How Can We Make Conversations More Prosocial?

The vast majority of conversations we might have on any given day are not particularly emotionally challenging. These conversations whiz by without us even noticing. But the conversations that are going to trip up a group's attempts to be prosocial are the ones that include differences of opinion and conflict. How are we to deal with those challenging conversations? Even though only a small proportion of our total relationships involve difficult conversations, they consume a great deal of our energy in terms of planning, worrying, regretting, griping, talking with others, and so on.

To the extent that we have effective ways of dealing with difficult conversations we have more mental and emotional energy to do our work and live our lives with vitality and engagement. Being able to speak and listen in ways that build engagement, commitment, and learning with anybody gives us tremendous power to shape our own lives and to better collaborate with others.

These skills are particularly relevant for enhancing core design principle 6: fast and fair conflict resolution. We often treat this skill- development work as a goal for action when working on that principle, but we're going over these skills separately here because we think they're also useful for the Prosocial process in general. That is, when we talk about all the other principles, and when we do the matrix, we will have conversations that reflect differences in perspectives and values, and these conversations need to be safe and cordial in order to move a group toward the goal of integrating individual needs with collective needs.

To develop skills in conversation it's useful to think of three hats, or roles, you can alternate between:

- Giving good information (speaking)
- Listening mindfully (listening)
- Structuring or facilitating the

conversation Let's look at each of these.

Giving Good Information

The first and perhaps easiest skill is speaking. Ideally, speaking involves giving good information. By "good" we mean reliable, compre- hensive, and useful information for the context. The following checklist is useful for evaluating the comprehensiveness of a statement:

- *Noticing:* What am I noticing about this situation? What data am I using?
- *Feeling:* How am I feeling?
- *Thinking:* What sense am I making of this situation?
- *Requesting:* What, if anything, am I requesting?

These questions offer both a comprehensive description of our current state and also a kind of natural progression through time. First, we focus on the inputs to our sense making, then on our emotional and cognitive responding to that situation, then on what we're hoping might happen next. This framework is a distillation of many years of teaching communication skills. Peter Senge introduced something similar that he called the "ladder of inference" (1990). First, we begin at the "bottom," actively selecting a subset of the available data, and then we narrow down to just one perspective on the situation—a perspective that excludes far more than it includes.

Let's look at the parts that make up this process.

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Noticing

By "noticing" data we mean describing the actual "facts," or observable elements, of a situation. Consider the difference between "When you spoke rudely to me, I felt angry" and "When you raised your voice and accused me of cheating, I felt angry." The former is a judgment or an evaluation of the situation, whereas the latter is closer to a description. Of the two, judgment or description, the latter is more valuable for the context of giving good information. It respects the facts of the situation rather than any party's particular perspec- tive or response. This opens the door for all parties to arrive at an integrative understanding of the situation, how both parties feel about it, what might really be going on, and how that issue might be resolved, rather than an understanding skewed from the start by another's perspective.

The best way to tell whether we're describing rather than evaluating a situation is to ask ourselves whether everybody could agree on the description. What I might call "rude," you might call "honest" or "justified," but when I describe you calling me a cheat, it's easier to tell whether or not this event actually occurred. Of course, this process occurs on a continuum. You might disagree that you "raised" your voice or that you "accused" me of anything. The other option would be to make a still more literal statement, something like "When I heard the volume of your voice increase and you said the words 'I don't believe you completed the test yourself,' I felt angry."

Of course, while it is useful to be flexible enough to speak this way in emotional and conflictual situations, it's often too slow and artificial a way of speaking to be practical. However, functionally, all that matters is that both parties are using the same data. So, ultimately, the key is this: Can we all agree on a description of what actually happened? The data we're using might not always be publicly observable to others. For example, I might say something like "I noticed myself shaking and wanting to shout at you," and provided this is an honest reporting of what I actually noticed about my situation, and I own it as my own experience—not something that you made me experience—functionally it's just a description of what is going on. And, as a result, it's often useful in the sense that the other can understand what I'm thinking and feeling.

Feeling

Feelings are the second element of giving good information. Over many years of working with teams, leaders, and managers, we've encountered many people who are reluctant to express feelings in "professional" relationships. This stems, in part, from people viewing emotions as counter to reason, as irrational. But emotions are not the opposite of rationality; they form a parallel system of interacting with the world and deciding (Jasper, 2011). Though this system is based less in language and more in feeling and response, we still direct it toward evaluating the world and responding effectively. And emotions, occupying enormous activity in the brain, are highly functional. Our emotional system is built around driving effective social interaction. Emotions drive whether or not we cooperate, so it's essential to engage with them—at work no less than in other areas of life.

