



## Pathway to Healthy Conversations Pt. 2

*"When it feels safe in a relationship, you can say just about anything; but when it's not ...."*

Real dialog requires safety. We can become more effective in conversations if we begin **noticing when a conversation becomes unsafe** for ourselves or the other person. That requires a level of awareness that is more than focused on winning or just getting our point across. When it becomes unsafe, we can keep talking, but it would be better to notice it and put energy into restoring safety.

What does "unsafe" look and feel like? Internal signals may include tightness in stomach, dry eyes or mouth, muscle tension or a headache. Become aware of feeling scared, hurt, and angry or feeling the need to hide those emotions. External signs include closed body language, raised voices, fingers pointing at each other or one person becomes very quiet. Instinctively, when we feel unsafe we respond with silence or violence. Silence can include withholding information, changing the agenda or withdrawing physically or emotionally. Violence may not be physical; it may be shoving our opinion into the conversation or using verbal put-downs to attack.

Safety in risky conversations requires having both a **Mutual Purpose** and **Mutual Respect** between the parties. When either one is lost, restoring them is the critical task if dialog is to begin again. When safety disappears the best first-step is to acknowledge it, take a time out and agree to return when all parties can be committed to restoring safety. That can at least restore a temporary Mutual Purpose.

Begin by re-establishing for yourself that you have a Mutual Purpose for the conversation. Without a clear Mutual Purpose, it is difficult for the other person to not feel like you have a hidden agenda. A Mutual Purpose means that some common outcome is desirable and that you care about the other person's goals, interests and values. It cannot be a manipulative technique or just an agreement to avoid conflict. It must be a "real agreement" about the outcome envisioned yet dynamic enough to be open to new information and acknowledgement that the process of getting there is still open. A Mutual Purpose is required for there to be enough trust to dialog. If the agreement is not genuine, then the seeds of more conflict will be planted. Remember the scriptural wisdom to "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and 'No' be 'No.'"

Get clear about your Mutual Purpose by using the heart questions. Invite them to find answers for themselves and then share answers as a way to open up a new dialog:

What do I really want for me?

What do I really want for others?

What do I really want for the relationship?

How could we behave if we really want these results?

Apologize if it is appropriate and acknowledge what you did to make the conversation unsafe. When an apology feels inappropriate, use a Contrasting Statement and clarify the misunderstanding from your point of view. It combines "don't and do" format where the "don't" addresses their concern about your purpose and the "do" clarifies your real purpose.

For example: [The "don't" part] - The last thing I wanted to do was to suggest that your efforts have not been focused on getting the job done. [The "do" part] - I think your work has been critical to the process.

What if there is no clear Mutual Purpose? Then you'll either have to create one or acknowledge that there is little basis for the conversation. Use the four questions to structure a safe dialog and see what comes up as Mutual Purpose. Remember, a Mutual Purpose leaves open the path to get there and does not require

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agreement on the whole process. That will feel controlling and disrespectful to the other person because no dialog is required; just conformity to someone else's plan. Step back and look for a larger Mutual Purpose rather than the path to take.

Re-establish Mutual Respect. That does not require that you have to respect every aspect of another person's life choices or their point of view. Part of the wisdom of the daily praying the Lord's Prayer is that it includes a reminder that giving and needing forgiveness is a daily (sometimes hourly) process. Someone suggested it helps to pray, "Lord, help me to forgive those who sin differently than I do."

Don't automatically believe what you tell yourself about their intention to disrespect you. We generally think that our thoughts are true about 100% of the time but misperception plays a significant role in undermining Mutual Respect. Our old hurts can create a perception of disrespect when none was intended. Our "normal" way of giving and receiving respect may be from our family-of-origin and imposing it onto current relationships fails to acknowledge that others learned different patterns. We can feel disrespected by raised voices either because our family argued quietly or was extremely loud. Sudden body movements, hands pointing and gesturing, moving away from the other person, interrupting sentences are just a few disrespectful triggers.

Begin restoring Mutual Respect by apologizing when you realize you were disrespectful. If you can't see how you were disrespectful, be empathetic with how it felt to them. Don't compound the challenge by disrespecting their right to feel what they feel even if you don't feel it is justified. Use a Contrasting Statement to clarify the misunderstandings.

Example: [The "don't" part] - The last thing I wanted to do was to disrespect you. [The "do" part] - I do value your opinion and contribution to what we want to accomplish/create.

You don't have to wait for a crisis. Here are a few suggestions: Work on noticing any feelings of disrespect toward the other person and explore the source of those feelings. What has been triggered? Watch out for any "unsigned agreements" you thought the other person made (or should have made) with you or unexpressed expectations you have for them. Practice using contrasting to maintain safety.

Example: "I don't want you to think that I don't value the time and energy you have put into this project, however, I have some concerns about the budget and expenses. Can we discuss that issue?"

Questions for exploration:

1. What are the physical and emotional symptoms you experience when you begin feeling unsafe in a conversation?
2. Do you tend to use more Silence or Violence responses to feeling unsafe in a conversation? Which ones?
3. What is your reaction to using the Contrasting Statement when it feels like an apology is not appropriate? Have you ever felt you had to apologize when it really was not appropriate? What would it have been like to use the Contrasting Statement instead?
4. In what ways do the learned patterns of dealing with difficult discussions from your family-of-origin impact your ability to create safety in your current relationships? What is it in "normal" patterns of the other person's family style that creates challenges for you to feel Mutual Purpose and Mutual Respect? What about the other way around?

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