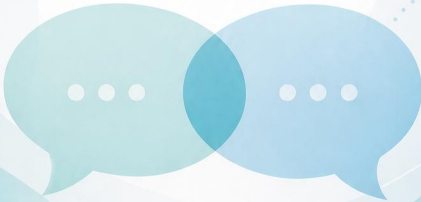


Dare To Say It!

How to Have Important
Conversations that Build
Working Relationships

Laurie Weiss, Ph.D.



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Dare To Say It!

How to Have Important Conversations that Build Working Relationships.

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Dare To Say It!

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Executive Summary

The reality is, things don't always go smoothly at work. A coworker may get on your nerves, a boss may have a style that doesn't feel good to you, or misunderstandings may get in the way of doing your best work. The question isn't so much how do you avoid conflicts, it's how do you handle those conflicts and differences when they arise. The truth is that at work, most people avoid difficult conversations and by doing so, often create more struggles.

Avoiding sensitive and potentially upsetting conversations leads to lost opportunities, mistrust, backstabbing, and ineffectiveness. These are the very things people are trying to avoid by remaining quiet because they can't figure out how to share their observations and feelings without getting themselves or someone else into trouble.

Daring to have these important, but difficult, conversations

- encourages responsibility,
- enhances connections,
- allows creativity,
- encourages problem identification,
- enhances growth,
- and affirms everyone's value.

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Learning to recognize how conversations get derailed, and what to do to get them back on track, makes difficult conversations into opportunities for solving problems, creating stronger relationships, and creating a rewarding and effective work environment.

Here are tools that empower every team member to risk starting and sticking with important conversations—the ones that matter.

Dare To Say It!

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How to Have Important Conversations that Build Working Relationships

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[1. Daring to Have the Conversations That Matter](#)

[2. What is an Important Conversation?](#)

[3. Completing Incomplete Conversations](#)

[4. How Important Conversations Get Derailed](#): Recognizing and
Responding to Incomplete, Defensive and/or Dysfunctional
Conversations

[Blocking Transactions](#)

[Tangential Transactions](#)

[Drama Triangle](#)

[Discounting/Denial](#)

[Passive Behavior](#)

[Managing Passive Behavior](#)

[5. Getting Conversations Back On Track](#): Tools for Creating Important
Conversations

[Dialogue](#)

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Dare To Say It!

[Listening](#)
[Questioning](#)

Dare To Say It!

[Acknowledging Emotions](#)

[Meta-Conversations](#)

[The Four-Fold Way](#)

6. [You Can Make a Difference](#)

Dare To Say It!

Introduction

Whether you like it or not **your world revolves around conversations.**

- You have face-to-face conversations, e-mail conversations, telephone conversations, texting conversations, voicemail conversations, social media conversations, conversations with memos, conversations on wikis, conversations on list serves, conversations on forums -- the list is endless.
- You have conversations with coworkers, bosses, subordinates, customers, suppliers, clerks, truck drivers, flight attendants, public servants, vendors and salespeople. You have really important conversations with family and friends.
- And you have the irritating, infuriating non-conversations with telephone trees and tech support. You even have conversations with yourself or others while you're in a queue waiting to have a conversation.

Conversations contain information, allow problem-solving, pass the time, convey rules, make rules, share feelings, and even describe other conversations. And this is certainly not an exhaustive list.

Many conversations are brief. A single word text messaged to Twitter - - arrested -- helped to get a journalist released from custody. Some conversations are excruciatingly long and you search for ways to end them.

There are conversations you must have, conversations you want to have (sometimes desperately), conversations you dread having -- that you would do almost anything to avoid and, of course, conversations you are afraid to have.

- There are trivial conversations and conversations your job depends on. There are imaginary conversations -- the ones you have with yourself after a conversation has gone wrong and you're thinking about what you could have/should have said -- but it's too late now.

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- There are surprising conversations that evoke strong feelings. You leave those conversations feeling anything from elated to ashamed.
- There are emotional conversations, affirming conversations, threatening conversations and soothing conversations

Conversations can build or destroy relationships; they can save jobs or lose them. Conversations can go nowhere or be extraordinarily productive.

Sometimes conversations work and sometimes they don't.

My job for over 35 years has been to help people have successful conversations — conversations that work.

This short special report is to help you change your nonworking conversations into conversations that help you build important relationships.

- This report is focused on relationships at work, but all of the information is useful in addressing every one of the relationships I've spoken about.
- I've kept it brief and to the point because although every section is worth a book in itself, you don't have time to read that many books.

So here are tools you can use now to think about and change the conversations that don't work.

Hopefully, you'll use these tools to plan what to say and how to say it ahead of time, so when the time comes you'll know exactly what you need to do. After a while, I hope you'll learn to use the tools automatically.

