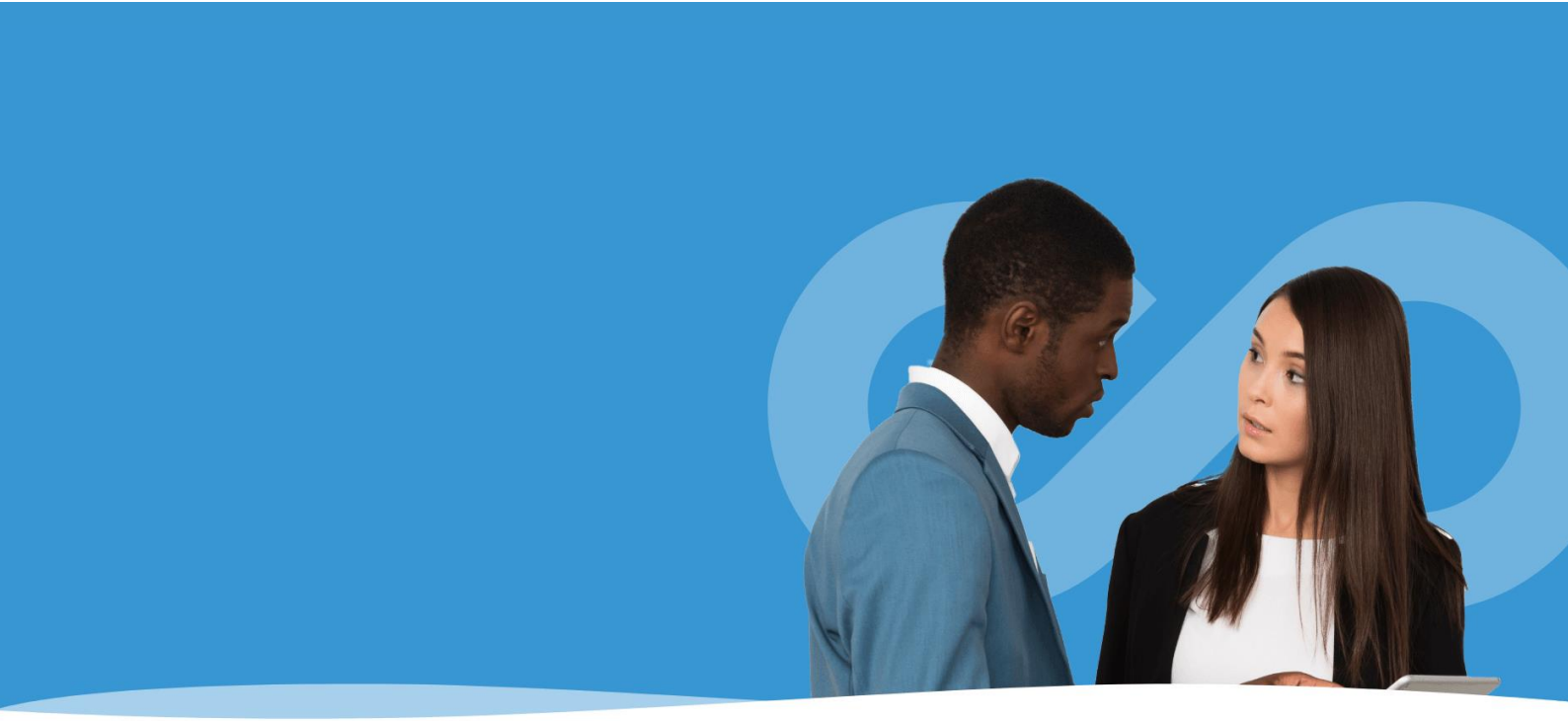




Difficult conversations - text

Chapter 3

Addressing conflicts

Addressing conflicts

As humans, we have an immense capacity to collaborate and to enjoy ourselves as we create great results together.

