Difficult Conversations:
Authentic Communication Leads to Greater Productivity

by Martha Lasley

Difficult conversations can lead to crisis or harmony. The Chinese word for crisis combines two symbols: danger and opportunity. When it comes to challenging conversations, we usually only remember the first meaning, danger. Real conversations can become highly emotional, trigger old battle wounds, and motivate us to confront, freeze, bolt, or attempt to smooth things over. Or we can choose lively discussions to explore the tension and discover new options. The piano maker Theodore Steinway said, "In one of our concert grand pianos, 243 taut strings exert a pull of 40,000 pounds on an iron frame. It is proof that out of great tension may come great harmony." Authentic communication can turn tension into creativity and harmony.

Imagine yourself at a tense planning meeting where the financial director reports, "To compete profitably, we need to lay off 20% of the workforce." The marketing director responds, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. We need to lay you off so we can hire new people who are serious about growing the business." Are you ready to add fuel to the fire, would you prefer to crawl under your chair, or do you have the skills to facilitate an authentic, productive conversation?

How do we develop facilitation skills so that we can embrace challenging conversations rather than avoid them? First, we need an effective process that leads to understanding and productivity. While smoothing things over may look quick and easy, in the long run, radical honesty and directness help teams perform at their highest potential. Roger Schwartz, author of the Skilled Facilitator, says that most meeting facilitators call for a break when the emotional energy escalates, but skilled facilitators know they've hit "pay dirt." Intense emotions mean that people are talking about what matters most. Emotions serve as a barometer indicating the level of importance.

Support and understanding are two of the most important universal needs, but we often sweep them under the rug, telling ourselves that we don't have time for that nonsense, especially in a fast-paced workplace. But the sense that "I matter, you matter, we matter," gives rise to high-functioning work groups that improve relationships, build team spirit, and contribute to the growth of the organization. Steve Bates, a writer for HR magazine, says, "...study after study indicates that employee emotions are fundamentally related to-and actually drive-bottom-line success in a company." Emotions are directly connected to whether our needs are met or unmet.

Everything we do or say is an attempt to meet our needs. Sometimes our positions for getting our needs met seem to be in conflict, such as "We need to hire more people" and "We need to fire more people." However, when we deepen our understanding of each other's needs, we open to new visions that can satisfy all parties. The key is to understand the needs fully first, and then come up with strategies that will meet everyone's needs.

Authentic Communication

The Authentic Communication process, adapted from Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, is a powerful way to turn conflict into a productive force that leads to creativity and new ideas. In this process, instead of speaking in ways that alienate others, we connect by sharing our observations and reactions and by

becoming aware of each other's needs. Rather than becoming attached to particular positions, we explore the underlying needs we hope to satisfy. From this shared awareness, we can request strategies that work for everyone.

The process for Authentic Communication includes four basic steps:

Observation: When you _____ (state your observation)
Feeling: are you feeling _____ (guess the emotion)
Need: because you need _____ (guess the need)?
Request: Would you like (me, him, her, them) to (specific action) _____ ?

What do these steps look like in practice? Let's apply them to the situation above, the planning meeting where layoffs are being considered. The financial director, Susan, has suggested laying off 20% of the staff; the marketing director, Jack, responds by questioning her ability and judgment. Noting that Jack seems the most agitated, you decide to address him first.

You: Jack, when you heard Susan say that we should lay off 20% of the staff, (observation), I'm guessing you were feeling pretty alarmed (feeling), because you're concerned about the company's effectiveness and growth (need). Is that accurate? (request)

Jack: Yes, she's clueless! Doesn't she know we're launching two new products this quarter? If we have any chance of success, it's crucial that we have adequate staff on board, especially in marketing!

You: So hearing this plan (observation), you're really concerned (feeling) about the life of the company? (need)

Jack: Yes, I care about the company-I've been here ten years. But I also care about my job and I can't do it without adequate staff. The last guy in her position made the same mistake and I ended up paying the price. Sales plummeted! We're still recovering, three years later.

You: So you're worried about the company (feeling) but also want some understanding about what's involved in adequately marketing products? (need) You want the staffing and resources to do your job well, and feel confident about success. Is that right?

Jack: Yes, that's it.

Having heard Jack's concerns, you now turn to Susan to see that she's understood what Jack has said. At first, she may need some help; it's not unusual, especially when tempers are high, for one person to hear a message very differently from what the other expressed. If you're not confident that Susan has heard Jack, you can check back with him and/or share with Susan what you have heard Jack say:

You: Before we go on and I hear your concerns, Susan, I want to make sure that we have clarity about what Jack has said. Could you tell me what you heard him say?

Susan: He said that I remind him of my predecessor and that I'm making the same mistakes he did. He thinks I'm screwing up.

You: Thanks Susan. I'm glad I checked. What I heard Jack say is that he wants sufficient staff to successfully launch the new products this fall. He wants to build an effective department and is worried that he won't have the resources to do so. Can you tell me what you just heard me say?

