

What it is

A series of articles, best practices, and tools for engaging successfully in challenging conversations

What it can do

This tool can help leaders and consultants:

- Break patterns of procrastination and avoidance in dealing with challenging and uncomfortable relational situations.
- Learn best practices and tools to create more successful outcomes from these conversations.

How it works

The Courageous Conversations Toolkit includes the following articles, best practices and tools:

1. *Courageous Conversations: A Paradigm Shift*
2. *Do You Need One?*
3. *How To Prepare*
4. *Best Practices*

You can download the articles in this toolkit, and many other tools for transformation, at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

*This is the 1st article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.
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atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation*

*“Difficult to manage relationships sabotage more business than anything else –
it is not a question of strategy that gets us into trouble; it is a question of emotions.”*

– John Kotter, Harvard Business School, expert on organizational development

A leader's life is filled with challenging conversations:

- Confronting staff about problems with their performance
- Misalignment or competition with allies
- Struggles with the board
- Dealing with misbehavior by colleagues
- Negotiations with funders
- Negotiations with adversaries
- Conversations around power and privilege

Many of us feel varying degrees of reluctance to engage in these kinds of conversations. We often put off having them – perhaps in some vague hope that the problems will go away on their own.

They don't! There's a price we pay for avoidance. Emotions fester and grow. We build up our cases against each other. Misunderstandings pile on. We are distracted and weighed down by the unresolved issue. We 'forget' that *not* dealing with a situation is a choice – and it's a choice that almost always makes things worse.

When we finally get around to dealing with the situation, the problems are greater as a result of having procrastinated and our success rate goes down. If the conversation goes poorly, we “prove” to ourselves that these kinds of conversations are difficult, which leads to more avoidance, which leads to...

In a Courageous Conversation, we take the risk of dealing with people in a direct and authentic way. We share our concerns honestly and invite the other(s) to do so as well. We enter into dialogue with the hope of a positive outcome that addresses our concerns and furthers our interests.

The pages that follow contain articles and tools to help you have successful Courageous Conversations.

Beyond learning some techniques, you're being invited to a paradigm shift.

A SHIFT FROM:

These messy conversations are necessary evils or distractions from the important work.

TO:

These Courageous Conversations are critical opportunities to advance the work and the mission.

AND A SHIFT FROM:

I avoid these difficult conversations when possible.

TO:

Every morning I scan my world and look for potential opportunities for Courageous Conversations that build partnership, deal proactively with potential disturbances and breakdowns, and further the mission.

Read the following articles in this series. Use the tools and try out the best practices:

Courageous Conversations #2: *Do You Need One?*

Courageous Conversations #3: *How To Prepare*

Courageous Conversations #4: *Best Practices*

Practicing more frequent and more effective Courageous Conversations is one of the most profound ways to empower your leadership.

Courageous Conversations #2: Do You Need One?

By Robert Gass

*This is the 2nd article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.
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atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation*

All leaders need to become comfortable and proficient at Courageous Conversations. But it's also important to understand that dialogue is not always the right choice.

There are situations where you would be ill-advised to sit down and have an honest conversation. There are realities of power. There are people with bad intentions. The **Risk-Reward Assessment** is a tool to help you determine whether or not to initiate a Courageous Conversation based on strategic thinking rather than your comfort or discomfort in dealing with a situation.

Step 1. Risks of Inaction

What are the negative implications and possible consequences of NOT having a Courageous Conversation?

For you? For the relationship? For the organization? For the work?

Look at both tangibles (e.g. negative impact on work) and intangibles (e.g. drain on your energy, lower trust)

When we procrastinate or avoid, we may delude ourselves into thinking we're not making a choice. It's important to keep remembering that not having a direct conversation is a choice.

Step 2. Rewards of Courageous Conversation

What are the potential rewards in having a Courageous Conversation? For you? For the relationship? For the organization? For the work?

Step 3. Risks of Courageous Conversation

What are the REAL risks in speaking honestly?

Be aware that we sometimes have troubling discerning real danger from anxiety that causes us to overestimate risk or see danger where there is none.

Step 4. Assess Risks and Rewards

Look at the relative risks and rewards in the situation?

Do exactly what you should do before initiating any significant action – be strategic.