Telling you about the tools and how to use them is only part of the solution. Sometimes you've been told before, but sometimes you're completely mystified. I've included lots of resources you can use to learn more if you need to or want to.

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Understanding what you need to do may be simple, but I'm sorry to tell you it may not be easy. Learning to do something new means making mistakes at first until you become skillful at using the tools.

Please contact me if you need help.

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How to Have Important Conversations that Build Working Relationships

Laurie Weiss, Ph.D.

Daring to Have the Conversations That Matter

As an executive or manager, do you find it nearly impossible to say something sensitive or potentially upsetting to someone you work with?

If you answered 'Yes' you are certainly not alone. Many people are reluctant to share important information with others at work. If you are afraid to tell the truth about your own perceptions because:

- You worry about looking weak or foolish, losing face, or being proven wrong, or
- You suspect and fear that the very people you should be communicating with may react defensively or vindictively when they hear an unpleasant or unpopular point of view, or
- You want to be polite and avoid saying or doing anything that might embarrass someone, so you remain silent about very important issues; you need to know you are definitely not alone.

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With a few tools, difficult conversations not only get easier, but they also become amazing opportunities for solving problems and creating stronger relationships.

You can learn to have the important conversations that allow you and your coworkers to share the information needed to create a rewarding and effective work environment.

The following tools will help you have important and rewarding conversations.

In these conversations, information about values, thoughts, feelings, and/or activities is shared and enhances the agreed upon purpose of all the participants. Understanding is developed and problems are resolved.

You will learn:

- To recognize important conversations as they are happening.

- To tell when an important conversation is *not* happening.

- How to help important conversations happen.

What is an Important Conversation?

Important Conversations Demonstrate Self-Responsibility instead of Blaming or Shaming

Conversations that recognize you have some part in creating a situation that didn't work become important conversations. You take responsibility for how you converse with others. You address your communication to others in ways that facilitate non-defensive responses.

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Example: “If you don’t understand my point, I must not have made myself clear. Let me try again.”

Important Conversations Enhance Connections

An important conversation helps you connect with, rather than alienate, others. Alienation often happens in meetings when somebody is in obvious distress and the conversation continues as if nothing is happening. It’s as if the distress is totally irrelevant - a non-event. That’s a signal that an important conversation needs to happen.

Example of an invitation to connect: “You seem upset. Is something wrong?”

Important Conversations Allow Creativity

By allowing and inviting more than one option into a conversation, you create an opportunity to go beyond what is the “right way” or the “way we have always done this before.” Your conversation may become a search for possibilities.

Example: “Are there any ideas we have not considered?”

Important Conversations Encourage Problem-Identification

Striving to address uncomfortable issues instead of acting as if they don’t exist or matter encourages important conversations. Ignoring the existence of a problem signals that an important conversation is needed.

Example: “Are you concerned about the discrepancies in the numbers?”

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Reverse Example: An important conversation didn't happen when I was 21 years old and working in a radioactive isotope laboratory. I said nothing when I thought I saw a spill of radioactive material. It took three days to clean up contamination at the lab at significant cost to the organization.

Complete details and analysis of this story are found in ***The Integrity Course***, Lesson 7, "*Maybe the Emperor Really is Wearing Clothes, and I Can't See Them*," by Laurie Weiss, Ph.D. This multi-media home study course of case studies is available at <http://www.TheIntegrityCourse.com>

Important Conversations are Growth-Enhancing

Deliver feedback in a way that encourages others to be willing to risk honest responses. Non-threatening feedback elicits an internal response of "they see the best in me" instead of "uh-oh I better be careful and hide my mistakes."

Example: Asking, "How do you suggest we handle that differently?" or "What are you going to do about that?" lead to growth.

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Important Conversations Affirm People's Value

Transactional Analysis offers tools that use simple language to describe complex behavior. A Transactional Analysis model is useful here.

A belief that I'm OK and You're OK is visible in attitudes participants display when speaking with each other. They **get on with** solving problems instead of *getting away from... getting rid of...* or **getting nowhere** when problems are revealed.

Example: If **I'm OK and you're OK** then if something goes wrong between us we **get on with** solving the problem together. We take the initiative to acknowledge that something is happening that's not working or that something needs improving. Then we decide what are we're going to do about it.

Reverse Example: If **I'm not OK and you're OK**, then if something goes on between us I "know" it's because there's something wrong with me. I would rather not expose that flaw, so I'll attempt to withdraw and **get away from** the problem. Nothing useful is going to happen.

Reverse Example: If **I'm OK and you're not OK** and something happens there's nothing for us to solve. It's obviously your problem because you're not OK. If I can **get rid of** you, the problem goes away too.

