

Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

It's time to face up to it - much of our communication has nothing to do with words. In other words (excuse the pun), we depend on the subtle, sophisticated and silent language of non-verbals.

What silent signals do you send to your friends, business associates and clients? Are you transmitting openness, honesty or positivity? Or are people decoding darker messages - anxiety, irritation or quiet desperation?

Have your Say...

A feature for YOU in each Issue....

“Conversations are about making sure that people hear me and my point of view - and agree with it!”

A Word from the Editor...

This is a must-read issue if you're interested in how to handle difficult conversational moments. We review a book about difficult conversations and there are practical tips on negotiating your way around them. We also share with you, experiences from people who've attended our *Conversational Coaching Clinics*. Experimenting with new conversation tools isn't limited, though, to what you may learn in one of our Clinics. We invite you to share your contributions, conversational experiences and challenges with others through this forum...

Bill Cropper, The Change Forum, November 2003

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Facing Up - the silent language of conversation...

The *Weekend Australian's* Susan Maushart recently spun another of her witty, 'tongue in mouth' tales about California-based psychologist Paul Ekman, inventor of the *Facial Action Coding System* - a 500-page catalogue of 3000 facial gestures and their meaning. Ekman isn't talking easy-to-read gestures like 'open-mouthed shock'. He's made a mint, peddling his ability to interpret 'microexpressions' to 'deceit industries' like the CIA, FBI and some notable used car saleyards!



"Micro-expressions - the telltale flash of truth in an otherwise meticulously managed facial performance" (thanks for that definition Susan) are minute facial give-aways - a flickering brow-furrow, a momentary mouth-twitch or inadvertent eyebrow-raise. In some situations, up to 90% of data we collect in a conversation is non-verbal. If these silent messages are positive, our response is likely to be equally positive. When we detect non-verbals that indicate negativity, uncertainty or dishonesty, we 'back-flip' in a split-second (and usually never let the other person know why!).



As vital as it is to understanding others, these silent signals rarely get raised in open conversation. How often do you register something in a conversation (eg. 'So-and-so looks irritated, impatient, confused') but don't check it out with them? This doesn't mean your assumptions about someone else's non-verbals don't have an impact on the conversation - they do! So, why not try vocalising and feeding back to others what you register in their non-verbals? Make it tentative though. Let them know *you* may be mistaken. Non-verbals are notoriously hard for most of us (*Eckman aside*) to read. Of course, in the end, people may not want to be truthful about what's really going on for them. But if you happen to have Ekman's catalogue handy you'll be easily able to ascertain that for yourself!

...Airing His Views?

"My youngish son (15 and a half) arrived back home yesterday after a trip to Italy with his father. Sitting on the back verandah in the beautiful blue air, still very excited, he declared in no uncertain terms (but with good humour) when requested to let other people put their two cents worth in as he certainly was - that '*Conversations are about making sure people hear me and my point of view, and agree with it!*'. (Contributed by Cath Callaghan, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority)

Not an unreasonable definition of conversations and one we suspect prescribed to by many politicians and others in various seats of power. We all probably wish it were true for us. Wouldn't life be simpler?

Deciding not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin!

The first step in handling difficult conversations is getting a better understanding of what's really going on...

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most (Stone, Patton & Heen) Penguin 2000, is highly recommended reading

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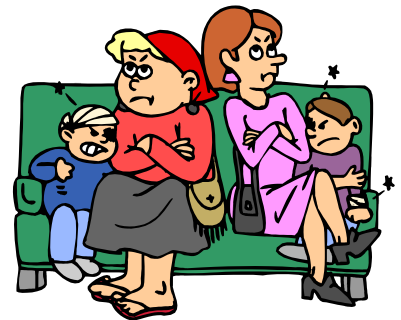
Difficult Conversations: Can we do without them?

Difficult conversations are part and parcel of life - in boardrooms, lounge rooms, across the negotiation or the dinner table. Still, why not look at it this way. Without them life would be tranquil, harmonious and a whole lot quieter. Half the verbal clutter that gives your favourite restaurant its chatty ambience would probably disappear. Politicians would have to concentrate seriously on good governance not endless debate and your evening soapie would be over in 5 minutes!

