



## WEED OUT – Conducting Conversations in Challenging Situations

By Out Loud

Course Module 6



## 1. The Module contains 6 units:

- I. Importance of conversations in challenging situations
- II. Pre-contact - Preparation
- III. Start of the contact – Introducing and setting the boundaries
- IV. Contact – Conducting the conversations
- V. Closing the contact
- VI. After-contact – Learning moments and prevention

## 2. Learning Outcomes

1. Be able to explain the basics of non-violent communication.
2. Be able to prepare a challenging conversation using effective communication methods and negotiation techniques.
3. Be able to lead conversations in challenging situations.

## Learning Units

### Unit 1. The importance of conversations in challenging situations

It is important to empower people to know what to do, how to talk when faced with bullying incidents. It can build confidence for both individuals and teams. You may find that changes to your current policies might be needed when planning and conducting such type of conversations. Giving staff the opportunity to have input and build on current policies and procedures can empower them to make better choices. It can allow people to take ownership and responsibility for their own health and safety and the confidence to report incidents that might affect the health and safety of others.

There are lots of benefits of having such conversations:



- Teams are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death due to unsafe conditions (Research Study: Silent Danger).
- Five times faster response rates to financial downturns—budget adjustments can be made far more intelligently than less-skilled peers (Research Study: Financial Agility).
- Influence change in colleagues who are bullying, conniving, dishonest, or incompetent. (Research Study: Corporate Untouchables).

It is important to remember that sometimes conversation will not be enough – the involvement of the management team or even security or police intervention will be needed.

It is possible to separate all conversations in five parts:

- Precontact – the stage of preparation
- The start of the contact
- Contact – the conversation
- The closure of the contact
- Post-contact

## Unit 1 Precontact - Preparation

Precontact is a stage of preparation of the conversation. There are people who jump to the conversation and conflicts ASAP. Usually, they talk and act before thinking. It doesn't help to resolve conflicts but deepen them. Therefore, precontact stage – the preparation, gathering the data, thinking about the space, time and participants in conversation is crucial. This is a time to calm down and decide on a strategy for resolving the contact.

Don't decide to hide a bullying situation or conflict, especially if you see the situation repeating and escalating. Understand the importance of having the conversation – it can help not only you personally but make the whole workplace safer.

There are different reasons why people keep silent and encourage occupational violence. Usually they think:

- *The other person must know that his behavior is inappropriate or bothersome.*
- *I don't want to hurt the other person's feelings.*
- *I'm not allowed to tell people that their behavior is inappropriate*
- *I'm afraid of what might happen.*
- *I'm afraid of escalating the aggression.*



Keeping silent will encourage the abuser's behaviour, therefore it is important to stop them as soon as possible. It could be considered unlikely that this type of behaviour is a one-off, especially if it is a colleague. Report by having a private conversation with a supervisor. Discuss if the behaviour is part of a pattern of behaviours, though even a single incident of negative behaviour may have the potential to escalate into bullying; and should be managed, not ignored.

### **Choosing the safe place and time for conversations**

The precontact stage is the best for designing a safe space for all the participants involved in the conflict. Loud noises, the presence of many people (particularly if more than one is talking), too much background noise, or even bright fluorescent lights will not only be distracting but may further agitate the disorganized person. Consistent with both control and safety concerns, move the individual to a less stimulating environment, whenever it is possible.

There are many things that get in the way as we listen or even try to listen. Consider, for example:

- **Setting**—what else is going on when you are having a conversation? Are you in a private setting where it is quiet and, therefore, easy to hear what is being said? Or are you trying to have a substantive discussion in a noisy restaurant or any place where there are a lot of distractions?
- **Timing**—are both people in the conversation ready to talk about the particular subject at that point in time? Consider how difficult it is to listen when the other person has brought up a subject you weren't expecting, and you need time to think about how you really want to proceed.
- **Beliefs**—what beliefs do I hold that are potentially in conflict with the person with whom I am communicating?
- **Perceptions**—what preconceived ideas do I have about the person across from me? Am I reacting to how he/she is dressed or how he/she speaks?
- **Emotions**—am I having a bad day? Did I come to work today with emotional baggage left from something that happened at home this morning?
- **Cultural differences**—is this person from a different part of the world or a different religion?
- **Relationships**—do I compete with this person for “face time” with the CEO? Do we have a natural rivalry? Might this person stand in my way for a promotion or the other way around?
- **Words**—does this person use words I don't understand?
- **Assumptions**—am I applying my own assumptions to what the speaker is saying



