

Communicating with Respect: The Key to Effective Dialogue

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Note: This article is based on Sondra Thiederman's video training package, *Gateways to Inclusion: Turning Tense Moments into Productive Conversations*

Let's face it, our diverse workplaces – because they are diverse – can be mine fields of potential misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and even conflict. Believe me, I've stepped on more than one of those mines myself! That's not to mention, by the way, the fact that the rules of political correctness seem to have taken over the world. Things sure can get tense.

The good news is: It doesn't have to be that way. If handled properly, these uncomfortable moments – or even small explosions - can be transformed into gateways that lead to better working relationships, increased understanding, and less tension. That's why I call them "Gateway Events."

These events come in many forms, but, most commonly they involve someone saying or doing something that causes another person to feel offended or hurt. Here is just one example:

Offended Person (Connie)

"I know there is a lot of sexism in the workplace, but I sure didn't expect to see it coming from a woman. In our last training about building respect in the workplace, this outside trainer kept using the word 'guys' – 'OK guys'; 'You guys are doing great'; 'Almost done, guys...'. That's fine except that 'us guys' are 9 women and only one guy! So I just couldn't keep quiet. At the end, I raised my hand and told her how sexist she was being. I don't know if the other 'guys' agreed with me, but I just had to speak up."

Accused Person (Henrietta)

"I wish I could have seen my own face at the end of the workshop when a woman accused me of being sexist. My 'sin' was to use the word 'guys' when most of the participants were women. I pride myself on being respectful so it really threw me off and I said something like, 'You've got to be kidding, everybody knows "guys" is just a term that has nothing to do with gender. It's merely a casual way to refer to a bunch of people.' As far as I'm concerned, that woman was taking things just too darn far."

Interesting situation, isn't it? Two people, both well meaning, abruptly embroiled in a sticky conversation at the end of a workshop on respectful communication of all things!

This is a classic situation that could have easily been turned around if both parties had had the skill and willingness to communicate with respect. Let's see what we can learn about more effective communication by looking at their mistakes.

For one thing, Connie raised the issue of what Henrietta had said in front of the entire group. Of course there are times when the offense is so egregious that it needs to be addressed immediately, but, in this case, all Connie accomplished was to embarrass Henrietta and make her, in turn, defensive.

Respect Strategy: A quiet private conversation is far more apt to produce good results than a humiliating charge rendered in public. To make matters worse, Connie jumped to conclusions about the meaning of Henrietta's use of the word "guys" – she assumed that it meant that

Henrietta had a sexist attitude. Maybe she does, maybe she doesn't. Except in the most extreme cases, there is no way to tell about a biased attitude from the use of a single word. Connie – and her relationship with Henrietta – would have been better served had she not jumped to conclusions about Henrietta's intent.

Respect Strategy: Assess intent cautiously. Engage the person in extensive conversation before guessing about how he or she really feels. The impact of an act or statement matters, of course, but what we do about that impact is directly influenced by what motivated the event in the first place.

Henrietta, too, has something to learn about how to communicate with respect. Her phrase, "You've got to be kidding" essentially shouted into the room, "Connie has no right to feel the way she does!" Talk about disrespectful! Sure, Connie may have been off base, but she felt what she felt. It is the height of disrespect to deny her that right. A far better choice would have been for Henrietta to say something like, "Thanks so much for telling me how you feel, I really appreciate your speaking up."

Respect Strategy: Always honor the other person's right to feel as they do, even if you find that feeling distasteful. Negating someone's feelings is a sure-fire way to bring any good communication to an abrupt halt.

Next, Henrietta might have demonstrated still more respect by inviting Connie to talk about the problem some more. She could, for example, have said, "I'd love to talk with you about it, do you have a few minutes to chat after class?" As a follow-up, it would be great if Henrietta then approached Connie after the program was over to send the message, "I'm sincere – I really do want to sort this situation out."

Respect Strategy: Do every thing you can to show that you want to hear the other person's view.

Finally, Henrietta could have shown respect by practicing what I call "engaged listening." This means that, when she and Connie sit down to talk, Henrietta removes all

distractions and really focuses on what Connie has to say. No cell phone, no looking at her watch, no gazing around the room – Connie and her discomfort become the center of Henrietta’s world.

Respect Strategy: Do every thing you can to show that you want to hear the other person’s view. From shutting your door, to holding all calls, to turning off your cell phone – each of these gestures communicates that you care about making things right.

Had Connie and Henrietta practiced these simple acts of respect, that moment of tension would most likely have been transformed into increased mutual understanding and, in turn, a better working relationship. It doesn’t get better than that.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity/inclusion, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest video, Gateways to Inclusion: Turning Tense Moments into Productive Conversations provides practical skills for dialoguing effectively in the face of diversity-related tension. The video is available at her website (www.thiederman.com)

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