Difficult conversations are a pervasive problem – one that many people coming along to our Conversational Coaching Clinics want to learn how to handle better. At first, they're disappointed when we say: "There are no set formulas or quick-fixes..." – then relieved when we tell them: "But there are tools that'll help you get some leverage!". However, for aficionados of formulas, we recommend 'Difficult Conversations - How to Discuss what Matters Most' by Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen and Doug Stone of the Harvard Negotiation Team, from the same stable as the people who brought you the 1980's best-seller on negotiation - "Getting to YES!".

The first step in handling difficult conversations is getting a better understanding of what's really going on. This, as the Harvard team suggests, puts you in a stronger position to sort out what *kind of conversation* you need to have. For instance, should it be:

- **A 'What happened?' conversation** – where you stop arguing over who's right and wrong and agree to explore each other's stories and perspectives without *blame-gaming* or assuming malign intentions.
- **A Feelings conversation** – where you each share, reflect on and try to understand the role of emotions in making this a difficult conversation
- **A 'What's really at stake here?' conversation** – ask yourself: 'How much does this really matter to me?' 'Why am I reacting this way?' 'What do I really want and what do I need to accept?'



Then, rather than focus on getting *your* way, the idea is to shift your stance to support mutual learning, sharing and problem solving. Stone, Patton and Sheen refer to this as a 'learning conversation'. Try to understand what's happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view and work together to come up with a way forward. This makes it more likely the other person will open-up to being influenced and that you'll both learn something that significantly changes the way you understand the problem.

The authors make it sound all too easy really! Still, they've consulted on constitutional transition in South Africa, to school teachers in the Colombian drug capital, Medellin and with community leaders and police in Springfield, Massachusetts, so I guess we could say they've had their fare share of difficult conversations! According to them: "delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. But choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin!". Sounds like they've been consulting with the military too!

➔ **"Defusing Difficult Conversations" in this issue... more tips on handling difficult conversations**

Light Bulbs & Fishbowls – staging a Conversational Coaching Clinic...

'Day 1 provided a good introduction to the key concepts', Tony Hancocks, HR Manager with Hervey Bay Council, said about the clinic he attended. 'Day 2 built on the learning from day 1 and the fishbowl exercise was a highlight.'

Tracey O'Driscoll, social worker with Queensland Health had something similar to say about the Cairns clinic: 'I felt the pieces we went through on day 1 all came together on day 2.'

...Continued

“The Art of Conversation requires high levels of skills, insights into the human factor and certain risk-taking. This Coaching Clinic provides the solid basis for making all of these elements work together effectively. Excellent coverage, excellent facilitator, excellent tools. Current, up-to-date and extremely useful.” Lyn Mackay, Lecturer JCU

These participants pick-up on the ‘staged’ nature of our Conversational Coaching Clinic. It takes people through practice sessions with a set of basic conversational tools on Day 1, culminating in a *Skillful Discussion Fishbowl* on Day 2 where they bring all these tools into play while closely observing and giving feedback to each other.

It’s an unsettling structure for some at first – especially those who want quick-fix formulas straight up – as you might infer from Tammy Jennings’ (again from *Q-Health*) comments: *‘I found the first day I was unsure where things were leading and what I’d get out of it, but on the second day I felt that the first day was consolidated.’*

The clinic’s structure carefully balances the tension between making people feel safe yet bringing them slowly out of their comfort zone, where real challenge and learning occurs, as Elizabeth Germain from Families felt: *‘It was hard to know what to expect and I was constantly leaving my comfort zone. I especially liked the Fishbowl and getting feedback about my style. By Day 2, people were more open and it was strange at the end of the day when we all had to say goodbye. I felt we had more work to do.’* On the other hand, for people like Lyn Mackay - lecturer at JCU - the clinic’s structure is all ‘ducks- to-water’:



‘Day 1 was stimulating, intellectually challenging – providing a sound launching platform for practice in a user-friendly environment. I appreciated the practical elements that provided hands-on experience in utilising the strategies being propounded on Day 2...It would have been opportune to have even a third day!’

