a high degree of certainty. I dare you to argue with me.

An alternate approach would start the same way. I would share the same behavioral data from my playground observations. I might then propose one possible interpretation of the behavioral change as being related to an issue of medication. I would pose this as a question, a hunch, a point for additional exploration, not a fact. I would then open





the question to the team to explore what additional plausible explanations there might be. In asking this question, we might find out about changes in the home routine or even additional evidence that supports our hunch. Our goal is to share our perspective in such a way that it invites an ongoing shared exploration of the issue.

When framing our sharing in the context of positions and interests, it is equally important that we share both. It is critical in a conversation for collaboration that we identify our common and independent interests. This exploration, which we will cover in more detail in the next module, is critical to our capacity to achieve mutual gain or benefit from the conversation. Our interest will become the criteria by which we evaluate a range of possible options.

So what role do our positions play? Is taking a position bad? The answer depends on how you hold the position. If the position, which tends to include your proposed solution, is proposed as the only viable solution, then it becomes problematic. Your attention shifts to advocating your position while losing sight of the more important interests. On the other hand, if your position is held as one possible option, then it may be helpful. There is nothing wrong with bringing and sharing potential solutions into the conversation. It is when you become more committed to your solution than mutual gains collaboration that it becomes problematic. It stifles the creative conversations that might emerge if we are open with curiosity to new learning. Fundamentally, we are seeking to create a conversation of shared learning.

As a group, use the following suggestions to increase your understanding what to share when sharing your perspective in a challenging conversation:

- Identify and describe a meeting where you might have confused the sharing of facts and interpretation of the facts. What specifically did you say?
- Identify alternate ways in which you might have shared this information using the strategies identified above. Practice with a partner.
- Identify and describe a meeting where you might have focused your sharing on advocating your position while not identifying your interests. What specifically did you say?
- Identify alternate ways in which you might have shared this information using the strategies identified above. Practice with a partner.
- What insight has surfaced for you from this practice?
- What action might you take to increase your effectiveness?

Some Final thoughts on Sharing your Perspective: Asking Permission and Looping Back

We have used the habit, “seek first to understand . . . then to be understood,” proposed by Stephen Covey as a framework for this module. Two questions often arise at this point in the discussion:

1. When do I know when it is time to shift from listening to sharing?
2. What do I do if the other person starts arguing with what I am sharing?

Let’s take these one at a time. I believe that I have sufficiently heard and understood (Seek first to understand. . .) the perspective of the other person. I will then summarize what I have heard (Active Listening), and ask the person if they believe that I am “getting” what it is they want and need me to understand. If they say no, I might ask them to share specifically what it is that they do not think I understand. I will then summarize my new understanding, and repeat my previous question, “Am I “getting” what you need me to understand?” If they say yes, then it is time to make the transition to sharing my perspective (. . . then to be understood).

This transition is brief and critical. I ask permission to share my perspective. I ask, “Would you now be willing to hear my thoughts and perspective on this issue?” I might couch this request in a restatement of my commitment to mutual purpose. In sharing my perspective, I am not intending to rebut their point of view. I am interested in adding my perspective to theirs in an effort at creating a deeper, shared perspective. You can not force someone to hear your perspective. You can influence their willingness to hear by making it their choice, maintaining a commitment to mutual purpose and engaging respectfully.

This takes us to the second question: What if the other person starts arguing with what I am sharing? Despite all our best efforts, the person may perceive our perspective as a rebuttal and again begin advocating their point of view. At this point, I have a choice. We talked about these choices in Module 2. I can go on the defensive with fairly predictable results. I can also loop back into listening (seek to understand) to what it is the person wants to make sure I understand. I acknowledge this understanding, and then return to advocating my perspective. This is not a linear process. In essence, we are seeking to weave our individual perspective into a shared, integrated perspective. We are taking our individual stories and weaving them into a single, shared story. We will continue to expand on this notion in the next module.

As a group, use the following suggestions to increase your understanding of the transition from listening to sharing and integrating our stories:

- When you are sharing your perspective, what behavior in others tends to move you to defensiveness?
- What are the indicators you have experienced that tells you the conversation is moving from collaborative to argumentative?
- What strategies have you used to bring the conversation back in line with mutual purpose?



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Special Education Resolution Center,
9726 E. 42nd Street, Suite 203, Tulsa, OK 74146
888-267-0028 (toll free); 918-270-1849
serc.okstate.edu