Reverse Example: If **neither one of us is OK**, we'll both attempt to retreat, and attempts at problem solving will **get nowhere**. If by some rare chance, you did something about it, I would screw it up.

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Example: "Jim had something come up at the last minute. Maybe we should just reschedule the meeting for a time when everyone can be here." Spoken while knowing it took weeks to get the meeting scheduled, and Jim is not a key player.

Important Conversations Are Complete

An important conversation needs to be a complete conversation. It must include everything necessary to get on with a situation. Complete conversations include your own needs, feelings and/or values, the other person's needs, feelings and/or values, and relevant aspects of the situation.

Example: We both know we need new equipment and want to go purchase the best available, but we know our budget is limited and we need to discuss inexpensive options.

Completing Incomplete Conversations

Complete Conversations are Critical!

Learning to have a complete conversation makes it possible to have an important conversation.

Complete Conversations:

- End Alienation,
- Release Creative Energy,
- Facilitate Reaching Goals

Complete conversations release your energy. You are no longer waiting or trying to prove something. Everything necessary is already "on the table" and you can make a decision.

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YOU ARE READY FOR ACTION.

Complete Conversations

Include:

Your own Needs, Feelings and/or Values --*and*
Others' Needs, Feelings and/or Values --*and*
Relevant Aspects of the Situation

All three things must be present in any meaningful interpersonal exchange in both work and personal situations.

Only you know about your own needs, feelings and values **unless you can communicate them to others**. Their needs, feelings and values are known only to themselves; **until they communicate them to you**. The external situation includes strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, which are usually better understood and more easily addressed by everyone involved. **But just focusing on the external situation is not enough!**

In a work setting, the unspoken agreement is to focus primarily on the external situation. The psychological and organizational danger of leaving out the needs, feelings and/or values of participants is less visible.

Example: Frustrated by delays and interpersonal sniping, an operations manager in a large organization noticed that needs, feelings and values were usually absent from department conversations. She shared this observation with her co-workers who agreed to expand their conversations to include this information. Talking about their needs, feelings and values helped them resolve the problems in their working relationships.

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Caution: This is NOT about spilling messy feelings all over the floor! Taking organization time to focus on and examine personal feelings is usually inappropriate. But admitting that needs, feelings and values exist and impact the situation is usually sufficient. In difficult situations, just having this knowledge is often a source of new understanding, acceptance and energy.

Incomplete Conversations are Dangerous

Incomplete conversations leave out important information and often create problems instead of solving them.

Incomplete Conversations

Exclude:

Your own Needs, Feelings and/or Values --or
Others' Needs, Feelings and/or Values --or
Relevant Aspects of the Situation

Incomplete Conversations

Lead to:

Negative Feelings
Undiscussables (Nobody dares to say, "The emperor is naked.")
Defensive Behaviors
Stress

When a conversation is incomplete, undisclosed personal issues can stop progress in its tracks.

Example: The owner of a professional practice was livid because a key, difficult to replace, employee had just given 30 days' notice of his intent to leave the practice. This notice was within the contractual agreement.

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The owner felt betrayed because several months earlier the employee had assured him that he would stay on for an additional year. Because of his assurances, the company had not taken timely steps to begin searching for his replacement. The owner felt that **the employee had literally lied to him**, and had done considerable damage. During a management meeting a few days later, the owner said, "I'm still furious at him."

His executive officer told him, "We're better off without him. During the exit interview I learned that the reason he's leaving is completely legitimate. He needs a nine-to-five job, and we can't provide that for him. He **didn't trust you** not to fire him immediately if he told you he was looking for a new position, and he couldn't afford to be out of work." [The executive officer's message to the owner is actually, "You shouldn't feel your feelings."]

The owner said, "I'm still furious!"

An associate then said, "You shouldn't feel that way" and gave reasons why the owner's feelings were inappropriate.

What's wrong here? Two important people on the management team want to leave feelings out of the conversation. They seem to believe that feelings are irrelevant. They want the owner to stop feeling angry and just get on with solving the problem.

This professional practice owner is trying to develop an organization culture in which people support, trust and learn from each other. He also has a very sore spot about people not caring about how he feels. He feels angry and betrayed because his management team doesn't support him.

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Often, simply acknowledging someone's feelings when they are first expressed makes it possible to refocus on the more informational aspects of the conversation.

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Incomplete Conversations can be Completed

You can improve working relationships by noticing when a situation or conversation is incomplete and doing something about it.

Example: As a coach observing the meeting with a contract to help the organization develop the new culture, I stopped the conversation. I pointed out that within the past five minutes, the owner had twice been told that he was wrong for having feelings. Everyone present knew the importance of acknowledging clients' feelings, BUT it had not occurred to them to apply that information to themselves.