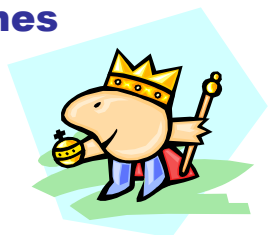
And this comprehensive piece of feedback from Erin Mulherin about the Mackay Clinic she attended sums up the experience of our coaching clinic quite aptly we think...

‘I must admit to being a bit sceptical before attending, but once we started, I really enjoyed the low-key approach of both Bill and Chris, and how they interacted with each other and participants. It was definitely different to what I had expected. I really liked the way the sessions were structured so that participants actually figure the tools out for themselves – that the focus was on participants doing the work, not the facilitators.’

‘I thought after lunch on day 2 was fantastic. It actually brought together everything that we had learned throughout the two days. It was almost as if a light bulb had been switched on. The “conversation” after lunch showed how you can jump from tool to tool, and I could see when other people were doing that at different times – the after lunch session really showcased the tools and how they could effectively be used.’

Conversations and the King’s New Clothes

Most of us know Hans Christian Andersen’s story of *The King’s New Clothes* about the roguish tailors who conspire to sell a vain, silly and despotic king a new wardrobe made of nothing but thin air! As the king nakedly parades his non-existent new clothes in front of the populace, no-one is game to say anything except a little boy who cries out for all to hear: *‘Look, the king’s got no clothes on!’*



What has this got to do with difficult conversations?

Well, the first step in handling difficult conversations is getting an understanding of what’s really going on... and this is actually a wonderful metaphor for a conversational dilemma we all face to varying degrees. In most conversations, people act from untested or unrevealed assumptions about each other.

The trouble is, when everyone keeps important things to themselves, our ability to have open, meaningful conversations and to make good decisions is reduced and the risk of raising defensiveness and having difficult moments increases.

It is often what is left *unsaid* that creates most of the difficulties – what we call our *Left Hand Column* – the private monologue we carry on ourselves that we don’t share with others in the conversation (but often need to, to establish new or better understandings).

Like the story of the *‘king’s new clothes’*, while no one is willing to speak the truth, the king remains ‘naked’ and we collectively conspire in deluding ourselves.

There is a gap between *what we think* and *what we say*. We carry on a *private monologue* and a *public dialogue*, which we tend to filter - only saying what we assume will be noticed, heard, not upset people, get us what we want, win a point and so on.

What's a difficult conversation? Saying "no" to your boss? Dealing with poor performance or dysfunctional behaviour? Telling your truth about a situation that's been bugging you?

Difficult Conversations: Fight, Flight or Faint?

No matter how conversationally correct or competent we are, we all experience difficult moments in conversations when things just don't go so well – no matter what efforts we make or conversational strategies we try.

What's a difficult conversation for you and what's your typical reaction when you face a difficult conversational moment?

Often we resort to one of these conversational survival strategies – all fraught to various degrees with fear, frustration or frantic antics. Do you:



- **Fight?** You decide in the heat of the moment to really let go and hit-them-between-the-eyes' with the truth - no matter what the effect might be (on you or others).
- **Flight?** You swallow your pride, put a lid on the anger or righteous indignation and just act polite no matter what (then feel like a door-mat afterwards?)
- **Avoid?** You sidestep the whole issue by talking about any topic that distracts from or defers the difficult moment (then feel frustrated with yourself for being such a whimp!)
- **Placate?** The back-down position. You'll agree to anything to ensure the other person keeps their cool and doesn't make the conversation more difficult than it already is.

Often, it's the conversations we dread most that we handle the most clumsily.

All of us have agonised weighing-up whether to say something or not, then what to say and how. How many times do you find yourself in situations where you really need talk over with someone something that's really annoying you - but your concern about their reactions stops you? Deep down, you know if you avoid this conversation, your feelings of frustration and resentment fester. But if you do confront them, you worry about whether it will turn into a major argument and whether your intentions will be misunderstood.