But, thanks to our brains, conflicts get in the way.

If we want to ensure high-performance and workplace excellence, we must bravely address these situations.

The other person's reactions



In the last chapter, you learned how to defuse your limbic system in preparation for a difficult conversation. That is a big barrier removed! However, you still need to have the conversation and you might be concerned about the other person's reactions.

Imagine this situation.

You and a colleague have been avoiding each other for a few weeks after you disagreed in a meeting and it got heated. A new project kicks off next week and you'll need to work together, so you want to address and resolve your conflict.

Imagine that you are preparing to have a conversation to resolve your conflict.

What is the worst-case scenario you can imagine for that conversation?

- They ignore your efforts
- They cry
- They get angry with you
- They get others on their side
- They blame you
- Something else

You can only control yourself

As you learned in the last chapter, there is likely to be a grain of truth and some assumptions your brain has made up behind the worst case scenario that you fear.

When considering the grain of truth, remember that you cannot control the other person, but you can certainly manage your impact on them. You do that by managing your own limbic system. This includes preparing for both potential outcomes for a difficult conversation - the best case and worst case.

Prepare for both outcomes

Difficult conversations are opportunities to increase excellence, build stronger relationships and solidify trust. If you plan for this kind of positive outcome, it is more likely to happen. **If you are focused mostly on your own discomfort then you will increase your discomfort and theirs.** So, focus your attention on the possibilities and prepare yourself for a positive outcome.

But that doesn't guarantee you will get what you aim for; you will also need to prepare for the unexpected and unpleasant to give you the stability to work with whatever challenges show up.

This chapter will help.

Plan for the best

Imagine that in addition to surviving a really difficult conversation, you also managed to create more connection, understanding and trust in your relationship. This is absolutely possible and your approach can help make that happen.

Try expanding your thinking about what is possible.

Imagine a positive outcome

Set aside your stress and thoughts of the difficulty.

Focus on what's possible for you, the other person and your relationship.

Understand that this conversation can help you and your partner may

- develop a stronger relationship through this conversation
- understand each other better – your sensitivities and needs (BSC)
- respect each other more
- have more compassion for each other
- build trust with each other

All of this is possible because you have these kinds of conversations.

The more you visualise positive outcomes the more likely that the conversation will happen in that way. Before you undertake a needed conversation, take a moment to set aside your stress, and focus on the possible positive outcomes.



Three ways to plan for the best

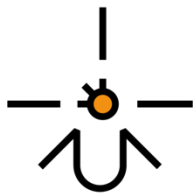


Creating an inspiring outcome can be managed with a few pragmatic steps. Unsurprisingly, the most important step will be good brain management: manage limbic threats, create some limbic rewards and of course, engage your PFCs.

Emotions should be welcome, of course, but don't let the limbic system run the show. When limbic threats and needs take over, conversations can derail or spin out of control which just makes things worse.

Whether you initiate the conversation or someone else does, you can always take responsibility for supporting both of your brains. Here are a few ways to do that.

Bring the right attitude



It's a feature of being human that we can feel others' emotions. So the attitude you bring to a conversation will speak volumes and will affect the other person's willingness and ability to engage with you.

Draw on what you have learned about mindset to interrupt any negative thinking and adopt a mindset that will benefit both you and the other person. Show up prepared to listen to them and hear their desires - whatever they are. You might be surprised at the difference this makes.

You will learn more about adopting a growth mindset in the next chapter.

Start off on the right foot

You know what it is like to get off to a bad start: someone says the wrong thing early on and then you spend a lot of energy trying to recover.

The first part of your interaction and your opening words will set the tone and direction for the conversation. Get these clear in your mind and use metacommunication to get the conversation going in the right direction. The rest will then flow more easily.

Our own discomfort can make us nervous or impatient and to get the conversation over with, we jump in, blurt out some feedback or bad news without giving the other person any warning. This will likely create a threat reaction in them and prevent them from hearing anything you have to say, making the rest of the conversation pointless.

