

*This is the 4<sup>th</sup> article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.  
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at:  
[atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation](http://atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation)*

A conversation is a dialogue between human beings. You don't get to control it. You can do everything "right" and the conversation can still go poorly. However, the following tips and best practices can help you dramatically improve your success rate for these critical acts of leadership.

### **Tip #1. Practice Deep Listening**

*"The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention."*

*– Rachel Naomi Remen*

Listening is the key to successful Courageous Conversations.

Through deep listening, we:

- Learn who others are and what they need
- Help others feel respected
- Build rapport and trust
- Learn what we need to help generate solutions

Best listening practices include:

- Stay very present and really focused on what the other is saying,  
*vs. allowing your mind to wander or think about what you're going to say next.*
- Listen with curiosity and openness to learning,  
*vs. evaluating everything according to your pre-existing points of view.*
- Listen without interrupting and try to pause before responding, allowing a relaxed pace to the conversation,  
*vs. jumping in and creating a sense of competition for airtime.*
- Try to communicate your understanding of what the other has said before stating your point of view,  
*vs. failing to acknowledge what the other has said.*
- Seek to validate what you can agree with in the other person's experience,  
*vs. being unwilling to acknowledge any validity in the other's point of view.*

## Tip #2. Be Authentic

Our unconscious habits of dishonesty are barriers to Courageous Conversations. While most of us would say we place a high value on telling the truth, in reality, we all engage every day in behaviors that are less than authentic.

These lies, half-truths, and avoidance of truth are so habitual we're often not aware that we're doing them. Consider these common forms of deceit:

- Agreeing to things you don't really agree with
- Making excuses when confronted with a situation in which you actually do share some responsibility
- Failing to be clear about what you really want and need
- Avoiding mentioning important things because you're afraid the other person might get upset
- Exaggerating, withholding or distorting the facts to win your point
- Making agreements that you don't intend to 100% keep
- Avoiding saying the "risky" things that might actually create the breakthrough you need

We learned many of these habits very young and they may actually have been functional survival adaptations to the circumstances in which we grew up. But, depending on the situation, the unconscious reliance of these behaviors can limit our power as leaders.

Our first challenge is to be fully honest with ourselves, for there are ways in which we all have learned to deny uncomfortable truths and uncomfortable feelings.

*"I found that to tell the truth is the hardest thing on earth, harder than taking part in a revolution... You will wrestle with yourself most of all, for there will surge up in you a strong desire to alter the facts, to dress up your feelings. You will find that there are many things you don't want to admit about yourself and others. And yet, there is no more exciting adventure than trying to be honest in this way."*

– Richard Wright

Once we have told the truth to ourselves, we are ready to consider speaking our truths to others in a Courageous Conversation. Truth has great power. There is a ring to authenticity, and other people have pretty good radar. They can usually tell when you're being less than honest. People don't know what you're withholding, but their instinct will be not to trust you.

There will continue to be many situations in which it would be unwise, inappropriate or unsafe to be 100% honest. There may be times where you consciously choose any of these behaviors as a political tactic. But, in choosing a Courageous Conversation, we want to bring forth the full power of our truth.

*"Great leaders are those who have come to make that fundamental decision to act and speak on the outside in ways consonant with what we know to be true on the inside."*

– Parker Palmer

### Tip #3. Practice Skillful Communication

Our words have great power: to harm and to heal, to create and to destroy.

Best practices for communicating in Courageous Conversations include:

- While you may have strong feelings and opinions, remember that you don't know everything. Your truth is only a truth.  
*vs. Speaking as if our point of view were the only truth.*
- Keep focused on creating what you want.  
*vs. Complaining about what you don't want.*
- Be present. Stay aware of those to whom you're speaking so you can sense and gauge your impact.  
*vs. Being so absorbed in your own self-expression that you lose track of your impact.*
- Own your contribution to what's not working.  
*vs. Blame, fault-finding, and denial of how you might have contributed.*
- Keep focused on your outcomes and moving the conversation forward.  
*vs. Not taking responsibility and allowing the conversation to lose focus, drift into unproductive territory, or deteriorate.*

### Tip #4. Deal with Breakdowns

Courageous Conversations often deal with very challenging situations (which is why they're called 'Courageous Conversations'). You might follow all the suggested best practices and there may still be breakdowns in the process. Breakdowns should be viewed as a normal part of Courageous Conversations and not necessarily a problem.