Also, feelings evolved to serve both motivational and expressive purposes. Anger not only motivates me to fight back, it also tells others that they have transgressed in some way. But our feelings also occur on a continuum; there is a world of difference between "I was mildly irritated," "I was annoyed," "I was angry," and "I was furious." Furthermore, learning to express feelings to others forces us to express them to ourselves. So, when giving information, especially in situations of conflict, it is enormously useful to be able to ask oneself, *How exactly am I feeling. Am I irritated or furious? Why?* So, feelings convey both the tone and the degree of responding that a person feels. Finally, when people use feeling words, others are more likely to trust them because it's easier to tell whether the person is being authentic. On the other hand, there are certainly times when it is difficult or inappropriate to use a feeling word. The key here is not to generate a rigid rule—that one must always express a feeling when giving good information—but rather to have the flexibility to do so when it would be useful.

Although feelings might be rational, it's important to recognize that they are also often very ephemeral. One of the reasons some people resist talking about feelings is that they get taken too seriously. We need to hold a person's feeling at any given moment quite lightly.

We're not arguing that every conflictual situation must be met with a deep dialogue. There are times when such an approach is actu- ally counterproductive. Sometimes "talking it through" tends to enshrine feelings as fixed, when in fact they are more contextual than that—feelings are continually being reinvented. Generally speaking, it's helpful to just hold our perspectives somewhat lightly. Sometimes the best way to do this is by making fun of the situation, or even cultivating a habit of letting it go and seeing what comes next. The key point here is to pay attention to what moves us forward.

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Thinking

The third element of giving good information is a description of the sense one is making of the situation. For example, if I say, “When you accused me of cheating, I felt angry, because I was actually trying to be efficient in helping you, and the idea of cheating never occurred to me,” I’m providing a reasonably comprehensive description of (a) what I am noticing, (b) how I feel about it, and (c) the sense that I am making of the situation. We all assume that others see the world in the same way we do. This behavior was presumably selected for in our evolution because more often than not people can infer a reasonably accurate perception of what others are thinking and feeling, and it’s cumbersome to slow down in a natural conversation to check and see if everyone shares, or at least understands, the per- spectives of others. But when things go wrong, and there is conflict or just differences of interests and opinions, it is critical to have the flexibility to be able to carefully explain the elements of your experience to another.

Requesting

The final element of giving good information is to provide information about what specifically one is requesting of the other. This is not always necessary, of course; we’re not always making requests of others in the conversations we have in our groups. And of course, one should pay attention to conversational rhythms; sometimes you’ll have to let the person you’re speaking to respond to your noticing, feeling, and thinking statements before beginning a request. But identifying the request in the situation can be extraordinarily helpful in a variety of ways.

First, it helps the speaker get clear on what they actually want and care about in the situation. Imagine a team member is telling a story about how the boss of the team is always making excessive demands. It might seem obvious that what they want is fewer demands. But perhaps they actually want fewer tedious demands and more interesting demands, or demands that are less time restricted and more manageable in the time that’s available. If this team member considered what they were noticing, feeling, and thinking about their work- load—and what exactly they might ask for to achieve the outcome they’d be happy with—they might be able to make this request and achieve a more effective and positive end.

Second, it builds personal responsibility and agency. Consider a person moaning and complaining about their boss. Asking what they’d like to see happen naturally leads to the question “What might you do to help make that happen?”

Third, making a request in a conversation can encourage the *other* person to give good information. Imagine you say to someone, “When you accused me of cheating, I felt angry because I was actually trying to be efficient in helping you, and the idea of cheating never occurred to me.” The other person might just say, “Well, it should have occurred to you. The fact that it didn’t just indicates what a natural cheat you are!” With this statement, this person has revealed that they expected you to read their mind. If you make an explicit request for them to give you good information (for example, “Would you tell me what you are noticing, thinking, and feeling?”), then you’re more likely to get a more useful understanding of their perspective, which might help you move the conversation forward and avoid the situation in the future.

“I” statements

You might have noticed that for *all* of the elements of giving good information we’ve discussed, speakers make statements in which they own their noticing, feeling, thinking, and requesting as their own perspective. They follow the template of what is widely known as an “I” statement. Statements that focus on the “you,” by contrast, like “You hurt me” or “You don’t care for me” or “You are inconsiderate,” all include assumptions about the other’s intentions, character, or experience. But of course, we can never really know exactly what another is experiencing, or why; we can only offer our own experience. This insight is at the very heart of growing one’s perspective-taking skill for conversations. The “you” statements above can easily be reframed to use “I,” such as “When you did X, I felt hurt,” “When you forget my birthday, I wonder if you don’t care for me,” or “I would like you to remember my birthday, and when you don’t it seems incon- siderate to me.” In each of these statements the speaker recognizes that what they’re offering is one view of the world, and that there are other possible views that can be respected and considered. The statements also open space for the other person to respond, and in a prosocial manner—such as to correct a mistaken impression, or to apologize for a wrong they may have done—rather than an exclusively personal one.