It is wise to choose a discrete place where everyone feels safe and physically comfortable, prepare for the conversation with facts. Write a fact sheet and make notes before initiating the conversation. Don't rely on your memory, especially if situation is emotionally charged. If you are not aware of the conversation dynamics, invite a coworker to join the conversation. Choose an appropriate time when no one is in a rush

## Unit 2 Start of the contact

Yes, words matter in conversations. Besides it there are lots of tiny nonverbal elements in interactions which can influence the outcome. Agitated people lose the ability to accurately listen to what you are saying, much less maintain a coherent train of thought. Instead, they will be tracking other aspects of communication:

- your muscular tension;
- the amount of physical space between you;
- the positioning of your hands;
- the quality of your voice.

Therefore, remember about the importance of non-verbal communication.

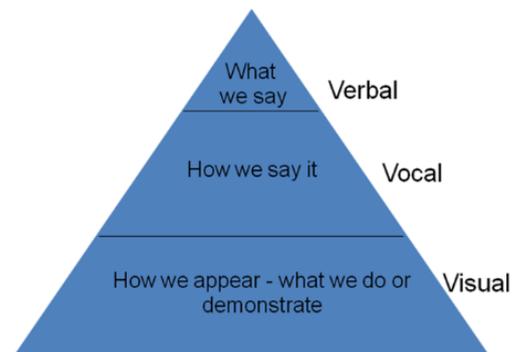


Table 1. Communications triangle

In non-verbal communication:

- Mind your tone of voice;
- Mind the volume of voice;
- Mind your posture;
- Mind your gestures;
- Mind your distance – stand close, but not too close;
- Mind what you touch;
- Mind your facial expressions;
- Mind your eye contact.



It is OK to start challenging conversations with small talk. Small talk will give space and time to calm down, to understand the mood of the conversation partner,

The purpose of small talk is:

- to establish a pleasant working atmosphere;
- to initiate a fruitful communication between partners;
- to remove barriers resulting from different understanding of some situations while waiting or setting a schedule;
- to provide an occasion to clarify different intentions resulting from cultural differences;
- to move closer to a communication partner.

## Unit 2 Conducting the conversations

### Opening the conversation

If you are opening the conversation, choose opening words or questions such as:

- I need to talk through the issue with you
- I need a reality check with something
- I'm having a problem
- I hear what you're saying about...
- I have a dilemma and I need some help with it
- I am not sure I agree with.... Can we explore a bit more?
- Texting isn't the best way to communicate in this situation. Can we...
- How so? Etc.

### Listening to partners

Be prepared to listen! Listening is important! It is dangerous not to listen – you will miss essential information and won't see problems coming. When you try to understand why people do things, you have to mind-read and guess to fill in the gaps in your listening skills.

Listening is a commitment and a compliment. It is a commitment to understanding how other people feel and how they see their world. Listening actively involves paraphrasing, clarifying, and giving feedback. Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, feelings, theories, and experiences about the topic and the situation at hand. When faced with pressure and strong opinions, we often start looking for ways to win, punish, or keep the peace, not understanding the situation.



If you are familiar with the nature of aggression, you will be able to assess the level of danger more adequately. You will know what is likely to make things worse, and what is likely to make things better. Try to avoid such words “always,” “never.

Feel the difference:

*“You never tell anything to us” versus “We need such kind of information as soon as possible”. “*

*“Why are you always so mean?” versus “I feel offended”*

*“Why are you always so emotional?” versus “Is there a possibility to discuss it calmly?”*

