



# Change the Conversation

Lisa Rubinstein

**“Here we go... again” went through my mind as Mark rose to speak. We braced ourselves for the barrage of complaints we knew was sure to follow, and hoped it would pass quickly. I stood there feeling like a deer caught in the headlights of an onrushing train, not knowing what to do or how to stop him.**

That scene was nearly 20 years ago, but I still remember it so clearly as I learned invaluable lessons on how to deal with difficult people. Cultivating effective working relationships in companies, both in and out of the training room, is an ongoing challenge. Many people are uncertain as to how to have those tough conversations that engages and builds trust between people, while at the same time improving performance within teams.

While there are no simple answers, there are important actions you can take to help guide those conversations to a more productive outcome. The first is changing the conversation from adversarial to collaborative.

## Keep them in your in-group

When faced with a difficult person, we can't help but have an automatic negative response to their words or behaviours, as human beings are wired to get upset.

We each have a unique set of values that tell us what is important and what matters, as well as our own mental map of the world generating our specific interpretation of a situation. As each brain is uniquely wired, our resulting perspectives are distinct from everyone else's on the planet.

The trouble is, we unconsciously assume that everyone around us shares our perspectives when we live in a world with more than seven billion disparate views.

So when someone behaves in a way that contradicts what we believe to be appropriate,

we experience it as being wrong, get upset and unconsciously assume that others will share our position. That bad behaviour then occurs as an absolute fact versus an opinion. When Mark stood up that time I was clear that he was absolutely wrong!

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We then start to distance ourselves from the other person and attach a negative bias not only to their actions, but also to them as a person and move them to our out-group.

The brain categorises people in in-groups and out-groups depending on how much we perceive them to be like ourselves. When someone is in your in-group you feel more empathy towards them and actually get a reward response in the brain when they have a win. As well, if they fail or struggle, you “feel their pain” through a corresponding empathetic response in the brain.

It's just the opposite with people in your out-group. In fact, when they struggle or fail you may even get a little reward response. It's how the brain is wired to respond.

When we put people into our out-group, we build up walls, judge their behaviours through our bias and thus, lose our ability to communicate objectively with them. That's part of why we then label those conversation as “tough”. Any interaction that involves a clash of values and perspectives is going to feel uncomfortable and be difficult to resolve.

If you want to help someone change to more effective behaviours, you need to be more objective and understanding of their point of view, even if you disagree with it. It's not always easy, but it is the first step in being able to influence them in any way.

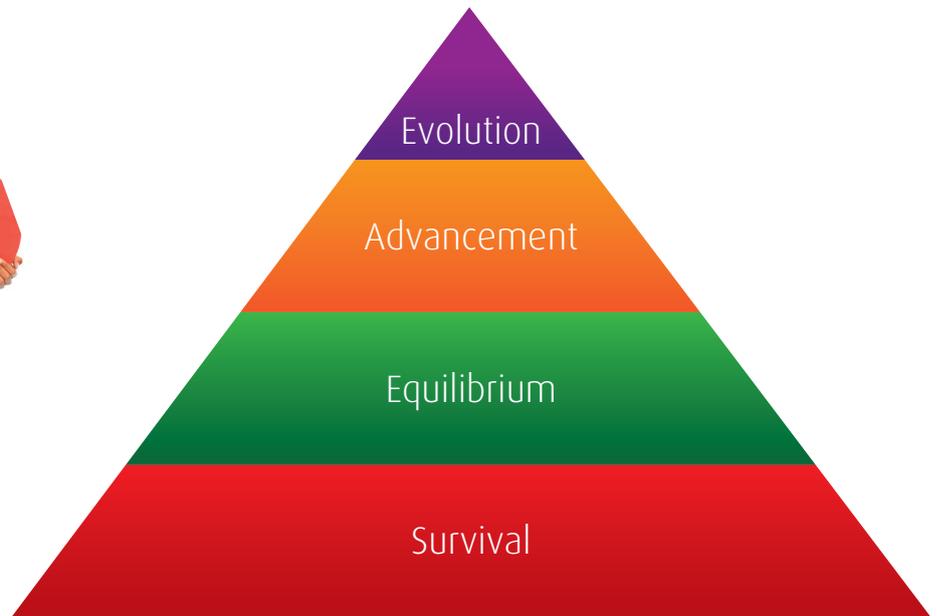
When we start to wonder what their perspective may be and why they are behaving the way they are, we begin to break down those walls and build a more collaborative relationship. This takes the edge off any conversation.

