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### **Crucial Conversations**

*“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed, but when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” ~Audre Lorde*

We have conversations with family, friends, colleagues, and even strangers throughout our day. Most conversations are not simple linear “ask and tell”, instead they are more complex. What we think, what we say, what we mean, what others hear, and how we feel about it afterward are key dimensions to a conversation. Successful conversations allow people to openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings and articulate their theories. Conversations are the way we connect and share with others. Yet, there are times when you are having a conversation and something goes very wrong.

**Example:** You and a colleague are collecting soil samples; the sampling is going well and the conversation is casual. It is early in the day and you suggest that statistically for environmental samples you should collect 60 samples from the field. Your colleague says that 60 samples aren’t necessary and you should give the statistics a rest; they really hate it when you get all “OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder)”. You say that in science being “OCD” is not a bad thing. He/she calls you a self-centered know-it-all and you reply by calling him/her a mediocre scientist. He/she begins yelling obscenities. You stop talking turn around and walk to the vehicle to get more sample containers. Later you wonder how the conversation went so downhill. What you don’t realize is that somewhere in the conversation it became a crucial conversation.

A crucial conversation is a discussion between two or more people where: 1) Stakes are High – decisions or outcomes have serious implications, 2) Opinions vary – often oppositional and 3) Emotions (feelings) are strong. Due to their significance we tend to 1) avoid them, fearing making things worse, 2) face them, handling them poorly, or 3) face them, handling them well. When a conversation becomes crucial what is occurring physiologically?

Human brains are not constructed to effectively handle these challenging conversations. It requires us to overcome years and countless generations of genetic evolution. To be capable of attentiveness and to skillfully engage in difficult conversations requires combatting our natural instinct to fight, take flight or freeze. It's biology!

Biochemical and/or neurochemical reactions are triggered the moment we interact with others. These millions of minute-by-minute neurochemical reactions within our brains drive our state of mind. This affects our relationships every day, all day long, through the way we built trust and communicate. The parts of the brain most involved in communication are: 1) prefrontal cortex (executive brain), 2) amygdala (primitive brain), 3) limbic area – where memories are stored, and 4) orbitofrontal cortex – where trust and distrust overlap. Trust takes place in the prefrontal cortex where we assess credibility, intention and predictability of a person's future behavior. While, distrust takes place in the amygdala.

The prefrontal cortex (executive brain) enables us to build societies, have good judgment, be strategic, handle difficult conversations and build and sustain trust. It's the part of our brain where our empathy, judgement, ability to connect, and more strategic social skill reside.

When we are having good conversations, even if they are difficult ones, we feel connected to the other person, feel we can trust them, and know where we stand – we feel safe. We feel good when we have a sense of fairness, ownership, reciprocity, cooperation, open expression and status. When in this state, neurotransmitters released are dopamine and serotonin (the happy neurotransmitters) as well as oxytocin (a bonding hormone); together these neurotransmitters buffer against stress and produce pleasure.

The amygdala (primitive brain) is hardwired to protect and has the well-developed instincts of fight, flight or freeze that have evolved over millions of years. The activation of the amygdala (primitive brain) ensures our survival, by preparing the body to deal with an attacking saber-toothed tiger. In present society there is minimal threat of saber-toothed tiger attacks but our primitive brain is still on high-alert for physical, emotional or ego threats.

When communication with others induces fear, sadness, depression, agitation, anger or over stimulation; this activates our fear-distrust neurochemistry to produce excess dopamine. Excess dopamine over stimulates the primitive brain and sympathetic system (fight, flight, freeze), increasing levels of adrenaline, testosterone, norepinephrine (stress hormone) and cortisol (fear hormone).

Unfortunately, when fear or distrust is triggered, the neurochemistry associated with those feeling has a much longer-lasting effect than when our trust neurochemistry is activated. When cortisol, is released, it has a twenty-six-hour shelf life in the body. If we continue to replay the experience more fear is generated, which can extend our sense of apprehension for days, months, or even years.