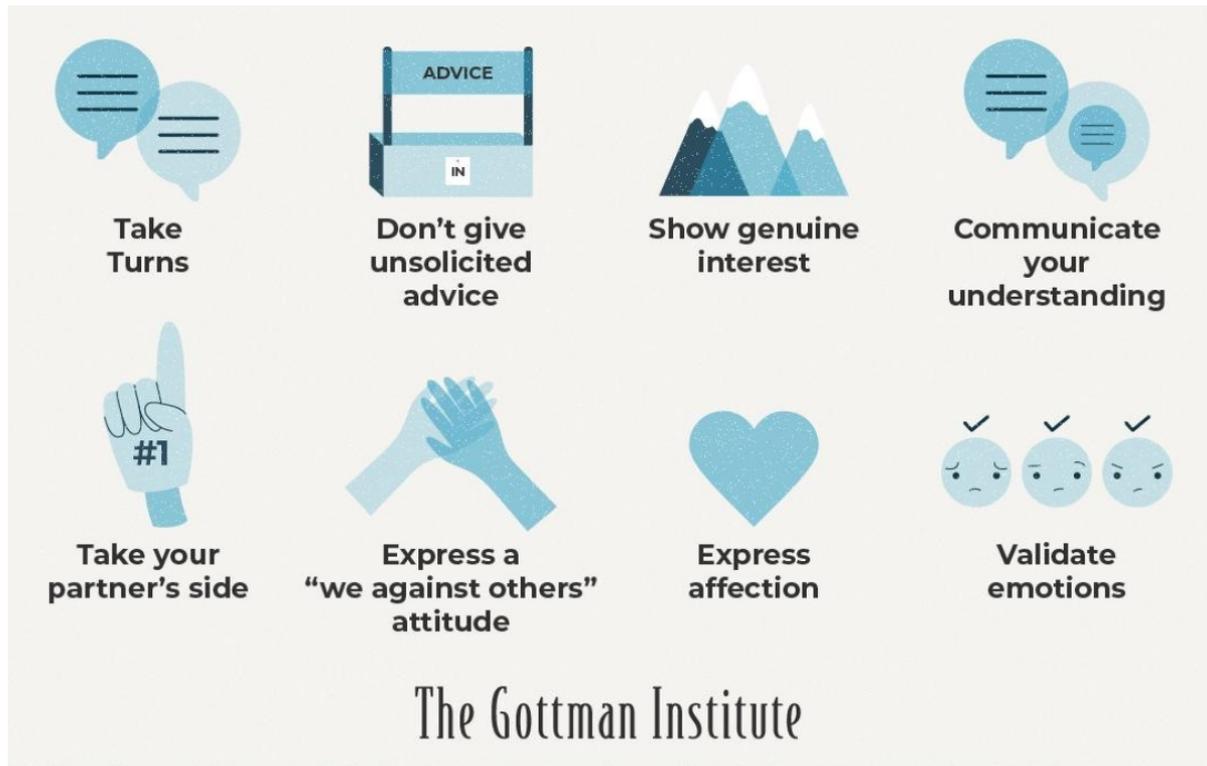
If you are familiar with how best to communicate with people in different psychological and emotional states, you will not waste your words. You will say the right thing, rather than anything. Avoid labelling such as “you are acting rude”, “lazy”, “selfish”, “aggressive” etc. It will reduce the possibilities to calm down the situation.

By developing our emotional intelligence, we learn a crucial secret about de-escalating angry situations or persons. Just being polite may not be enough to manage a difficult situation – we need to understand not only messages, but metamesages too.

Metamesages are unstated meanings we glean based on how someone spoke— tone of voice, phrasing— and on associations we brought to the conversation. You might say that the message communicates word meaning, but the metamesage yields heart meaning. So, a crucial step in breaking the gridlock of frustrating conversations is learning to separate messages from metamesages.

#### **Basic laws in conversations:**

- Don't make things a power struggle
- Engage a simple conversations and small talk – it will help you to understand the seriousness of the situation
- Leave people alone and give time where it is needed
- Use calm, direct, and open eye contact
- Use names
- Paraphrase
- Get a whole story
- Make non-threatening requests
- Respect the conversation partner
- Use a softening statement to put the other person at ease, when appropriate.



The examples of conversation:

- o when you block my path, I feel intimidated*
- o when you criticize me in front of my teammates, I feel belittled.*
- o when you make a condescending statement because I ask for help, I feel belittled.*
- o sometimes things are frustrating and please discuss the situation with our supervisor*
- o I feel disappointed that you would act that way, mocking a teammate.*
- o when you slammed the door, it frightened me and I feel unsettled.*
- o 'Jane, it's good that information is protected and when you change a password to common spreadsheets, please email me the new password.'*
- o when you don't let me know of important changes to procedure, I feel disappointed.'*

Resolving the conflict may be your intent, but that can quickly erode if you say the wrong thing. The phrases that you should never say. You may be frustrated, and you may be tempted, but beware of the consequences if you utter these words. They will not resolve a conflict. Rather, they will fan the flames and ignite a firestorm. Even if you are thinking them, don't say them. Take the high road, take a deep breath, and avoid phrases like:

- o That is so stupid.*
- o Are you a moron or something?*
- o I'm warning you.*



- o What exactly are you*
- o What exactly are you accusing me of doing?*
- o That's ridiculous!*
- o Such a loser!*
- o You are so stupid!*
- o There's no reason to get so defensive.*
- o Stop acting like a child!*