I reminded the team that simply acknowledging feelings is often enough to dissipate them. The owner said, "All you need to do is tell me you understand that I still feel angry." They did and then quickly moved through the business of the meeting.

In this case, because of my contract and previous experience with the group, I could confront the situation very directly. You probably can't be that confrontational. However, when you know you're involved in an incomplete conversation, **you can say or do something that will make a difference.**

As a participant, you can say, "Oops I think we left something out." You can also put in what's missing. You could be the one to say, "I can hear how angry you are about that." Slipping in a comment like this can get a meeting moving again without calling attention to yourself.

Stay Alert

There is more than one kind of incomplete conversation. Some people focus exclusively on other people's needs. They tend to get drained

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and burned out in the process. Others focus entirely on what they want and have no perception of the impact they have on others.

When you develop the skill of noticing what's missing and making sure it's included, you can facilitate the development of important conversations. A master facilitator can make these interventions almost effortlessly. A novice who is committed to the process can still be very effective!

How Important Conversations Get Derailed: Recognizing and Responding to Incomplete, Defensive and/or Dysfunctional Conversations

Dysfunctional conversations take place one sentence at a time.

Recognizing the problems as they occur, sentence by sentence, makes designing effective intervention strategies possible.

Blocking and tangential transactions, participating in the drama triangle, and discounting or passive behavior all signal that communication problems are occurring. These problems must be addressed for important conversations to take place.

Blocking Transactions

When a blocking transaction occurs, someone tries to get a response to a statement or question and somebody actively refuses to respond.

Example of a direct block:

A question is asked and the response is "I can't answer that," or "No comment."

A statement is made and not responded to at all; just as if the words had never been spoken.

Example of an indirect block:

"I'm too busy, I can't handle that right now."

"I have one nerve left and you're getting on it." Interpretation: Go away, I have no intention of responding to you.

The most common response to a blocking transaction is that everyone present acts as if it did not happen.

An "I'm Not OK" questioner may **think**, "I must have done something wrong." and say nothing.

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A “You’re Not OK” questioner may **think**, “You are a jerk.” and say nothing.

Usually the conversation continues about something else, but nothing is said aloud about the original question or issue.

Counter response to a blocking transaction:

- “If we can’t talk about it now, can we talk about it later? When?”
- Repeat what was said or asked.
- Comment on the lack of response. “Did you hear me say/ask _____?” Use this if somebody simply ignored you and didn’t answer.

Tangential Transactions

In a tangential transaction, a response is made that’s to a similar topic, or to a part of the previous subject that was being discussed.

Repeated tangential responses in a conversation are very confusing and often frustrating because each statement seems related and seems to make sense. The problem is that **every response takes you further and further way from the initial topic**. It may take some time to notice that the conversation is going nowhere.

Example:

A: Is the project done?

B: Well you know, C was out sick last week. He had the flu and his kid got it and his wife got it too. It was really bad. *Maybe that is an excuse for the project not being done.*

A: There’s a lot of that going around. *Now the conversation is about the flu, not the project.*

B: Yeah, and you have to wait so long to see the doctor. *Now it is about the doctor’s schedule.*

A: We need a better health care plan. *Now it is about insurance.*

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B: My brother heard that rates are going up again. *Now it is about insurance rates.*

What about the project being done???????????

In my work with both married couples and people who work together, the **most common complaint** that I hear is, “We never get anywhere **we just go around in circles** and get confused.” You can get off track from the original topic in three seconds and not notice it because it sounds like everything along the way makes sense.

Long-windedness invites tangential responses:

It’s hard to respond to a really long treatise. When someone talks in pages instead of paragraphs and wanders from topic to topic, it’s often hard to understand the central point of the conversation. You have to stay focused on listening carefully to the lecture. Most people don’t and won’t do this.

If someone says seven things and the listener picks out just one of them and responds to it, that determines the direction of the conversation. Of course the person who made the speech feels misunderstood because of the six points that were missed.

Useful response to a single tangential transaction:

Use the broken record response from assertiveness training. Simply repeat your original statement, if you can remember it. You can also gracefully respond to the diversion, and **then** repeat your original statement, prefaced by, “What I originally wanted to discuss was...”

Useful response to a tangential conversation:

- Acknowledge your confusion and stop the conversation.

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- DON'T ask, "How did we get here?" You will just get further confused.
- Ask each participant, including yourself, to answer this question aloud in a single sentence. "What are you trying to accomplish in this conversation?"
- Start over.

Example: "My goal here is to simply put in my request for a vacation. Your goal may be to keep everything covered. If this is the case then we can talk about how to accomplish both goals."

