Navigating Difficult Conversations

BY BEY-LING SHA, PH.D., APR
DEAN, CSUF COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Kinds of Difficult Conversations

- Unsafe
- Uncomfortable
- Emotion-Driven (fear, anger, sadness, etc.)
- Conflict-laden

Think before you get on the road

- Where is the conversation happening?
  ◦ Who has the “home advantage”?  
  ◦ What are your technology options?
- Who is involved in the conversation?
- What is your goal for the conversation or gathering?
- How will you navigate while driving? (tips & tricks)

Who is involved?

- People who will be present
- You and yourself
  ◦ Avowed & ascribed identities
  ◦ Your history & assumptions
  ◦ Your “buttons,” fears, needs
- Roles people play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOU</th>
<th>ELDERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARENTS</td>
<td>OTHER FAMILY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHILDREN</td>
<td>FRIENDS &amp; GUESTS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Navigating Difficult Conversations

What is your goal?

- Expectations & realities
  - Media portrayals of holiday gatherings
  - Social media reports from others
  - Reality
    - No gathering is ever ideal
    - No perfect solutions exist
- What is your goal?

Best practices in tough situations

- Remember that you can only control yourself (how you feel, what you say, how you behave)
- Acknowledge that what’s upsetting to you about others can be reflective of what’s upsetting to you about yourself
- Separate your position (on an issue) from your interests (in the moment)
- Separate what you observe (in a person’s words or actions) from what you assume (in a person’s feelings or motives)
- Know that you will never regret being your better self

Tips & tricks for conversation navigation

Internal tricks for you

- Depersonalize: (to yourself)
  - “This is not about me personally; this is about Person A and their B issue.”
- Let it go: (to yourself)
  - “I am going to ignore that comment. I am going to take the high road.”
- Empathize: (to yourself)
  - “Let me try to understand where they’re coming from.”
- Reflect: (to yourself)
  - “Why are those words/actions upsetting or hurtful to me?”
- Disengage: (to yourself)
  - “I am leaving this situation.”
Navigating Difficult Conversations

Tips & tricks for conversation navigation

General
- Use "I" Statements:
  - "I feel/think ..." (tip: the word "you" should not be anywhere in this statement)
- Count to 10, then do it again

Neutral
- Set Ground Rules:
  - "Let's agree to not discuss X, to not interrupt, to not use bad words, etc."
- Observe:
  - "It seems that we’re getting emotional/angry right now."
- Accept & Dismiss:
  - "I’m sorry you feel that way" (then change the subject)

Warm
- Appreciate:
  - "I can understand why you may feel that way."
- Acknowledge:
  - "This sounds really important to you."
- Listen & Learn:
  - "I think I hear you saying XYZ; can you tell me why you feel that way?"

Cool
- Decline:
  - "I don’t want to discuss that right now."
- Remove:
  - "Let’s talk about that outside/later."
- Redirect:
  - "Speaking of A, what about B?"
- Disarm:
  - "I apologize for what I said last year about X; let’s move on."
I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou

Bey-Ling Sha, Ph.D., APR
Dean, College of Communications

✉️ bsha@fullerton.edu
🐦 @DrSha
ぽ @beyling_sha