Trigger words and phrases	How and why they provoke increased resistance
Universals such as: always, never, all, nobody, everybody, and everything.	<p>When one of these words is used, the other party stops listening to what you are saying and begins scanning their experience for the exception.</p> <p>The extremes we will go to, to prove that the speaker is wrong. If we can provide ourselves with evidence that the speaker is not credible, we can feel justified in dismissing their perspective on other issues. A universal word will rarely hold up under scrutiny because they are almost impossible to prove.</p>
Absolutes such as: avoidable, certain, correct, defective, exact, harmless, incomplete, inevitable, irrefutable, literally, necessary, needless, obvious, superior, total, temporary, thorough, unavoidable, unequal, unimportant, universal, valid, worst and wrong.	<p>Words that represent an absolute judgment, something which is or is not, will usually evoke a push back from the other party. When the judgment leaves no "elbow-room," the other party will defend their position.</p> <p>A judgment is just an opinion or a conclusion and the other party is quite likely to have a different opinion or conclusion, particularly about the degree of something. For example: "That was a total waste of time." "I think there were parts of that presentation that were useful to me." The most common offenders are included in this list of absolutes, and it is by no means complete.</p>
Why?	<p>This is a perfectly appropriate word in most circumstances, but it is almost guaranteed to create defensiveness if you use it when there is tension between you and another party.</p> <p>When your performance was not at the expected level, the authority figure was likely to ask you "Why?" The result of all this experience is that when we hear the word in any context in which there is tension our amygdala goes on high alert. We immediately recognize that there could be trouble and become defensive.</p>
Just and at least	<p>"Just" is a tricky word because, depending on the context, it can mean a lot of different things and usually it isn't a problem as in: "I just got here"; "I'll just be a minute"; "It was just three dollars!" It is when the word is used to minimize something that it can cause a problem. For example: "I was just trying to point out...." This sentence suggests that the listener is making something more of what is being said.</p>



	<p>“Could you just do it?” suggests that whatever it is you are asking, is not a big deal. If you just did it, things would be better! The listener is quite likely to have another opinion when the word “just” is used to minimize their experience.</p> <p>“At least” has the same effect. It is used to lessen the effect of a sentence, and, in a tense situation, the listener is not likely to appreciate the inference. “Could you at least give it a chance?” suggests to the other party that they are not being fair in their resistance. A perfect recipe for further resistance!</p>
<p>Demands: You need to..., You have to..., You should..., and You must....</p>	<p>Phrases that imply a requirement evoke that little voice in the back of our heads that says, “You aren’t the boss of me.” Having control over our environment is a basic need. It’s what drives a little one to pull the spoon from your hand even though the child has not yet developed the coordination to steer that spoon to their mouth.</p> <p>When we are in control, things are more predictable. With increased predictability comes the capacity to foresee where and when a threat might occur, and this allows us to take proactive steps to protect ourselves. We feel vulnerable when someone else is in control and the result is that we resist others telling us what we must do, or should do</p>
<p>But, however.</p>	<p>Although “but” can be used in many ways, when we are in a tense situation, the word is almost always used to negate whatever preceded it. For example: “I love your attitude, but I really need to see more cooperation.”</p> <p>When we hear something like this we discount or disregard the first half of the sentence and focus on the second half. “However” works the same way; it’s just the “city cousin” of “but”! In tense situations “but” or “however” always signal that a reprimand, criticism, or demand is about to follow</p>
<p>Don’t take this personally, don’t be defensive, and don’t take offense at this.</p>	<p>Any phrase preceded by the word “don’t” is a warning that something unpleasant, a reprimand or criticism, is about to follow. In a previous chapter I explained that when we are told not to think about something, we must think about it to not think about it. It is the proverbial, pink elephant. You were not thinking about it, but if I tell you not to think about a pink elephant, you picture it immediately.</p> <p>Telling someone to not take something personally or not to take offense works the same way. You just warned them that whatever you are about to say is offensive or personal.</p>