In this sense, giving good information involves what you *don’t* say as much as what you do say. Again, this comes down to Heifetz’s (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009) notion of getting up on the balcony so that you can observe what is going on more dispassionately

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and separate the people involved from the problem you're trying to address. Don't make claims about another's character, or assumptions about their intentions; when we do this, we're likely to evoke defensiveness as that person seeks to protect their positive sense of identity.

In summary, giving good information involves paying attention to describing what is being noticed, felt, thought, and requested as you and another person are speaking. Tough conversations almost always involve speaking assertively about your own experience of the situation. To do this effectively, the most critical thing to remember is to separate the "facts" you perceive from the sense you are making of those facts. For example, "I am tired of your laziness" mixes facts and interpretation, whereas "When you show up to work late, I get annoyed because it interferes with me getting my work done" keeps the facts and the interpretation separate, and this helps lower the other person's defensiveness and allows for learning to occur.

Keeping these aspects separate is sometimes hard to do because we assume others see the world the same way we do. However, the number one cause of conflict is that people do not see the world the same way. By reporting your *own* experience, observations, and interpretations separately in the conversations you engage in, and allowing others room for theirs, you can help counteract the effects of this fact.

Putting This Skill into Practice

You can prepare yourself to give better information in a conversation. Here are some questions we sometimes give to a group during the Prosocial process to encourage them to think through what they want to say. The emphasis here is not on planning out exactly what to say, but rather to get clearer on the elements of what the person is noticing, feeling, thinking, and, potentially, requesting:

- What are the facts related to both the context and my concern?
- What sense do I make of these facts in terms of feelings and consequences for others and myself?
- Do I need to consult with others about my facts and related sensemaking before interacting?
- Can I give this information assertively (not judgmentally) while seeking to test it, learn, and change it if I get better information?

You can practice the first and second points in this process with the following exercise. Think of a difficult conversation that you should be having either in a work or personal context. Now have a go at answering these questions:

- *What actually happened?*
  (Be sure to avoid any overly interpretive or judgmental terms and focus only on facts that everybody who is involved is likely to agree on.)
- *How did you feel about the experience?*
  Rather than good or bad, happy or sad, try to use more nuanced feeling words. The more precise you can be in parsing the dif- ference between envious and jealous, ashamed or embarrassed, sad or melancholy, for example, the more you will learn about your current state.
- *What impact did the experience have on you? Why did it affect you? What were the consequences for you?*
  As much as possible, focus on reporting *your* experience of the situation rather than how others might have experienced it.
- *Are you requesting something of someone in this situation? What could someone do to help improve your experience?*

To give you a feel for what giving good information looks like, here are some examples of how people might give good information, having used the steps above:

- *John, when you didn't finish the safety check, I was really annoyed, because safety is critical for me, and I want to be able to trust you to do the right thing.*

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- *I'm confused. I think you are saying X, but I am seeing Y. Can you help me to understand how those go together?*

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- *I really appreciated the class you ran today because I learned heaps about some of the assumptions, I've been making about some people who are standing in the way of me getting the best outcomes with them.*

Here's an example that combines structuring (more on this skill later) and giving good information:

- *We don't seem to be getting anywhere here, and I am noticing I'm getting pretty wound up. When you talk over the top of me, I wonder if there is any point continuing, and I feel angry and a bit discouraged. How about I listen to your perspective, then I'll check with you to see if I've really understood you? When you feel as though I have really got it, would you be willing to listen to my perspective?*

Listening Reflectively

Now, most of us are passably good at giving good information. We at least demonstrate enough skill to make our points of view known. But most conversations consist of people repeatedly asserting their own point of view—not necessarily listening to that of others. Can you recall a time when someone really listened to you? What was that like for you? Perhaps they were silent and attentive, or perhaps they asked questions that indicated their genuine interest. Or perhaps they checked back with you to make sure they had accurately under- stood what you were trying to say.

If there is one single communication skill that has the most impact on creating more prosocial groups, it's the capacity to listen mind- fully, or reflectively, by which we mean both (a) listening deeply for meaning and (b) testing one's understanding of the other's perspective.

Listening reflectively involves two parts. The first part is to closely track what the other person is saying to *see* if you can determine their sense of the situation and, in particular, what they are hoping for in the conversation. Particular things to listen for include emotions, fears, purposes, and hopes. The second part is to state to the other person your understanding, in your own words, to make sure you cor- rectly understood their perspective. This not only allows you to proceed with the correct information, it builds trust and caring in the relationship because everybody wants to know that they've been heard.

Most of us think that listening is a passive activity, but as you will see, listening reflectively is *hard* work. And, as with structuring and giving good information, effectiveness comes more from your attitude and your willingness to take the perspective of another than from specifically what you say in response. So, listening reflectively involves listening for the sense the other person is making—*their* observations and experience—and then reporting back what you heard to check your understanding. Listening in this way is a life- changing skill, and it's the most important thing you can do to build influence and relationships.