What is our brain doing when a crucial conversation occurs? When a conversation creates a sense of threat and stimulates the primitive brain, we become drunk on adrenaline reducing our ability to think rationally. Remember, the amygdala is vigilantly watching for threats (physical, emotional, and ego). When the amygdala is triggered by threat signals, key brain functions start shutting down and we lose our executive brain functions. The prefrontal cortex becomes disconnected from our conversational ability, and we are left with our primitive brain piecing together words, while our half-starved brain grapples with processing words, ideas and concepts. Fear, distrust and conflict not only change the chemistry of the brain, they also change how we feel, how we behave, and how others perceive us. We can be perceived, in a nanosecond, from a trusted friend and advisor to a seriously distrusted frightening threat, due to the effect of fear. We distrust people when we feel they don't have our best interest at heart, and whether that impression is true or not, we create a story of our relationship in a negative or uncertain light. When the amygdala becomes hyperactive, it activates the limbic area of the brain, which stores all of our memories. Once triggered, this part of the brain begins to remember other similar hurts and threats grouping them together editing them into a new scary mental movie. It is little wonder that when it matters the most, our reactions may be at their worst.

**Continuation of Example:** You and a colleague are collecting soil samples; the sampling is going well and the conversation is casual. It is early in the day and you suggest that statistically for environmental samples you should collect 60 samples from the field. Your colleague says that 60 samples aren't necessary and you should give the statistics a rest; they really hate it when you get all "OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder)". You say that in science being "OCD" is not a bad thing. He/she calls you a self-centered know-it-all and you reply by calling him/her a mediocre scientist. He/she begins yelling obscenities. You stop talking turn around and walk to the vehicle to get more sample containers. Your mind accessing your memories, makes the assumption that his/her reason for not wanting to collect 60 samples is that they want you to be criticized by article reviewers for inadequate statistics. You avoid him/her for the next two weeks, repeatedly replaying your new complied memory. Intensifying your belief that they are trying to make you look inept to management.

Conversations depend on how we think, how we listen and how we speak. It's important that we learn to bring ourselves and others into a state of trust in order to ensure conversational success. When gaps arise between what we expect and what we get, relationship uncertainty activates our fear-based neural networks. This results in a lack of neurochemical and hormonal support required for trust. Our good judgment gives way to defensive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive behavior. The challenge, is to determine ways to reduce our fears, or in the least understand their source, allowing us to change our behavior and have productive conversations. At the same time, it is important to remember we can influence others but can only truly change ourselves.

Crucial conversations are not simply challenging, frustrating, frightening, or annoying; the results could have a huge impact on the quality of your life; forever altering elements of your daily routine, for better or worse. When a discussion starts to become stressful, we often do the exact opposite of what works. New skills can be learned to better handle crucial conversations. Self and situational awareness are key factors of crucial conversation skills.

We need to learn skills to break the cycle of actions in order to improve our crucial conversations. This requires us to: 1) Look at the content and conditions of the conversation. 2) Watch for fight or flight reactions (for yourself and others in the conversation). 3) Look for the use of your Style-Under-Stress. Your Style-Under-Stress is based on long-standing habits, you'll resort to the forms of communication that you've grown up with (debate, silent treatment, manipulation) when conversations become stressful.

We become more effective at enhancing conversational trust and safety, by learning to read signals from the amygdala and intervene. We can learn to impede signals from the amygdala by 1) Noticing our reaction to threats – observing whether we engage in “fight (violence), flight (silence) or freeze (deer in the headlights)” and then 2) Choosing a different reaction at the moment of contact (deep breathing; discovery questions and feeling sharing).

Choosing a different reaction requires us to become aware of our emotional triggers (nonverbal, words, ideas, concepts, tones) that push us into states of fear (distrust). Ways to conquer your fear in emotional situations include 1) Recognizing and acknowledging your fear. 2) Becoming aware of your thinking. 3) Gaining perspective by stepping-back (disengaging) mentally and physically. Disengagement is a healthy negotiation tactic that can improve the conversation and calm the amygdala and other fear centers.

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Asking questions of yourself that require thinking such as: 1) What do I really want? 2) What do I really want for the other person? 3) What do I want for the relationship? These questions help to reengage your prefrontal cortex, giving you access to your higher-thinking skills. Asking the other person discovery questions (questions for which you have no answer) helps them to reengage their prefrontal cortex. Discovery questions, help to avoid misunderstandings and allows for discussion of what you both really want.