**Spark words and phrases**

How and why	they create less resistance
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Your name	When you see or hear your name in a novel or unexpected context a surge of dopamine immediately follows. During a difficult conversation, you can use this knowledge by saying the other party's name in a soft and caring manner. It will work the opposite, however, if you don't get the tone right.
I wonder, and imagine	These words appeal to the subconscious. They evoke a picture or visualization and, in doing so, bypass the critical, analytical, and judging prefrontal cortex that works with words and numbers.
Because.	Our history with the word "because" is that it is usually followed with a logical, rational reason for something. When we hear the word, we tend to get a little lazy and don't always analyse the merit of whatever follows.
Perhaps, maybe, and you might	These words work well when you want to offer advice because they create the illusion in the other party that, when they follow your suggestion, it is their decision and that they are in control.
Yes, and.	<p>When you respond to something the other party has said with "yes" the other party recognizes that you are not opposing their idea.</p> <p>This removes the need to be defensive and allows you to add an additional thought to their suggestion. Example: "I think we need to repeat the marketing campaign we used last year." "Yes, and if we add some tweaks to it based on the new data, I think we would have a winner."</p>
Yes, if.	"Yes, if" is a cousin to "Yes, and". The difference is that it adds a condition to the agreement. For example: "I think we need to repeat the marketing campaign we used last year." "Yes, I would agree if we were dealing with the same market issues. Since the new data shows some vastly different trends, we might need to ...."
You probably already thought of this..., and You probably already know ....	When you use either of these phrases, you are saying to the other party that you believe they were smart enough to already have considered something or to know something. This signals respect and mitigates resistance because if the other party tells you no, they didn't think of X or that they didn't know X they are admitting that they are not smart enough!
Easily, naturally, and automatically.	If something is easy, natural, or automatic, there is no reason to resist. We are much more likely to cooperate if we have reason to believe that it will not take a lot of effort and that we can anticipate success.



We need to bear in mind that there are people who get into the conflicts easily, but they have trouble getting out of them. We need to help them not only to calm down but also to get out of the situation mentally and physically. Some ideas for that:

- Stop – wait for a minute or two before you respond.
- Breathe – get more oxygen into your system so that you can think more clearly.
- Actively listen using CARE to listen.
- Neutralize negative emotions
- Label their emotions
- Offer a glass of water or a walk around
- Take a pause. Offer a timescale for it. For example, say – *I have a call after 5 minutes, I will call back you after 20 minutes.*
- Offer a future based solution
- Don't fix into the situation
- Offer choices
- Appreciate their time

If you see they are calming down don't try to get your message across. Help them to get out of the situation and close the conversation.

## Unit 4 Closing the contact

Respect the other's time and close the conversation timely. Draw conclusions and don't let the conversation to start circling.

Even if the outcome of the conversation is as good as you expected thank everyone for their time and attention. Wrap up the conversation,

- *Thank you for bringing your concerns*
- *Thanks for letting me know that this was a problem.*
- *I appreciate your willingness to talk about this issue*
- *We still don't agree, but I understand you better*
- *I understand your doubts better*
- *I know you weren't very enthusiastic about this conversation, and I appreciate you found time for it etc.*

Keep the positive future view and express your hope on finding a fast resolution.

## Unit 5 After the contact – Learning moments and prevention



Keep your promises. If you promised to send the documents, do it. If you promised to talk with the supervisors, do it. Otherwise, you will earn the distrust and each next conversation cycle will be increasingly complicated.

Find a time to ask a feedback and draw conclusions about your conversation skills. Learning new skills takes time. Do not avoid challenging conversations – the more you practice, the better a negotiator you will become.

After the important conversations it is worth asking the questions to yourself:

- *Are you having difficulties with the same person?*
- *Are you having the same or related kinds of conflicts again and again?*
- *Are conflicts occurring at any particular time or place?*
- *Do you have more conflicts at home or work?*
- *What skills do you need to practice?*

Many people find it helpful to keep a diary in conducting the conversations. Start by answering the following:

- *What was the reason for the encounter?*
- *Where were you?*
- *Did you have privacy?*
- *How was your body language?*
- *What did the other person say?*
- *Did you give the other person a chance to talk?*
- *How was it resolved?*
- *If you choose to confront the other person again, what will you say?*
- *If you could do it again, what would you do differently?*

Write the notes without bias, noting times, dates, workers involved, place of incident. Keeping a notation of all incidents for your use is important should you need to call upon the information at a later date. Diarized information can also be used in civil proceedings. This information could help to develop the strategies to monitor and evaluate further incidents

### **You are not alone!**

Don't stay alone in difficult situations, conflicts, incidents or bullying cases! Discuss with the team topics such as the disadvantages of negative communication and the likely consequences. It is important that all staff is aware of company expectations regarding respectful communication. It is also important to establish if the behaviour is a pattern of repeated behaviour and if experienced by most team members, or is the behaviour directed towards this individual in particular. Deliver the message: our organization has an expectation that all employees have a responsibility to promote a safe workplace environment, free from harassment and we are committed to the highest standards of behaviour.



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