Susan: He wants to make sure his department can adequately market these new products.

You: Right. That's what I understood. Jack, is that what you wanted to express?

Jack: Yes. It's crucial that these new products do well.

Once you're confident that Susan has understood Jack, you can turn to her concerns. Wanting to include Jack, you can check with him first to see if he's ready to hear what Susan has to say:

You: It's important to me that everyone is understood (need), so I'm wondering now Jack if you're ready to hear where Susan is coming from? (request)

Jack: A little anxious, but ready...

After several rounds of listening to each other in this way, both see that they share similar objectives. They both care for the life of the company, fear for its future, and want to see the company succeed. Having heard each other, they come up with a mutually agreeable solution. Susan agrees to postpone any layoffs in the marketing department for six months, until after they launch the new product line. Jack also agrees to new sales targets and acknowledges that if they don't reach their goals, some layoffs may be necessary. Jack ends the meeting more motivated than ever to market the new line. Susan has a greater understanding and appreciation of the challenges that Jack faces in his department and agrees to involve his input in the future.

It may take several rounds of guessing feelings and needs before both parties feel understood. Once the needs are on the table, you can encourage all those involved to make requests that honor each other's needs. Because they feel understood, each person involved is much more likely to listen to the other's ideas and create strategies that work for everyone.

The outline above can be visually summarized in this model:

Authentic Communication

Adapted from Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication™

The inner options in green (observations, feeling, needs, and requests) represent ways of connecting with energizing, productive forces. The outer options in red (judgment, thought, positions, demands) represent alienating forces or habitual ways of communicating. The four steps and choices are:

1. **Stimulus:** We can either pass moral judgment or notice our observations.
2. **Reaction:** We can tune into what we're thinking or what we're feeling.
3. **Awareness:** We can decide on a position or explore what we need.
4. **Action:** We can either make a demand or make a request.

Components of Authentic Communication	
Observation	Observations differ from judgments. Observations are what you would see and hear in a videotape vs. what you think, judge or evaluate.
Feelings	Feelings are not the same as what you are thinking. Feelings are your emotions or gut reactions vs. interpreting what someone is doing to you.
Needs	Needs are not about figuring out what others should do. It's about what you need vs. how you think you can get those needs met.
Requests	Requests are the strategies for getting needs met, and are very different from demands. Requests involve asking for what you want vs. insisting on what you want.

Let's explore the distinctions between observations and judgments. The statement, "Derek is a poor manager," at first might sound like an observation. As far as you're concerned, it's a fact: Derek is simply not doing a good job—anyone who worked with him would agree. But this statement in fact offers no clear observations; all we are given is an evaluative word, "poor." A clean observation might sound something like, "Derek tore up the report, pounded his fist on the table, and did not say goodbye when he left." Or perhaps your evaluation comes from more subtle observations, such as "Derek raised his eyebrows when one of his employees made a suggestion." We don't know what the raised eyebrows mean unless we check. When we state what really happened instead of telling people what we imagine is going on, we reduce the likelihood of defensiveness and open the door to authentic conversations.

In many organizational cultures authenticity suffers because people think they have to check their feelings at the door, but in actuality, everyone is always feeling something. When people equate emotions with being needy or weak, they often avoid expressing themselves fully. In cultures where feelings are off limits, I sometimes show a tape of Martin Luther King trembling during his "I Have a Dream" speech so that we can see how full emotional expression helps us connect with the speaker. Feelings reveal our needs, wants and desires, which lead to understanding, collaboration, and team work.

Some Examples of Feelings When Our Needs Are Being Met

Compassionate	Friendly	Warm	Confident
Open	Engaged	Curious	Fascinated
Intrigued	Inspired	Amazed	Excited
Energized	Grateful	Appreciative	Moved
Thankful	Hopeful	Expectant	Calm
Encouraged	Optimistic	Delighted	Thrilled
Proud	Safe	Happy	Pleased
Centered	Relaxed	Relieved	Trusting

Some Examples of Feelings When Needs are Not Being Met

Afraid	Apprehensive	Worried	Annoyed
Frustrated	Impatient	Hopeless	Angry
Furious	Outraged	Disgusted	Confused
Bored	Envious	Shocked	Surprised

Uncomfortable	Upset	Embarrassed	Hurt
Sad	Hopeless	Discouraged	Irritated
Nervous	Overwhelmed	Stressed Out	Disappointed

If we are not accustomed to identifying and articulating our feelings, we can confuse feeling with thinking. How often have you heard "I feel manipulated" or "I feel like leaving," or "I feel that this conversation is going nowhere?" These are all examples of using the word "feeling" to describe what we are thinking. Manipulated is not a feeling; it's what I think someone is doing to me. Whenever I say, "I feel that _____ I feel you _____ ; I feel like _____; I feel as if _____ . " you know you're about to hear what I'm thinking, not what I am feeling. To connect with what I'm feeling instead of what I'm thinking I can ask myself, "How do I feel when I think that someone is manipulating me?"