➔ For some specific tips, see '[Defusing Difficult Conversations](#)' next page

Conversational Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Clinic for improving your conversations...

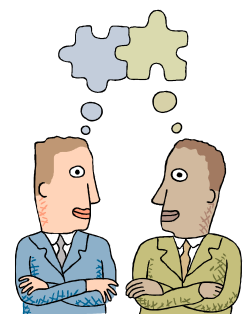
'The private monologue you have with yourself while the public dialogue is going on is invisible during the conversation since you express little if any of this out loud...

Yet it has an immense impact on how well your conversations go'

What's in your Left-Hand Column?

Left-Hand Column Analysis is a powerful, personal reflection tool for recollecting difficult conversations you've had. It's a way of documenting what you and others said (*in the right-hand column*) and what your thoughts and feelings were about it (*in the left-hand column*). It may even encourage you to share your unspoken "left-hand column" thoughts and assumptions with others to help defuse difficult situations or add conversational clarity. Here's how you start off:

- **Try to recall as best you can the exact words spoken** for the conversation you have in mind. Who was there? What did they say? What did you say? It is essential that you make it like a script in a movie scene and follow the 2-column format.
- **In the right-hand column (Public Dialogue)** describe what you and others actually said as comprehensively as you can recall. This is the "visible" part of the interaction. Write down only what was actually said (not what you would have liked to say)
- **Now go back and fill in your left-hand column.** This is the private monologue you had with yourself while the public dialogue was going on. This is often invisible during the conversation since you didn't express any of this out loud. Recall your thoughts and feelings about what you and the other/s did or said. Try to match this against the "action-script" in the right hand-column (ie. When so-and-so said this (RH-column, I felt/thought/assumed this (LH-column).
- **You can now analyse your left hand column** and develop a deeper understanding of the conversation from two perspectives – yours and the other person(s) – by underlining where you've made assumptions about the other person you didn't express and circling where you believe you clearly expressed these to the other person.



➔ If you'd like a full copy of this tool... [contact us at team.tech@bigpond.com](mailto:team.tech@bigpond.com)

Often, it's the conversations we dread most that we handle the most clumsily...

Regardless of the context, its the small but crucial errors in difficult conversations that trip us up and a few key adjustments can make all the difference...

Next Issue...

Please contribute your thoughts...

Defusing those Difficult Conversations...

Regardless of the context, its the small but crucial errors in difficult conversations that trip us up and a few key adjustments can make all the difference. Here are some tips to make difficult conversations a little less so:

- **Prepare yourself beforehand:** By this we don't mean buckling on your armour and sharpening your lance. Reflect on how the other person may be feeling. What are their intentions? How do you contribute to making this conversation difficult? Can you change your approach? If you don't raise the issue, can you let go of it?
- **Take responsibility:** The easy way out is saying to yourself: *"It's their problem – not mine"*. But their problem *is* your problem. Difficult conversations remaining unresolved strain, poison or even kill-off relationships. Take ownership for finding a solution.
- **Calm the climate:** Do you prime yourself to expect a difficult conversation? Pre-conversational tension bubbles over into blame or criticism that makes matters worse. Rapport-build. Connect with the other person in a safe mental spot before tackling the difficult issue. Try some appreciative inquiry (*What's good in what they're doing?*)
- **Don't assume intention:** Don't assume you know the other person's intentions (a common conversation-blocker in close relationships where you (*think?*) you know the other person well). Our assumptions are often wrong. Put aside your preconceptions.
- **Tune into their story:** During difficult conversations we typically assume the clash is because of how the other person is and they assume it's because of how we are! Really, the collision is a result of our 'stories' being different, but neither of us realise it. Decipher what happened. Where does their story come from?
- **Objectify and paraphrase:** Try describing the problem as differences between your stories and invite them to join you to sort out what those differences are. Explore and paraphrase each other's stories. Listen to understand their perspectives and the feelings behind their story. Then paraphrase these feelings to see if you understand.
- **Listen for Feelings, not just Facts:** Feelings are at the very core of many difficult conversations. Paying careful attention to what the other person is feeling (but probably *not* saying) is the key to unlocking difficult conversations.
- **Model yourself what you want from others:** If you want to be listened to – listen to others first. If you want to be understood – understand them first.
- **Avoid the blame-game:** Think back on your difficult conversations - did you get critical, point out mistakes, use provocative or disapproving words. *Fix the problem – not the blame.'*
- **Consider it may be you:** Genuinely admit openly where *you* could have been wrong or made mistakes. Admitting mistakes actually puts us in a stronger position
- **Reframe the situation:** Test your mental agility. How many other ways can we see this situation? Invite the other person to do this too.
- **Get solution-focused:** You can't do this until emotions have played out. The turning point in difficult conversations is when people start thinking together towards the future and leave the past behind. You can then entertain options that meet each others concerns, agree on actions and learn how to prevent this happening next time