So how does one prepare to listen reflectively? Here are some useful questions to ask yourself prior to or during a conversation:

- What might be the interests and intentions of the other person?
- How can I develop and sustain an attitude of real curiosity and interest in the other's point of view?
- How will I know if I stop listening reflectively?
- How can I listen to understand, rather than reactively dismiss the other person's views with arguments or reassurance?

Listening to Ourselves

If listening to others is important, so is listening deeply and openly to ourselves. When we talk, we're not just passing information to one another about the topic of conversation. There is also a parallel conversation we're having with ourselves (that is, thinking) about the quality of the relationship. We are evaluating the intentions of the other, our views of why we think they're saying what they're saying. For example, is it for personal gain, or are they interested in us? We are trying to predict what they might be thinking and feeling so that we can have a sense of how they might respond to different things we might say. We're also responding emotionally, perhaps to clearly articulated thoughts, or perhaps to the most immediate and automatic judgments.

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Structuring a Conversation

You can be much more effective in a conversation if you're able to openly discuss the *purpose* and *process* of it, both at the beginning of the conversation and throughout. Even for really tough conversations, giving others the opportunity to have input about why and how the conversation is conducted is a great way to get them engaged. What do we mean by "purpose" and "process"?

- *Purpose* is about the outcome one hopes for from the conversation—for example, (a) for me to hear your point of view, (b) for you to hear my point of view, (c) to come to a shared perspective, or (d) to decide on what to do next.
- *Process* is about the way the conversation occurs (for example, "How about I speak first about what's on my mind, then I'll listen while you tell me your perspective? Then we'll see if we can develop a way forward") and the time that it will take.

Note that "to have a discussion" is not a purpose; it's a process. To get to purpose, ask yourself, *Why am I really having a discussion?*

The beginning of a tough conversation should almost always involve a structuring statement. However, structuring can occur at any time *during* a conversation in order to put it back on track or to defuse strong emotions.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to prepare for effective structuring:

- What is my real purpose?
- What process will work well for making sure both sides feel like they're heard?
- What timing (length of discussion, day, and time of day) would work for both parties?
- Can I get this information out early in the interaction and confirm it with the other?
- Can I give this information without using judgmental language or a judgmental tone?

Here's an exercise to help you develop a structuring statement to open a conversation:

- What is your *purpose* for the conversation? (This is the hard bit. Note that "to have a discussion" is a process, not a purpose. Why do you want to have the discussion?)
- What *process* do you propose to follow? (For example, "I will say how I see it, then you can add your perspective, and then we will discuss the differences…")
- What is your *timing* for the conversation?
- How might you say all this in one to three sentences at the beginning of the interaction?

Here are some examples of structuring statements:

- I'd like to tell you everything I've heard in as much detail as I can. After that, I'd like for you to tell me what you know about the situation. When we reach a common understanding about what the problem is, I want us to think about what we might do to solve it. I've got an hour on my calendar for this meeting, but if it appears that we need more time, we can schedule another meeting and continue later. How does all that sound to you? (Jentz, 2007, p. 59)
- I wanted you to come in so that I could learn more about what happened the other day and decide what to do about it. I would like to hear what happened from your perspective, then I can tell you what I heard, and after that I will decide what to do. I have forty-five minutes. How does that sound to you as a process?

Lastly, here's an example of a structuring statement for the middle of a conversation or meeting:

> We seem to be getting bogged down in the detail a bit. We agreed at the beginning of this meeting that it would be about getting as full a picture of the situation as possible from all perspectives, and that we would focus on solutions in the next meeting. Would you be willing to put this discussion about the future on hold until we've heard from

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everyone?

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My hope and aim for this meeting were that we might better understand each other's views of what's going on. We may not have time to get to a solution, but at least if we can understand each other's perspective, we can take some time to think about it and then plan a way forward in our next meeting. Since I am the one who sees a problem, I suggest that I start by telling you what I have seen that bothers me. To be honest, I'm confused as to why this is happening, so I will listen closely to your perspectives until I have a clear sense of it and you are sure I fully understand how you see it. We have an hour for this meeting? How does that sound as a way to proceed?

Joe, I'd like you to tell me what happened so that I can understand your point of view. How about you give me all the facts and the sense that you made of them, and I will ask questions if I don't understand what's going on. We have fifteen minutes. Will you be able to manage this in that time?

Mary, I want to talk with you about what happened the other day. I'd like to describe some patterns I see in the way you interact with the team that don't seem to me to be working so well, and then I'd like to get your perspective on what I've said. We have an hour, and if possible, I would like to use at least some of that time to see if we can work out a way forward where you're happy and the team is performing at its best. How does that sound to you?

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