There's an analogy that my wife, Judith Ansara, likes to use about learning to drive on icy roads:

*When your car starts to skid, you feel an almost irresistible urge to turn the wheel in the direction you want to go. But, what's actually needed is to turn into the skid.*

When things seem to be going awry in Courageous Conversations – unexpected issues arise, conflict starts to surface, our carefully prepared plans seem in danger of being derailed – we may get anxious, start to feel out of control. Our instinct is usually to avoid, to turn away from the unplanned event. But, we need to turn into the skid, to see what opportunities there may be in this turn of events, to relax and see where things want to go. These moments of breakdown sometimes precede a breakthrough into new possibilities.

When challenges arise, it can be useful to assess whether you are dealing with a **substantive issue** or a **people issue** (not that these are always easy to separate from one another).

## Substantive issues

In many ways, substantive issues are easier to deal with. They may be gnarly, but we are at least dealing with problems that can be approached rationally and creatively.

A few tips:

- The famous *Getting to Yes*<sup>1</sup> approach instructs us to look at interests rather than positions. People in conflict often lock into stances or demands, which often seem at loggerheads with each other. But, positions are usually an attempt to meet some underlying need or desire, and there may be multiple ways to meet those needs in addition to the stated demand. Ask the questions: “*What do I really want?*” and “*What do they really want?*”
- Focus first on areas of potential agreement. There is usually some overlap of interests. Areas of commonality become a foundation to build on.
- When we focus primarily on where there are substantive differences, we often fail to gain traction on potential areas of agreement. We often see parties, who share 80% common interests, fail to achieve meaningful results together because of toxicity around the 20% disagreement.
- Get creative. Use problem-solving techniques like brainstorming. Generate a list of 20 ways this problem might be solved. Half-baked and quarter-baked ideas should be encouraged.
- Switch perspectives. When there’s disagreement and we’re sitting across from each other, there’s a problem between us. It often feels like the other person is the problem. My wife and I discovered a very simple technique to help break impasses. Move so that you’re sitting side-by-side, and put the problem in front of you. This creates a sometimes surprisingly powerful shift in perspective, where the two of you look together from the outside, as if you were consultants looking at someone else’s problem. Talk in the third person: “*It looks like what she’s wanting is...*” or “*I think they should try...*”

## People issues

Very often, it’s emotions that are in the way of smart people being able to solve a substantive issue. One or both parties feel not appreciated, threatened, not respected, hurt, or angry. In these states, no one is very creative at solving problems.

Some tips:

- Deep listening is good all-purpose medicine for people's issues. The experience of being heard helps people feel safe, less isolated, understood, and respected.
- When other people are emotionally triggered, our instinct is often to try to be reasonable and talk sense to them. This almost never works, as their capacity to think has been hijacked by more primitive parts of the brain. Along with deep listening, it’s often useful to slow the conversation down, perhaps even taking a break or cooling off period. For much more detail on how to deal with people who are experiencing deep emotions, see our article: *When Others Are Triggered*
- Perhaps the greatest challenge to meeting your objectives in Courageous Conversations is your own state of being. When you are in your *zone of leadership*, you have great capacity to respond to what the conversation requires to move forward. If you become emotionally triggered, you become your own

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, Roger and Ury, William, *Getting to Yes*, Penguin Books, 2011.

worst enemy. To learn how to handle your own emotional reactivity, see our article: *What To Do When Triggered*

### **Tip #5. Ensure good completion**

There's nothing more frustrating than to finish a seemingly successful Courageous Conversation, only to see things unravel once you leave the room. While there's no way to completely insure against this, there are some best practices that make successful follow-through more likely.

- Make sure things feel complete to both parties. If not, and you are out of time, be sure to schedule another time to complete.
- Make sure all agreements are completely clear to both parties. Unfortunately, people of good will often walk away from Courageous Conversations with different understandings of what happened. If agreements have been made, write them down at the end of the meeting and/or follow-up with an email restating agreements.
- Double-check for alignment and satisfaction – for yourself and others. A major cause of agreements unraveling is when people didn't really feel good about them. While you're still together, pause and have everyone reflect on how they are feeling about what has been accomplished. Listen and watch careful for signs of half-hearted commitment – in others and yourself.
- Clarify next steps, if any.

We have called these conversations “courageous” to hopefully challenge and inspire you to act. Look out into your life – your personal relationships as well as at work. Where are there Courageous Conversations that will strengthen relationships, address problems, move the work forward, and enrich your life?

Make a list – right here – of the Courageous Conversations you intend to have:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

*“It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare.  
It is because we do not dare that things are difficult.”*

– Seneca, Roman philosopher