Drama Triangle

Transactional Analysis provides another useful tool for recognizing when an important conversation is NOT occurring. You can recognize that a conversation is stuck in The Drama Triangle by noticing individuals playing the Persecutor, Rescuer and/or the Victim roles. It's very easy to get into this complicated mess.

Example: In a very large company interested in affirmative action, a very good manager was happy to hire a minority administrative assistant. The assistant did terrible work and the manager asked that it be done over. The situation occurred over and over and over again.

Finally the manager told her senior manager, "I have to get rid of her." The senior manager said, "Let me try her for a while." The assistant worked beautifully for the senior manager, but when she returned to the original manager, the problem recurred.

Soon there were rumors that the assistant was talking about her manager in the cafeteria. The assistant was reported to say, "She's out to get me." Then the manager saw the assistant

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polishing her nails and making personal phone calls. The manager again said, "I've got to get rid of her."

The administrative assistant threatened to file a discrimination suit.

Example from **What Is the Emperor Wearing? Truth-Telling in Business Relationships** by Laurie Weiss, Ph.D.

The situation begins with good intentions, but it quickly gets off track.

- The manager Rescues the administrative assistant.
- The manager becomes the Victim.
- The administrative assistant becomes the Persecutor.
- The senior manager becomes the Rescuer.
- The manager still feels like a Victim.
- The administrative assistant claims she is a Victim and Persecutes both managers.
- Both managers feel like Victims.

The roles keep changing. The players move around and around the corners of the triangle and the situation becomes very intense.

Drama *is not* melodrama.

Drama is exciting. You never know what will happen next. Each player shifts roles. You never know if the Victim will become the Persecutor, or if the Rescuer will become the Victim. The dramatic excitement captures your attention. You have long conversations about who did what to whom.

Melodrama is boring. Each character stays in the same position, and you quickly lose interest.

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It's easy to get involved and difficult to extricate yourself from the Drama Triangle.

When most people find themselves caught up in a drama, they try to get out of it by shifting positions. When Rescuing doesn't work, they try Persecuting. They may set tighter standards, have people rebel against the standards, and complain to higher management, and then get overridden and feel like Victims.

Getting out of the Drama Triangle requires clear agreements and complete conversations.

You must state what you need (the requirements of the job), and the other person must accept your conditions or offer a different agreement. You also need a clear understanding of what will happen and when it will happen if the agreement isn't kept. Then you must keep your agreements.

Clear agreements will help you avoid getting into the Drama Triangle.

Example: The administrative assistant was transferred to another department. Her new manager told her exactly what she was expected to learn. Several weeks later the new manager told her, "You needed to learn 10 things to do this job. You have learned only three of them. You have one week left of your probationary period; therefore you need to start looking for another job."

Discounting/Denial

Discounting is a thought process that's identified as denial in the recovery community (Alcoholics Anonymous, etc.).

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- You don't observe the thought process directly, but you can infer it from what is said or from behavior you can observe.
- It often involves acting as if something that most people believe is real is not happening.
- Usually someone in the situation is perceived as incapable, inadequate or "not OK."

Several types of discounting are recognizable.

There is no problem.

This implies that there's not anything going on here that needs to be addressed.

Example: A reply to a question about a perceived problem with the accounting: "We follow standard accounting principles around here." There's nothing to be discussed!

Example: Somebody is looking emotional or upset and the conversation goes on as if there's nothing happening. Implied belief: If there's nothing going on, you can't expect me to do anything about it. If I'm very uncomfortable about any particular problem, I may be motivated to avoid paying attention to the problem so that I don't have to address it.

There is a problem but it's not important or there's no reason for it.

This implies that it's pointless to try to address a problem because, since it is not important, there's no reason for it, or that's just the way things are.

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Example: You can't expect engineers to have understandable conversations.

Example: As Jon pulled out of his driveway, his wife noticed an oil spot on the driveway, and pointed it out. Jon said, "All Volvos leak oil." He later reported that he just didn't want to do anything about it and said (and wanted to convince himself to believe) that there was no reason for the problem. That way, nobody could expect him to interrupt his schedule in order to do something about getting the car repaired.

There is a problem but no one can solve it.

This implies that there's a problem but it is so big and complicated that it is just not solvable.

Example: It's the economy.

Example: Those decisions are made above my pay grade.

The implication is that, although I know there's a problem, there is no point in trying to solve it because I know in advance that nothing I can do can have any impact on the problem. It's not my responsibility!

There is a problem but I (or you) cannot solve it.

This implies that because of my condition or lack of resources, I can't solve the problem.

Examples: I'm too old why should I bother? I'm too scared, and too vulnerable. I don't have any power around here. Nobody ever listens to me.

Dare To Say It!