If they start out shocked, there's no sense in continuing the conversation.



Create a trail map

Imagine having a trail map or a personalised plan that helps you navigate these conversations with less effort. Now, imagine that the other person is using the same map.

Creating a working agreement with colleagues, direct reports and managers about how you will deal with any issues or conflicts before they arrive can make the conversations a lot easier.

Consider asking:

- How can we flag potential problems early?
- What do we need so we can point out each other's blind spots?
- How do we ensure that we are committed to each other's growth and development?

Reflect

Consider a conflict with a colleague that you know you need to address. Consider these questions and take some notes.

- What is the best-case scenario?
- What attitude do you need to bring to the conversation?
- How can you make the best-case scenario as likely as possible?

Prepare for the worst

Despite all of your best preparations, it is still possible that limbic systems will react (theirs or yours) and you will need to endure a storm of emotions.

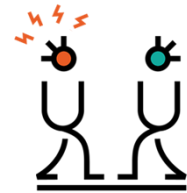
If you prepare yourself for the worst case you can think of, then you will trust yourself to stay present and calm - for your benefit and theirs.

This section will help you stay focused on a positive outcome for any conversation that gets stormy.

Stay

When faced with someone else's strong emotions, the last thing most of us want to do is stay and experience them. But it is usually the best thing.

For many people their worst nightmare is to be in the middle of a conversation and the other person has a big emotional reaction with tears or anger. This might happen and you can prepare for it. If they have an emotional reaction the one thing you need to do is to stay. **Stay present, stay in connection, stay calm.** This may not feel good but emotions are like a wave and their emotional reaction will soon pass.



Put yourself in their shoes

Imagine one of those conversations that you think will be very difficult for the *other* person. Put yourself in their shoes: what do you think is going on for them?

Consider these possibilities:

- They want you to like them.
- They feel misunderstood or blamed.
- They want to be seen as competent.
- They feel judged.
- They're scared that they will be fired.
- They don't feel listened to.

All of these reactions are signs that their limbic system is sending them a threat response. If you recognise that, you will be in a good position to support them rather than being frustrated by them.

Compassion goes a long way

If you are about to engage with someone and you know the topic will be difficult for them, it is time for a bit of compassion, care and focus on the other person. Choose to support them, even if the worst case scenario is playing out.

Here are a few actions you can take to make it easier for them.

Create safety



Let them know that they may not like what you will tell them but reassure them up front about whatever you can honestly reassure them about. Consider their personal needs - do they want belonging or certainty? See what you can provide for them without contradicting your message.

E.g., *"You're probably not going to like this outcome, but don't worry, you're not being let go."*

This is a short **metacommunication** at the beginning to help their limbic system stay calm.

Set context

Yes, they will want to know the ultimate decision, but laying out the big picture first can be helpful.

E.g., *"The organisation is going through massive change and this is a hard time for everyone. We are restructuring and some jobs are being eliminated. We intend to keep you on. But your position is being eliminated. So we are inviting you to a different position. Unfortunately it's at a lower grade level and there's a slight pay cut. I'm so sorry."*

Ask how they are doing



You are not the message. You are delivering a message and while it may not be great for them, you can still be on their side.

Once you have shared the difficult message, feedback or information, stay with them and also check in - with heart and sincerity: *"How are you doing with that?"*

But only do this if you have sincere empathy for this person; this is not something you can fake.

Establish clear next steps

At the end of the conversation, make sure you both are clear what happens next. Are there new actions to take, is there some accountability and when will you check in again on progress on this topic?

Also, make sure that both of you feel emotionally stable and at a clear place for now. If there are still some unresolved questions or emotions, find a time to check in again. In other words, create some amount of certainty for what's next.