Next Issue...

In Issue #3 of **CC-E-News** we'll talk about:

➔ **How to make your conversations more powerful and persuasive**

If **you** have any **powerful conversational moments** you'd like to case study, **email or fax your situation in 100 words or less...**

➔ **Fax:** 07-4068 7555

Email: news@thechangeforum.com

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“The clinic was great. There was much discussed over (the) two days and everyone went away thinking, “The next conversation I have with someone will be more than just words”. Rod Morton
Centrelink

Extend your conversational competency with personalised or small group coaching in the workplace - powerful learning support that's also very cost-effective!

More Information?

To register or find out more about how Conversational Coaching can help you contact...

Feedback from the Field....

One of the pleasurable advantages for us in presenting Conversational Coaching in a public forum, is the diversity of participants we get to meet and share experiences with.



Some 300 people now have joined our regional clinics – including public sector managers, human resource and training officers, health and welfare professionals, community workers, social workers, school principals, university lecturers, admin and resource officers, and many more... working in organisation sectors such as transport, housing, family and disability services, education, training and employment, natural resources, primary industries, state development, local government and planning, corrective services, health services, promotion and research...

One single unifying theme regardless of organisation context or occupation – is the importance of conversation – and there's always room for improvement for most of us. Here's a few comments we've received on people's experiences and insights following our Coaching Clinics...

“Congratulations on your first newsletter!”, writes Colleen Ahern Head of English at Bundaberg North State High School. “Gillian, Greg and I only last week 'exposed' our Heads of Department/Admin group to the Ladder of Inference. The section on this in your first newsletter was timely. Look forward to the next newsletter!”

Kathleen Macdonald from Tully High in the tropical north says: “Hi! I've been testing out the new skills - we had a faculty dialogue on the Student Free Day, which yielded some good stuff. Thanks again!”

Back to business and Arne Bauer, State Development Corporation Director stationed in Maryborough, told us how he's going with applying a conversational improvement goal he set himself: “I have just returned from (a conference where I) had to exercise much patience and effort at times to tune in and engage with a group who were very frustrating. I believe I was successful in ensuring I did not shut anyone down and that everyone had the chance to speak. One for the good guys!”

Steve West from Disability Services Queensland also wrote us to say: “I have been able to put into practice some of the skills I acquired and I am finding I am revisiting the manual - it has been very helpful in my approach to issues that I need to address in my new position as unit manager.”

Conversational Coaching can come to you

As well as conducting our Conversational Coaching Clinic in-house for your workgroup or management team, we can also provide personalised by-the-hour coaching programs for individuals or teams in your organisation. A great way to fast-track your conversational capabilities. A typical coaching program consists of:



- 5 x 3-hour structured coaching sessions (usually every 3 weeks or so)
- A blend if you want between individual and small-group coaching
- Online email and phone support over the coaching period (free of charge)
- Development of a personalised conversational coaching improvement plan
- Personalised attention, feedback and competency development practices

➔ **Contact Bill Cropper to talk over personalised coaching options for you or others in your organisation...**

The Change Forum

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