

Threshold Conversations: Making Difficult Conversations Less Difficult

Any one of these conversations is going to be awkward, possibly heated, potentially damaging. Would you like to be ready to handle them or something similar yourself?

- You've been promoted to lead the team you've been on for three years. Now two of your colleagues will barely speak to you. You try to strike up a casual conversation with one of them at the coffee station.
- A co-worker, whom you feels lacks judgment and a good track record, has stopped coming to you with any issue that might be even remotely challenging. Now she goes directly to your boss and lodges a complaint. You're headed to your co-worker's office, prepared to have a much needed heart-to-heart.
- You've hired a junior engineer who was laid off from another division in your company. You know he'd been well liked and had worked on some important projects. Within a few weeks you're baffled by his lack of performance and inability to account for his time. He's come to you with a list of questions and incomplete tasks you've gone over with him already.

What makes these Threshold Conversations?

The threshold is that moment when you realize that you and the other person are at a divide. You're trying to solve a problem, but you have uncovered something that's even harder to manage. Now surprise, threat, anger, shame, impatience or other emotions are bearing down on the conversation. Perhaps your jaw clenches, your heart jumps into your throat, your stomach knots, or you go blank. In some way, subtle or not so, you feel as though you've lost control. You're standing at opposite sides of a threshold with the other person.

The *temptation* may be to look away, or to rush in with everything you've got. Or some confusing middle stance? If you're not consumed with your own reaction, you may notice the other person is ready to pounce or run, as well. The *opportunity* is to step across that threshold to seek greater meaning and understanding. But how? Let's face it, what you want is for others to see things your way and act accordingly, right? Preferably with a smile. But you've already discovered it's not that simple.

Here's a simple 4-step process for slowing down your reactivity at the threshold moment and creating some space and possibility for stepping across the divide and joining them to create a meaningful exchange.

1. Pause - notice your own reaction in the moment. Notice it without judging it. Noticing can take the form of mentally labeling it, which helps you recognize it and create some distance (e.g., "fear" or "anger" or "shame")

2. Breathe - taking a few mindful breaths helps to calm the nervous system and shift you out of the fight-flight-freeze response. Once you've moved out of fight-flight-freeze, your brain can function at a higher, more sophisticated level. The mindfulness creates space and that space creates choices.

3. Listen - though it can be hard to listen to someone who is frustrating you, keep breathing and focus on being a listener. Let them know you are listening by summarizing what you hear them saying and checking for accuracy.

4. Ask - be curious about their perspective, experience, and conclusions in the situation. Let your first goal be simply to understand the other as fully as possible. Later, you can ask permission to share your perspective and then begin the process of collaboratively working toward resolution.

Start there and see what new possibilities open up for you and the other person.

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