The implication is that I am powerless to make any changes that would enable me to solve the problem. Therefore, you can't expect me to do anything about it.

Any of these examples indicate that unless something is done, a necessary important conversation will not happen.

Passive Behavior

The following behaviors are described as passive because, although they may actually involve activity, they do nothing to address the problem that's presented.

Doing Nothing

A common form of passive behavior is doing nothing about a problem. Your internal thought process supports that behavior, because you've already reached a conclusion that you shouldn't need to deal with the problem. This is either because it does not exist at all for you, or because, for whatever reason, you can't do anything about it.

That often means that none of the activities you choose to engage in have anything to do with solving the problem.

Overadaptation

This form of passive behavior may look like it's addressing the problem. However, here, you do the things you *think* that you're supposed to be doing.

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Example: You'll follow rules exactly. You'll show up exactly on time, you'll leave exactly on time; you'll do exactly what you're told to do but nothing further.

You'll try very hard to please others. You may intuit what you think someone wants you to do, and therefore not listen to instructions. Doing the things that you think are wanted rather than what is actually wanted may get you into trouble. Then you get upset when you're criticized because you're trying so hard to do what you think will help—but your thinking is flawed.

Agitation

Agitation is a form of passive behavior that uses activity to release some kind of tension. Common examples are physical movements like shaking, fidgeting, kicking, pacing, tapping, or even smoking, eating or drinking. The behavior could even be sharpening all your pencils, or rearranging all your books according to color or subject or size, instead of starting a difficult project.

This activity may keep you from having to cope with the problem of managing an uncomfortable feeling such as anger. It often takes your attention away from the problem of getting something you need.

Agitation may be almost un-noticeable or it can be overwhelmingly distracting.

Example: Taking a deep breath and blowing it out through pursed lips is a relaxing kind of thing to do. It doesn't do anything about the source of the tension, but it does relax.

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Example: Drumming on the table or pacing around the room, however, can be very upsetting to others.

Incapacitation/Violence

Incapacitation and violence are fairly extreme forms of passive behavior. They are grouped together because if you get to this point you force someone else to assume responsibility for managing your behavior.

Example: If you are drugged, sick, stoned, or violently angry, someone else must take care of you, minimize the damage and protect you as well as protecting others.

Managing Passive Behavior

If others are engaged in any form of passive behavior, you can invite them to change it. You can't force them to change it.

Managing Doing Nothing

Somebody who is doing nothing can be told to do something. They can be told specifically what to do. It's kind of hard to keep doing nothing when somebody says directly "get up, go over there, pick that up." It's possible to keep doing nothing but it's difficult under those circumstances.

Managing Overadapting

If somebody is overadapting they are giving some thought to what's expected of them. They're missing the mark and they're neither asking for nor taking in any information. You can tell someone in this position what to think about.

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Example: I want you to choose for yourself. Give me some options. You tell me several different ways we could approach this, and then let's talk together about the costs and benefits of doing each option.

Managing Agitation

You can ask someone who is agitated to stop the agitated behavior and think about what is needed or wanted. Some people can answer this question quite easily, others can't. You can also interrupt the behavior by offering what you imagine might be needed.

Example: Jon had a meeting with a colleague whose agitated behavior was talking. As she talked on and on, others lost interest and stopped paying attention. She apparently didn't notice and kept right on talking. He simply put his hand on her arm and she stopped speaking in mid sentence. She apparently needed somebody to notice her and the more she talked, the less attention she was getting. The touch was attention she recognized.

Managing Incapacitation/Violence

When people are incapacitated or doing damage (violence) to themselves or others it's not reasonable to expect them to function. Instead, you must take care of the immediate problem and wait for "sanity" to return. Then you can discuss the problem and encourage them to get professional help.

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You can make agreements with others to practice recognizing passive behavior, and learn that it often is used to avoid problems that could be easily solved.

Example: In a study group participants agreed to confront passive behavior in each other. In one meeting, a participant pulled out a cigarette. When asked, "What need are you discounting?" She replied, "I need a cigarette! Get off my back." The questioning continued and she suddenly burst into laughter. "When we came back here after lunch I needed to go to the bathroom but I didn't want to miss anything. I'm discounting my need to go to the bathroom and turning it into a need for a cigarette."

*Additional information is available in **Recovery From Co-Dependency: It's Never Too Late To Reclaim Your Childhood**, by Laurie Weiss and Jonathan B. Weiss. This book is available at www.LaurieWeiss.com.*

Getting Conversations Back On Track: Tools for Creating Important Conversations

Once interference is eliminated, important conversations do not happen automatically. Important conversations tend to occur when appropriate conditions are present. Using the tools for creating dialogue--listening, questioning, acknowledging emotions and creating meta-conversations--will all help **create the conditions where important conversations happen spontaneously.**

Dialogue

The prototype original conversation is sitting in a circle around a fire and sharing information about what is going on in the tribe. In this conversation we attempt to learn about each other and address problems as we become aware of them.