Assess the potential benefits of action. Assess the risks of action and inaction.

Step 5. Make a Clear and Committed Choice.

There are four possible tactics for dealing with relational challenges. The key is to actually make a clear choice and deal with the situation, rather than avoidance.

Option #1: Have a Courageous Conversation

Use the principles and tools in this toolkit to engage in an authentic dialogue

Option #2: Have a Courageous Conversation with help

This can be a wise choice when you have previously failed in attempting to work things out. This might look like engaging a professional facilitator or mediator, or even just a colleague whom you both trust. Sometimes simply the presence of a neutral party causes people to show up in a more mature and positive way.

Option #3: Make peace with what is

Perhaps you've made numbers of good faith efforts to work things out. Sometimes we simply need to accept things as they are – to lower our expectations and make the best of the situation.

In this option, we let go of trying to make things be different than they are. IMPORTANT: this is not a grudging acceptance or angry “the hell with it.” It's a realization that things aren't going to be as I would have liked them to be, but I'm making a wise choice not to keep fruitlessly resisting reality. In a relationship, this means we consciously de-invest in what we expect with and from the other.

For example:

There are 5 people on my team. I get along well with 4 of them. This person and I just don't get along. Not what I would have liked, but it's O.K.

Option #4: Restructure or terminate the relationship

Sometimes the problem in a relationship is the roles through which people are interacting. Whether it be due to differences in values, beliefs, strategy, personal styles or personal chemistry, sometimes the form of relationship demands too much interaction and interdependence and simply isn't workable. What's needed is not more Courageous Conversations, but a change in the nature of the relationship.

Some examples:

- You are having ongoing challenges with your campaign co-director. You two would actually do fine just being on the management team together, but the demands of such a close working partnership are too great given your very different styles of working. The right tactic might be to move one of you to another position.
- You are in a joint venture with another organization. Repeated conversations have failed to find alignment on strategy. The right tactic might be to end the joint venture. You can continue a relationship as allies, but not try to be close working partners.
- You are having ongoing conflicts with your boss and repeated conversations haven't helped at all. Given the criticality of this relationship for your job satisfaction, you may want to consider leaving.

When things aren't working between you and other people, choose among these four options:

- Option #1: Have a Courageous Conversation
- Option #2: Have a Courageous Conversation with help
- Option #3: Make peace with what is
- Option #4: Restructure or terminate the relationship

By failing to choose one of these four, you are “choosing” the default option: to avoid dealing with things, hoping they will go away. This is not a habit of great leadership.

Accept our challenge and invitation:

Courageous Conversations are critical opportunities to advance the work and the mission. Every morning, scan your world and look for potential opportunities for Courageous Conversations that build partnerships, deal proactively with potential disturbances and breakdowns, and further the mission.

For best practices and tools in having successful Courageous Conversations, see the next two articles in this series:

3 How To Prepare

4 Best Practices

*This is the 3rd article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.
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Our Courageous Conversations are critical, sometimes defining, acts of leadership. They deserve focused and skillful preparation to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. Here are some tips and best practices.

Tip #1. Prepare your POP

Hopefully, you would not launch a campaign or facilitate a major meeting without being clear what you were trying to accomplish. Yet all too often, we launch into critical conversations without clear goals.

If you are not familiar with the **POP** model, see our tool: *The Fabulous POP Model*
POP stands for:

- Purpose**
- Outcomes**
- Process**

Begin your conversation prep by getting clear: What is the **Purpose** of this conversation? Without a clear and positive purpose, we are in danger of launching into conversations with such unhelpful motivations as “*proving I’m right*” or “*wanting them to feel badly for what they did.*”

Here are some typical examples of **Purposes** for Courageous Conversations:

- Resolve tension between departments around finances.
- Rebuild trust with our coalition partner.
- Get clear on the boundaries and roles between Board and senior staff.
- Confront my deputy on her poor performance.

Clarifying the **Purpose** is the first step. Next, we want to be crystal clear on the **Outcomes** (specific goals) for the conversation. What do we want to be different at the end of this conversation, and how will we know if we have achieved this?

Example #1:

Purpose:

- Rebuild trust with our coalition partner.

