

Tension Happens! What to Do When Conversations Go Wrong

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Based on her video, book, *Gateways to Inclusion: Turning Tense Moments into Productive Conversations*

Do you have any moments in your past that still make you wince with discomfort? I sure do. The three I am thinking of (and wincing about) right now involve times when I inadvertently said something that offended someone or hurt their feelings.

One such mishap involved a poor taste joke that hit home with a dear college friend. At another time, my own culturally-ethnocentric values bubbled up in the middle of a presentation of all things. The third event involved the off-hand use of an offensive phrase when entertaining a group of my daughter's friends. All three still bother me to this day.

When I think back on my trilogy of disaster, I wish I had then had the skills that I have since learned and (most of the time) practice. The most regrettable thing is that these skills are so logical, you'd think I would have known them all along. Maybe I did, but, like most of us, when faced with an embarrassing and stressful moment, our minds go blank and our best selves don't always appear on the scene.

So, in anticipation of your next awkward moment, let's take a look at four skills that will allow you to convert moments of tension into opportunities to build better relationships and more inclusive workplaces (and avoid all that pain and wincing!)

Skill #1: Manage Your Emotions

Awkward moments can come in many forms, here are just a few examples: You've inadvertently said something that offended someone or hurt their feelings. You know what you have done and feel embarrassed, mortified, and even a bit defensive.

Someone around you has offended you in some way. You are furious and hurt.

Someone in your office has accused you of having a bias because of something she thought you had said. In fact, due to noise in the office, she heard the words incorrectly. You are embarrassed and angry.

One thing all of these examples have in common is the presence of an emotion that if given free reign cannot possibly benefit the situation. No one, by the way, is saying that you don't have a right to the emotion – after all, that's what you feel. What we are

saying is that the conversation is apt to resolve itself far more successfully if we can manage that emotion.

Here are some ideas about how we might, when faced with situations like these, convert our emotions from a liability into an advantage.

First, walk away for a moment. Go sit someplace quietly or grab a cup of coffee. Even that little bit of a break can work wonders when it comes achieving productive conversations.

Second, ask yourself, 'What am I really feeling?' It is amazing how naming an emotion has an almost magical ability to both reduce the intensity of the feeling and give you the power to manage it more effectively.

Finally, ask yourself, 'How might what I'm feeling influence how I approach the other person and is that approach the best way to achieve my desired result?' In other words, does your emotion increase or decrease the chances of your turning the tension into a productive conversation?

Of course, none of these approaches will make your emotion disappear altogether nor should it – after all, you have a right to feel as you do. The idea here is, not to kill the feeling, but to manage that feeling in a way that will empower you to have an effective conversation.

Skill #2: Set Productive Goals

Once you've gotten a handle on your emotion, the next step is to set a productive goal for the conversation. Setting productive goals is a matter of asking yourself one question and then answering it honestly: What do I want to accomplish by entering into the conversation? I'm reminded of what diversity leader Roosevelt Thomas once said, "Dialogue is conversation with a purpose." Remember, if you don't know where you're going, you just might end up somewhere that you don't want to be.

Your specific goal will, of course, be shaped by the nature of the event itself. Here is a sampling of the kinds of events you are most apt to encounter along with suggested goals. Keep this discussion in mind so that, when each situation presents itself, you will be prepared and able to enter into the dialogue with a firm function in mind.

1. You have said or done something that has offended someone else and you realize what you have done.

Productive Goal: To diminish their negative feeling and help restore the relationship to one of trust and mutual respect.

Counter-Productive Goal: Attempt to diminish the situation by denying what you have done or negating the accuser's right to his or her feelings.

1. You have been offended by something someone has said or done.

Productive Goal: To educate the offender about the nature of what he or she has done and its impact on you and others like you.

Counter-Productive Goal: To make the offender feel guilty.

1. You have been accused of an inappropriate word or act, but it is a misunderstanding:

Productive Goal: To demonstrate respect for the accuser by holding him or her to a high standard of judgment.

Counter-productive Goal: To make yourself look like a good person by pretending you have done something wrong. This goal only serves to make your accuser feel patronized and leaves them ignorant of what really happened.

Skill #3: Avoid Jumping to Conclusions about Intent

Let's face it, human beings have a low toleration for the unknown. We have an almost compulsive desire to understand what is going on, what will happen next, and, most pertinent to our subject, the intention behind people's actions or words.

In the case of tense conversations, assessing intent accurately is particularly important because that intent dictates what we do next. Right about now, you might be asking this pointed question. "Who cares about intentions? If I'm hurt, that's all that matters." Of course the impact of an act matters and that impact, if negative, must be remedied. The actor's intent, however, must be known, because knowledge of intent will influence the success of that remedy.

That brings us to our Skill #3: Be cautious when assessing intent and attitude. Give folks the benefit of the doubt.

The best, and most respectful, way to get a handle on how someone really feels is to engage the person in conversation. For example, rather than jumping to conclusions about why a colleague used an offensive phrase, you might say something to here like: "I was surprised that you used that phrase— that seemed kind of disrespectful to me. I'd like to understand better why that happened," or, "What you said really bothered me, maybe I misunderstood, could we talk about it some more?" In other situations, you might say, "I'd sure like to understand better what just happened, do you have a few minutes to chat?" or "I can't honestly say I agree with you, but I'd sure like to hear your perspective."

I know, I know – this wording may feel a little stilted and uncomfortable at first. But, as I'm sure you've experienced with other things, any new behavior – or new choice of words – can seem awkward when you first try it. Keep at it – eventually the practice – and the rewards – will make respectful responses like these second nature.

So, remember our third skill: Be cautious when assessing intent. No guesswork, just a genuine attempt to engage the person in respectful conversation. You'll be amazed at what you learn.

Skill #4: Communicate With Respect

Our first three skills – manage emotion, set productive goals, assess intent cautiously – lay the groundwork for Skill #4: Communicate with respect. Communicating with respect has, of course, almost infinite components. Let's take a look at just a few.

1. If someone has said something offensive, approach them in private rather than risk embarrassing him or her in front of others.
2. Avoid the use of accusatory labels like “sexist,” “biased,” or “homophobic.” Not only do such labels mean that you are jumping to possibly wrong conclusions about intent and attitude, but the very act of negatively labeling the person will create a climate of defensiveness that will be very difficult to overcome. Instead of labelling, talk about specific behaviors (not what you think those behaviors mean about attitude.)
3. Speak in terms of how an action made you feel. Say, for example, “When I hear jokes like that, it makes me feel left out” rather than “Your joke shows how sexist you are.”
4. Verbally acknowledge the feelings of others no matter how extreme the emotion might be. If, for example, someone is offended by something you said but you feel their reaction is excessive, do not say, “You're too sensitive,” or that pair of old standbys, “You know what I meant” and “I was only kidding.” Each of these dismissive phrases does little more than make the object of the allegedly offending statement feel still more diminished and the person who has been accused look foolish and unkind.

Say, instead, something like, “Thanks so much for telling me how you feel, I really appreciate your speaking up. I'll admit I'm a little confused, can we talk about it a bit” or “You have a different perspective. I'd like to hear more.”

1. Practice “engaged listening.” This means that, when the parties involved sit down to talk, they remove all distractions and really focuses on what each other is saying. No cell phone, no looking at watches, no gazing around the room – each is the center of the other's world.

These simple acts of respect are powerful tools for breaking down the barriers to good communication. The result? Human beings who are comfortable really listening to each other's point of view. It doesn't get better than that.

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