Conflicts arise not only from different views of reality, but also from the way we define the words we use. When we look at a word, idea or concept together to discover their meaning to us, we clarify and share our view of the world. Sharing helps us to align around the word, idea or concept. Humans have conversational blind spots we need to recognize. 1) Assuming others see what we see, feel what we feel, and think what we think. 2) Failure to realize that fear, trust and distrust change how we see and interpret reality. 3) Inability to stand in each other's shoes when we are fearful or upset. 4) Assumption that we remember what others say, when we actually remember what we think about what others say. 5) Assumption that meaning resides in the speaker, when in fact it resides in the listener.

***"Listening to others, especially those with whom we disagree, tests our own ideas and beliefs. It forces us to recognize, with humility, that we don't have a monopoly on the truth." ~Janet Yellen***

If you have no fear of being attacked or humiliated you yourself can hear almost anything and not become defensive. People become defensive when they no longer feel safe. The problem is the condition of the conversation, not the content of your message. If you can see when people start to feel

unsafe, then you can take steps to mitigate the issue. The act of paying attention to see when a conversation is in danger allows for early intervention to maintain a safe space and engages your executive brain.

When others begin to feel unsafe, they start acting in annoying ways such as: lashing-out, making fun of you, insulting you, or overwhelm you with their arguments. Trust, empathy, support and show of concern cause a shift in our brain chemistry. We become calmer, regain our composure and are able to think in a constructive way. Understanding which condition (Mutual Purpose or Mutual Respect) is at risk is the first step in re-establishing a safe space for conversation. Mutual Purpose is when others perceive, you care about their goals, interest and values, and they care about yours and recognize you're working toward a common outcome in the conversation. Defensiveness, accusations, circling back to the same topic and ending in debate are signs that Mutual Purpose is at risk. Warning: this is not a technique, you must really care about the interests of others, not just our own. If the purpose is to get your way or manipulate others, it will be apparent and safety will be destroyed.

When you and others are working at cross-purposes, step out of the content of the conflict. Stop focusing on who thinks what and create a Mutual Purpose. 1) Make a commitment to stay in the conversation until you have a solution that serves everyone. 2) Recognize the purpose behind the strategy. Separate what people are demanding from the purpose it serves. 3) Invent a Mutual Purpose. Invent a higher or longer-term purpose more motivating than the ones keeping you in conflict 4) Brainstorm new strategies. With a clear Mutual Purpose, you can find a solution that serves everyone.

The moment people perceive disrespect in a conversation, it is no longer about the original purpose it's now about defending dignity. Indication that Mutual Respect is violated are when people are defending their dignity, becoming highly charged, emotions change from fear to anger and they commence pouting, name-calling, yelling, and making threats. How can you respect people you don't respect? You need not approve of their behavior but can stay in conversation by finding a way to honor the person's basic humanity.

***“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made the feel.” ~ Maya Angelou***

There are three skills to use to restore a safe space: 1) Apologize, 2) Contrast, and 3) Create a Mutual Purpose (explained previously). An apology is appropriate when you've made a mistake that

hurt others, a sincere expression of your sorrow for your role in causing, or not preventing, another's pain or difficulty. When others feel disrespected during a crucial conversation even though you haven't done anything disrespectful, use contrasting to fix the misunderstanding. An apology is not appropriate, it would be insincere to admit being wrong when you weren't. When others misinterpret either your purpose or intent, step out of the argument and rebuild safety by contrasting. Contrasting is a "don't/do" statement that 1) Addresses the others' concerns that you don't respect them or that you have a malicious purpose, and 2) Confirms your respect or clarifies your real purpose. The "don't" is the more important because it deals with the misunderstanding that put safety at risk. When people misunderstand and you start arguing (STOP). Use contrasting, by explaining what you don't mean until safety is restored.

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Gaining the skills to handle crucial conversations will increase your influence, enhance relationships, create stronger teams and your leadership will be more effective. With practice you can gain the grace and ease to fluidly move through all conversations.

***“Expect the unexpected and whenever possible, be the unexpected.” ~Lynda Barry***

*This article was prepared or accomplished by LaDonna M. Choate in her personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not reflect the view of the U. S. Geological Survey, the Department of Interior or the United States Government.*

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