Outcomes:

- We each understand the others’ experience of what’s not working.
- We share an understanding of lessons learned.
- We have agreed on:
 - Who will take the lead in each of the three communities we’re working in.
 - What support each of us will provide to the three leads.
 - How to handle media relations and coverage of our joint work.

Example #2:

Purpose:

- Deal with my deputy about her poor performance.

Outcomes:

- My deputy is clear on the specific ways in which her performance has been subpar.
- A three-month trial period to improve performance has been established.
- My deputy is clear on what will constitute minimum acceptable standards.
- We have agreement on check-ins and support along the way.

The last P in POP stands for **Process**. How do we structure the conversation to increase the likelihood of achieving our outcomes?

For **Example #2**, this might look like:

- Step 1. Give specific feedback to my deputy.
- Step 2. Provide opportunity for my deputy to respond to feedback; listen to her experience and her own assessment of the situation.
- Step 3. Establish clear benchmarks for what needs to change.
- Step 4. Discuss what support she needs.
- Step 5. Closure: make sure the deputy is clear regarding the plan and next steps.

Tip #2. Examine your contribution

When there are problems in relationships, we're usually clear what the problem is:

It's the other person(s)! They don't get it!

They're being stubborn... shortsighted... too much ego... etc.

Maybe they are. But what's your contribution to the situation? You've likely heard the expression, "*It takes two to tango.*" Your assessment of the problem focuses completely on what they have or haven't done. It may be hard to believe, but they have their own story about the situation, in which usually they're the hero or innocent bystander and *you're* the problem.

While you sometimes may need to confront someone's unskillful behavior, you should also be willing to look at your contribution to the situation.

Reflect on these questions:

- What might I have contributed to what's not working?
What other choices did I have along the way?
- What might this situation look like from the other person's perspective?
- Have I been *triggered* in this situation/relationship? How so?

Triggering is when feelings from our past have been re-stimulated by events in the present. For example:

My Board Chair reminds me of a long chain of other older men with whom I felt disrespected and diminished. When I try to talk with him, I get angry really quickly, but underneath I feel powerless and defensive.

For more on triggers, see: *Managing Your Triggers Toolkit*

Tip #3. Practice

When athletes know a big game is coming up, they practice. When musicians have a major concert coming up, they practice. When you have a crucial Courageous Conversation, you...? PRACTICE!!!

You can't try to completely control an authentic dialogue, and you need to leave space for the unexpected. But typically, in a Courageous Conversation, there is some critical message you need to communicate – something that is challenging for you to deliver.

For example:

- *Your leadership of the campaign team is not where it needs to be. It's going to need to significantly improve if you are to stay in this position.*
- *We are not willing to continue with our current level of financial contribution unless there is more benefit returning to our organization.*
- *The frequency and manner in which you as Board Chair have been interacting with senior staff is creating challenges.*

In our Rockwood Leadership trainings, we have found that if we can deliver these challenging but critical messages from a place of authentic power – relaxed, confident, connected to our purpose – the rest of the conversation is easy. Research shows that 93% of human communication is not the content of our words, but the body language, tone of voice, and energy of our communications. We encourage leaders to practice these critical messages again and again until their delivery is clear and powerful.

Tip #4. Set up the conversation for success

The conditions under which conversations are held have a lot to do with the outcomes.

- Face-to-face is always far, *far* preferable to telephone for courageous conversations. (Definitely, do *not* use email as a substitute for dialogue.)
- Hold Courageous Conversations in a place free from distraction and conducive to good focus (i.e. no incoming calls or interruptions).
- Timing is important. Make sure all parties have clear attention.
- Make sure the amount of time set aside is adequate to meet the intended **Outcomes**.
- When dealing with *complex* conversations, resolution may require a series of meetings. If so, make sure your **Outcomes** for the first meeting are appropriate and achievable.

Use the following worksheet to help you prepare well for Courageous Conversations.

PREP FOR COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION WORKSHEET

Purpose of conversation

Intended Outcomes (be specific)

Process (what steps will I initiate to achieve these outcomes?)

What is my contribution to the situation?

Am I triggered by this situation? If so, what does it evoke in me?

What is the central, critical communication that I may want to practice?
(For purposes of practice, keep it to a few lines.)

Where and when will I propose having this conversation?
What are optimal conditions to support success?

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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*¹ 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

¹ 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