Timing



Timing matters. Our own discomfort can make us nervous or impatient and to get the conversation over with, we jump in and blurt out some feedback or bad news without giving the other person any warning. This will likely create a threat reaction in them and prevent them from hearing anything you have to say, making the rest of the conversation pointless.

Instead, plan to have the conversation at an appropriate time where you will have the time and emotional space to listen as well as talk. You will notice

the difference.

Timing: set yourself up for success

In essence, this is about taking care of your brain and theirs and making sure both of you have access to your PFCs.

- Consider when a good time of day is for both of you. Picking a time late in the day at the end of the week or after a stressful event is probably not the best. So when would be a time where you will both most likely have access to your calm, cool, collected selves?
- Consider how to invite them into the conversation. Will you give them a few minutes notice, a few hours or several day's notice? Will you tell them the topic ahead of time? You don't want to stress them out unnecessarily, so do what you think will be best considering your relationship with them and the topic you want to discuss.

Times to avoid

You might find yourself coming up with reasons why now is not the 'right time' to address a conflict. Although you might simply be procrastinating, there are some times that you definitely should avoid.

Your emotions are too hot or built up

If you are having a reaction that you can't manage, it is probably not the time for this conversation. At least if you want to have a constructive/productive conversation that improves the situation.

Cool down. Or possibly get help to proceed with the conversation.

You just want to punish them

It is not the right time, if you just want the other person to feel guilt, remorse or shame – this is not going to contribute to building a trusting relationship nor will it help you build a safe, positive and productive working environment.

Burn off your emotions elsewhere, then come back to the conversation with the individual involved. Of course you can let them know that you have strong feelings and emotions about this issue, but instead of punishing them, give them feedback and help them shift their behaviour.

They have no space to listen



Listening is crucial in a difficult conversation. If you or they do not have the time or emotional space to listen, you will not feel heard and you will not be able to take feedback on board.

So, if the other person is in a highly emotional state - perhaps right before a big presentation or right after they have just made a big mistake - it is not the right time to pile on with your own observations or feedback.

They are likely to be criticising themselves and your feedback will not be the most helpful thing at that moment – support would be more productive. There will be time later for feedback and corrections. If you have already supported them, they will be more open to listen later.

There are no next steps

If there isn't anything constructive that can come out of the conversation - either for how you interact together or for their own learning, you might consider skipping the conversation completely.

You are not the right person

If one person asks you to give feedback to someone else, this might set up a drama triangle. Instead, consider how you can support the two people to have a direct conversation together.



Of course, this is standard procedure in some organisations, if you are required to deliver feedback that is not yours to give, do your best to stick to empowering conversations and don't fall into the roll of the hero. Similarly, don't share your judgements or take sides with the feedback giver or the receiver.

There is too much stress in their life

Consider the stressors in their life. If they have big family traumas going on, health issues, severe pain or other life issues, it is not the best time to hit them with a piece of bad news or to challenge them on their behaviour. It is not likely to sink in and they may not have the capacity to do anything about it.

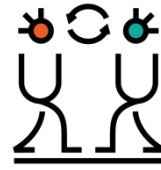
Of course, you may not have a choice - but at least be sensitive about what else is happening for them. And sometimes those life issues may be the reason they have poor behaviour at work. In that case, you might see how you can support them rather than challenge them.

Other tips for timing your conversation

Regular weekly or monthly check-ins will create opportunities for feedback, clearing the air and catching problems early. Ensure these meetings are more positive than critical, so people won't always expect the worst.

If you have feedback about a particular piece of work, give the feedback soon after the event so it's recent and relevant for them.

However, immediately after may be too soon as they may be too upset with themselves and not able to listen.



Support overall brain care and wellbeing. This will reduce the number of mistakes, conflicts and mental short cuts that create misunderstandings. It will also lead to more positivity and better conversations when they are needed.

Successful conversations need access to PFCs. Help them tap into theirs: consider doing something different like going out for a walk together: clear your minds and find new perspectives. And, of course, do your best to stay calm.