Language Often Mistaken for feelings:

Abandoned	Abused	Attacked	Belittled
Betrayed	Bullied	Coerced	Discounted
Harassed	Intimidated	Manipulated	Threatened
Rejected	Marginalized	Misunderstood	Neglected
Overworked	Patronized	Pressured	Provoked

The list above includes words about what we "think" another person is doing to us. We can translate any of these interpretations of others' actions into feelings and needs. For instance, when I say, "I feel manipulated," it may be that I'm feeling disappointed and needing independence and choice. When we face a crisis, we often rush headlong into the solution, without discovering what really happened, without connecting with our feelings and needs or to the feelings and needs of others. Taking the time to discover what we really need results in long-term solutions that work for more people.

Universal Needs:

Accomplishment	(Mastery / Growth / Progress)
Order	(Efficiency / Structure / Clarity)
Connection	(Relationships / Appreciation / Understanding)
Autonomy	(Individuality / Freedom / Choice)
Community	(Acceptance / Belonging / Support)
Respect	(Consideration / Integrity / Fairness)
Expression	(Creativity / Authenticity / Passion)
Meaning	(Learning / Purpose / Awareness)
Security	(Safety / Stability / Sustainability)
Contribution	(Service / Impact / Results)
Fun	(Humor / Play / Pleasure)
Harmony	(Beauty / Interdependence / Peace)

One of the ways that we entangle ourselves in challenging conversations is when we insist on a position or premature strategy without understanding the needs. Although every action is an attempt to meet a need, team members often have very different positions for meeting those needs. We lose sight of those core needs as we get caught up arguing the merits of this position versus that position. Both Susan and Jack had differ-

ent positions (hiring and firing) for meeting similar needs. When we insist on a specific solution before we have explored all the needs from all departments, our plans are usually poorly conceived, poorly received, and poorly executed.

When we discover and understand all the needs first, the resulting solutions are much more effective and satisfying to all involved. We get buy-in and cooperation that result in long-term productivity. "I need more money in the budget, and I need you to work longer hours," are not needs; they're tactics for getting needs met. To guess the actual needs we might ask, "Do you need more options and more support?"
We also have a choice when it comes to making demands or requests. We can announce "It's my way or the highway," but that only invites submission or rebellion, not teamwork. Alternatively, we can ask for what we want with a willingness to revise our positions. Requests invite options, and better strategies evolve when people recognize they have a full range of choices.

Although Rosenberg's model is simple, it only works if we follow one of Stephen Covey's principles, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Imagine accepting frustration, complaints, and rebellion as gifts. Instead of hearing an outburst as a judgment, you can listen curiously for the unmet needs simmering just below the emotions. Instead of seeing co-workers as whiners, you can see them as hungry to get their needs met. When your boss is furious, ask yourself, "What unmet need is the driving force?" When you connect with what others want, you can help them move away from blame and toward productive strategies. When you're scared, what do you really want? Probably you need reassurance and effectiveness, among other needs.
Feelings and needs awareness is a fundamental skill for today's leaders who are shifting from paternalism to partnership. Such partnership means mutual respect and that employees are included and engaged at full capacity. Many leaders are unsure how to engage employees fully, but powerful questions can get you started: How do you feel? What do you need? What energizes you? Several research firms have found that roughly half of the workers in America show up and do what's expected of them but don't go the extra mile. "Employees want to commit to companies, because doing so satisfies a powerful and basic human need to connect with and contribute to something significant," says Carol Kinsey Goman of Kinsey Consulting Services. When we connect with what energizes employees, we can quickly get to the heart of the matter; doing so helps workers engage fully and improve their performance.

By listening for feelings and unmet needs, we can collaborate to find strategies that work for all of us. When we listen to each other with respect and curiosity, we appreciate each other's contributions and build on opportunities for expanding the vision. When we engage in passionate wholehearted conversations, we pave the way for win-win solutions, shared vision, and higher productivity. This is not possible in a culture that expects people to leave their honest feelings and their humanity at home.

Honesty does not have to be brutal. Instead of equating authenticity with blurting out our cruelest thoughts, we can use honest dialogue to build awareness of what we need. Open dialogue is not about determining who is right and who is wrong, or claiming higher moral ground. Openness includes pursuing what we want, but not at the expense of other stakeholders. By listening to what others really want, we open up to new perspectives, and we develop supportive listening skills that lead to personal and organizational transformation. Instead of talking behind each other's backs, we invite authentic communication and create opportunities for mutual satisfaction. When we talk about what matters most, we communicate transparently, become energized, and invite others to see our needs as gifts. When we feel understood, we open to new visions and develop team spirit that impact productivity and the bottom line.

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