Dialogue is a useful both as a model of an important conversation and as a tool for creating an important conversation.

The contemporary form of dialogue espoused, by authors Meg Wheatley, Peter Senge, David Bohm and others, becomes a forum for discovery and exploration.

Premise of dialogue: **There are many ways of approaching any issue.**

In a dialogue there's no attempt to prove a point or position. What's valued is thinking about an issue in as many different ways as possible. Participants attempt to explore an issue both broadly and deeply.

Aim of dialogue: **Create a forum for exploration and expansion.**

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The aim of dialogue is to create a forum where people are free to explore and discover as much about an issue as possible. Expansive thinking is valued. Although the dialogue may be addressing a problem, problem solving is often done after the dialogue process is complete.

Activity of dialogue: **Speaking, listening, questioning, and silence are all part of the dialogue process.**

Listening

Without listening, important conversations are impossible. Listening is a skill that can be learned.

In dialogue you focus on listening to what's actually being said, and thinking about it before responding. This differs from ordinary conversation in which most people have learned to focus on creating their response before the speaker has finished, in order to look smart and involved. Listening in dialogue is not about getting ready to respond.

One of the strategies of dialogue is to be silent for a moment after each person speaks. Instituting this small procedural rule increases the chance that people will think about what is being said before responding to it.

Questioning

Questions are asked to deepen understanding. Some people even use their own internal impulses to defend a position as signals to remind them to ask questions.

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A question such as “how did you reach that conclusion?” is addressed as a request for information about the process you used to reach the conclusion, rather than as a challenge to a conclusion. Questions that address the reasons behind why someone is doing something in a particular way are encouraged. It’s a very good way to discover what is undiscussable in a way that doesn’t create a problem.

Example: A manager in a large technical organization who was sent to a meeting sat and listened for a short time and then asked with real curiosity, “why are we having these meetings?” Nobody had ever asked that question before and he created a very powerful dialogue simply by asking the question.

Example: A young engineer was asked to attend a meeting of people several levels above him in the corporation because he had a specific skill. Later, he said, “I genuinely felt I had to know what their needs were in order to serve them.” He asked questions to clarify his understanding of the situation. Those questions led to the discovery that many of the senior people present didn’t understand the situation either.

Twenty years later, the engineer explained how he manages a team of Ph.D. researchers. “I ask questions in a way that allows them to save face.” More details of this story are available in **The Integrity Course**, (Lesson 16).

Asking a question when you already know the answer is discouraged. Such questions are usually not intended to further the dialogue. Their usual intent is to show how smart you are. One of the main reasons people don’t tell the truth is to “save face,” either their own or somebody else’s. One of the skills

Dare To Say It!

that's very important to develop is to ask questions in a way that allows others to save face.

Example: "I'm confused about the reason we need to redo this work. Would you tell how you reached your conclusion?"

Reverse Example: A vice-president of a very large banking organization went to a meeting with a team working on new software packages. He asked a few questions about how it was working, knowing that things were bogged down. As he left the meeting, he confided, "I think I just have to shut that project down."

He didn't talk to anybody at the meeting about his thoughts and did shut down the project, demoralizing the team. Although the project did need to go, the situation could have been handled differently.

Acknowledging Emotions

Emotions are a critical part of important conversations.

Since emotions are often considered inappropriate in a working situation, people need to have permission to talk about emotions, and to develop skills that enable them to have these conversations.

Often people experience emotions as hunches or as feelings that something just doesn't seem right. When they can't identify a reason for what they're experiencing, they tend to say nothing, and often, important information is never even mentioned.

Emotions are contagious!

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You've probably experienced how contagious excitement can be. The same is true of 'negative' emotions. However, many people are willing to talk about positive emotions, but are unwilling to acknowledge the emotions that seem negative. Everyone in a room may feel tense, anxious, depressed, or sad, without ever bringing those feelings into the conversation. The reasons for the negative emotions may be very important to the conversation.

Permission is important

You can give a group permission to include information about emotions in a conversation by example. If you are in a group of people where you are experiencing a particular emotion you can say,

- "I sense an air of tension in the room. Is anybody else feeling the tension?"
- "Is there something else going on that we need to talk about?"

Questions like this can help others begin to talk about feelings.

Example: A manager's wife had just been diagnosed with cancer. He had come to an important meeting a little late and he was sitting in the meeting pretending that nothing was wrong. The meeting was bogged down and nothing seemed to be getting done when one of the women in the group said, "Why do I feel so sad?" The manager told the group about his wife's diagnosis. After expressions of support and sympathy, the work of the meeting was quickly completed.