If someone is frustrated and using toxic behaviours regularly, check in with them to find out what is creating so much stress, what their unmet needs are, and how you can support them to burn off stress and get back to their PFC.

The Ladder of Inference

You are nearly ready for the conversation. Before you start, take a moment to consider how you reached the conflict in the first place. This will help you understand the other person's perspective and reach a solution.

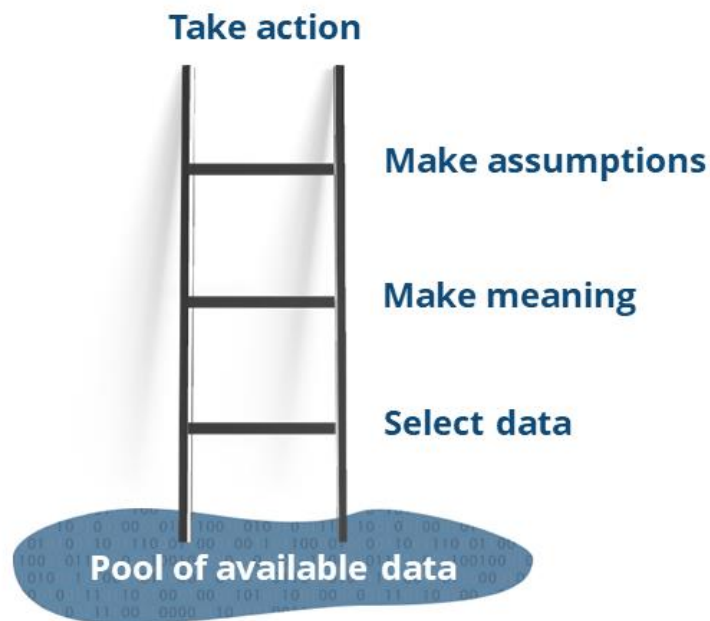
The Ladder of Inference helps us understand why some conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings happen. It was created by organisational psychologist Chris Argyris in 1970 and Peter Senge used this model in his well-known book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*.

Here we use a shorter version of the model for simplicity.

How it works

The point of this model is to show how we move from information to action: we take several intermediate steps where we shape the information, create our thoughts about it and then choose an action. Each individual will shape the original information in their own way at each step. As people reach the top of their ladders, they will have different ideas about what action to take, even though they all start with the same information.

Ladder of Inference



We start our understanding of the model by starting at the bottom of the ladder.

Pool of all available data

All information available includes facts, figures and historical data. It could also include project plans, comments and input from various people and anything else that might lead one to make a choice or decision.

Select data

Our attention is limited and selective. We do not have the capacity to absorb all information available. And our brain focuses our attention on what we are interested in, what we relate to, what we understand and what we expect to see. **We select specific data from the pool available.**

It is possible for two people to observe the same situation and take away completely different memories of the event.

Make meaning

We assign meaning to the data we have selected so that it fits in our world-view and makes sense to us. It helps us make sense of information, events and even people. But it doesn't mean we are correct.

For example:

- When my boss calls, that means that she is suspicious about what I'm working on.
- When Sandra replied to my email with an answer to my question but didn't ask me how I am, that means that she doesn't care.
- After two of my direct reports each call me to discuss the same topic, I think this means they have been gossiping.

In [psychology](#), **meaning-making** is the process of how people [construe](#), [understand](#), or make sense of life events, relationships, and the self.

Make assumptions

As we know, **the brain makes assumptions, draws conclusions and fills in blanks**.

These assumptions can be based on our history, traditions, memories, our own rules of conduct, what we've done in other companies, what we like, what we think should happen, our own personal values and so many other influences.

Take action

We take action, make a plan, move forward or even take a position about a topic based on all of the steps of the ladder.

The actions you choose will be based on your steps up the ladder, while other people will choose actions based on their own steps. It would be normal that your actions and theirs would be quite different and even incompatible.

The Ladder in practice

Take a look at this example of how two colleagues can experience the same 'Pool of available data' and come to very different conclusions and actions.

Pool of all available data:

Marvi is an Executive Assistant to both Markus (CEO) and Shayla (VP). She has a lot on her plate!

There is evidence of tasks that Marvi has completed and tasks she has not completed. These tasks are documented in plans, emails and her job description, as well as agreements made in various conversations between the three colleagues.

Shayla's data, meaning and assumptions:

Shayla notices that Marvi has not been following through on tasks. She pays close attention to Marvi's lack of performance and has listened carefully to critical feedback from others.

Shayla makes up that Marvi does not have the qualities needed for this position. She assumes that Marvi will not be able to master the role and concludes that it is time to let her go.

Markus's data, meaning and assumptions:

Markus has noticed how Marvi follows through on his requests, even if she has not always done everything she agreed to.

He has not paid attention to feedback from Shayla nor the others.

He makes up that she is learning quickly on the job, he assumes she has the capability but just needs some direction and concludes that it's time to invest in her training so she will become an excellent EA.

Markus and Shayla take action

Markus asks Shayla to take Marvi under her wing to train her and help her come up to speed.

Shayla explodes at the suggestion and Markus is completely shocked.

SHARE model

Now you have an understanding of why conflict happens, it is time to focus on the conversation itself.

The SHARE model can be used for conflicts, clearing up misunderstandings and talking through uncomfortable situations. It is used to invite someone into a conversation, so you can move forward together.

SHARE was inspired by Ladders of Inference and is about understanding that actions are based on assumptions, other types of interpretation and selective listening/data collection. The first three steps will help you prepare for the conversation and all five steps can be used as a guide in the conversation itself.

The SHARE Model



How to use SHARE

Soft start

Soft start up means to start the conversation gently: let the other person know that you want to talk about a difficult topic, then consider and set an appropriate time for it. Then start the conversation itself in a way that makes them feel safe.

The purpose of this step is to simply give them an opportunity to be mentally and emotionally prepared.

"I'd like to discuss our working relationship. I've put some time in our diaries for tomorrow morning to have a conversation over coffee."

"As I explained yesterday, I'd like to discuss our working relationship. We have a new project together that kicks off next week, and my hope is that we can start rebuilding our relationship to make that project more enjoyable"

Happening

Name what you notice is **happening or has happened** in the past. Use objective language as much as possible and stick to observable facts.

"I know I got a bit heated in the quarterly planning meeting a few weeks ago and I felt that you were tense too. I've noticed that, since then, we do not acknowledge each other unless others are involved in the conversation."

Assumptions

This is the key stage of this model. It is about understanding and accepting that we all process information differently, that we will have different viewpoints and we will choose different actions based on our assumptions and interpretations - or what we have made up about a situation. It requires you to admit that your brain - like all brains - is fallible.

Work through the Ladder of Inference to understand how you got to your current position. What information did you preferentially select? What meaning did you make of that? What assumptions did you draw and how did all of that lead you to where you are now?

When others share their assumptions, it is important that you listen fully with curiosity and a desire to understand their ladder.

"I've given it some thought, and now realise that I assumed that your comments in the meeting were a dig at my leadership skills. When you said that we should try a new way of working, I made it mean that you thought my method was inferior. What did you assume from your side?"

Resolve

After sharing assumptions, it is time to agree how to **resolve** the conflict and move forwards. What will each of you do?

This is a time to use many of your conversation skills. This is meant to be a 2-way collaborative conversation where both parties express what they need in order to move forward. It is a time to ask great open-ended questions and to listen deeply to each other, so you can find common ground and resolve this issue together, collaboratively.

"Now we understand how we each reached our points of view, how can we move forwards?"

Execute

With an agreement in place, it is now over to you to **execute** on that plan. How will you each follow through and do what you said you would do?