You can also acknowledge that emotions are present while maintaining privacy.

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Example: “I am upset, but it has nothing to do with our meeting or anyone here, and I can put it aside until we are finished with this.”

Meta-Conversations

A meta-conversation is a conversation about a conversation. It’s often about the process of a conversation instead of about the content or the issue being discussed.

Example: “We’ve been discussing this problem for fifteen minutes,” is a conversation about the previous conversation.

Meta-Conversations transform bogged-down conversations into important conversations.

Often a conversation seems to be bogged down because participants are avoiding an un-discussable topic. If something is un-discussable, having an important conversation is almost impossible. You can sometimes find out what the underlying problem actually is by shifting to a conversation about the process of being stuck.

Commenting on the process of being bogged down, and wondering why that process occurred, often introduces new and important information. This is a good way to counter mild forms of blocking and tangential conversations.

If undiscussable topics are not addressed, they tend to go underground and surface in inappropriate places, like in the hall after the meeting is over. It’s important to call attention to opportunities to bring important information to the surface.

Dare To Say It!

Example: Sometimes someone keeps repeating himself. If he has said something again and again it's useful to say, "I've heard you say (repeat the statement or question) three different ways, and I'm not sure why. What's your goal here?" This type of question redirects the conversation, and may also provide needed acknowledgment for the speaker.

Example: You may notice that some important topics are introduced and quickly dropped. Commenting on the process often brings hidden information into the conversation.

Example: When you encounter the common workplace game of "Why don't you...? Yes but..." in which a problem is found with every suggestion, you don't need to participate. Instead, you can have a meta-conversation about the pattern.

What are some of the things that are un-discussable in your workplace? What are the conversations that are not taking place? You can make a difference with one small question or comment at a time.

The Four-Fold Way

The Four-Fold Way consists of a set of guidelines created by Dr. Angeles Arrien and is a spiritual way of describing dialogue.

1. Show Up and Choose to be Present

Show up means nobody is allowed to be present as an 'empty chair'. Be present means to think and feel and participate.

2. Pay Attention to What Has Heart and Meaning

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That means pay attention to the things that sing to you. We have so many things demanding our attention in our lives. There's advertising coming at us thousands of times every day. Everything we encounter, everything we look at, shouts "Come here, look here, give me your eyeballs!" We're also constantly exposed to our own inner conversations and judgments. It is often very difficult to focus on what's really important to us.

3. Tell the Truth without Blame or Judgment

This isn't just telling somebody else the truth, it's telling yourself your own truth.

Example: When you say to yourself, "She is so wrong, she is (expletive deleted) because..." It helps to ask yourself the question, what in me is like her? How come I got so upset by that? You need to tell the truth to yourself about yourself before telling your truth to others.

4. Be Open to Outcome, not Attached to Outcome

Be interested in what's happening, but don't be attached to it. Be open to whatever happens, knowing it doesn't have to happen in a particular way. When you start an important conversation it doesn't have to end up in any particular place. Once concerns and feelings are discussed, the original concern may no longer be important.

You Can Make a Difference

When you have a model of what an important conversation is like, can identify when an important conversation is not happening, and can

Dare To Say It!

help important conversations to happen, you will have created a rewarding and effective work environment.

- You will feel confident and comfortable about sharing your perceptions.
- You will know ways to share difficult information gracefully so that embarrassment is avoided.
- You will be able to help others accept difficult information.
- Your relationships with your coworkers will be stronger and more satisfying.

Increasing your awareness of what's happening in the conversations that surround you and practicing just one or two of these new skills will start to make a difference immediately. Becoming highly skilled depends on how committed you are to practicing. Practicing the Four-Fold Way becomes a commitment to a life of awareness.

Start now!

Additional copies of this Special Report can be purchased from
LaurieWeiss@EmpowermentSystems.com

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Several of the examples are taken from case studies in **What Is the Emperor Wearing? Truth-Telling in Business Relationships**.

Many of the concepts in this report are expanded in those case studies.

Help is just a phone call away if you need it. You can contact us at

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Keep In Touch

I have been called a “human google.” I am constantly scanning for resources that assist my readers to enhance their business and personal relationships. I share them in occasional emails to my clients and friends.

To get these updates, send an email to

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Resources

What Is the Emperor Wearing: Truth-Telling in Business

Relationships, by Laurie Weiss, Ph.D., Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1998. (Out of print.)

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For additional information about Transactional Analysis:

The International Transactional Analysis Association

www.ITAAworld.org

North American Transactional Analysis Association

<http://www.nataa.net>

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