## Understand their perspective

As perspectives drive our actions that cause the results, anything we do is always going to be consistent with how we view a person or situation. Consider that our perspectives can fall into one of four categories: Survival; Equilibrium; Advancement or Evolutionary thinking, together forming a Hierarchy of Perspectives pyramid.



## Hierarchy of Perspectives®



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### Survival

The base of the pyramid is Survival, which happens when we are in situation that triggers a threat response in the brain. This occurs in situations ranging from a new and challenging role to suffering from an illness or lack of sleep, to coping with a difficult colleague, internal structural or strategic changes or just a simple busy day.

In this state we are very unlikely to be open to learning anything new as we are focussed on surviving the moment. We experience a cognitive narrowing as the brain focuses on the immediate and urgent. Everything else is then put aside for later as it is categorised as secondary or irrelevant. These are the times when we move quickly, feel stressed and lose our ability to step back and objectively evaluate the situation.

If someone in your training room is there under duress or experiencing the kind of stress that would give rise to a Survival perspective, they will be unable to settle down and pay attention to what is happening. They'll be too caught up with whatever is causing them stress. While they may have the capacity to comprehend what is being delivered, they will not be ready to learn.

As opposed to being able to learn, we've defined ready to learn as a *mental state of*

*awareness and responsiveness to your internal and external environment that allows for learning and adaptive behaviour.* In other words, we must be ready to take the time to respond constructively to what is being conveyed and then be willing to use it to alter our thinking and corresponding behaviours.

When we are ready to learn and engage in the process our ability to incorporate the new information into our daily lives is accelerated. This doesn't guarantee that people still won't disrupt the learning process, but they will be more likely to listen and engage. That readiness depends on our perspectives, how we relate to others and deal with our circumstances.

Someone in your training room who is stressed, continually sending emails or text, or stepping out of the room to take calls is most likely operating in a Survival mode. While it may occur as inconsiderate or rude, they may simply be under too much pressure to take time out to learn.

If they can't put aside those issues, they may need to postpone their training. It is unlikely they will absorb anything being said and their presence will be disruptive for the other participants. If you can view their situation with understanding and compassion for whatever they are

experiencing, then you will be in a much better position to help them.

### Equilibrium

Beyond Survival is the perspective I call Equilibrium where one experiences a sense of stability, predictability and order. This can involve anything from settling into that new role, to acclimating to the high pace such that we no longer feel stressed; to working in the same role everyday for years on end.

When we experience certainty, stability and order we can then relax and feel ready to move forward, take risks and learn something new. However, if we are too dependent on certainty and too resistant to change, our readiness to learn will also be very low. People who are resistant to change need to believe that the learning initiative will help them better manage what they are currently involved in and help maintain the status quo. The more you map the ideas onto what they already are comfortable with, the quicker they will settle in and open to learning.

### Advancement Thinking

Gaining that sense of certainty enables us to then move forward to the next level, which is Advancement Thinking. At this level, we are very focussed on ourselves, which has positive and negative aspects.



There is a reason why flight attendants tell us to put our masks on first. We need to look after ourselves in order to take care of others and perform at our best. But it can also be a problem if we focus only on ourselves to the detriment of others.

Narcissistic thinking comes with decreased empathy, lack of introspection and a diminished readiness to learn. These are the type of people who can give you the most trouble as they are too wedded to their own worldview to take in ideas from anyone else. Advancement thinkers are the bullies, drama queens, cheaters and liars. They often provoke resentment and hostility from the people around them, as they can be very difficult to work with.

Conversations to address their behaviours will be very difficult as they will deflect any perceived criticism and react aggressively to suggestions that they change. As well, it can be very difficult to empathise with their point of view as their actions often trigger resentment and resignation from the people around them.

I was brought in to work with the general manager of an organisation who was

labelled a bully. The CEO and senior management team were fed up with his behaviour but so far had been unable to affect any change. Even the high level of attrition on his team failed to convince him that his behaviour needed modification.

We need to look after ourselves in order to take care of others and perform at our best.

One of the first things I noticed was that, not only was he socially isolated by his peers, but he had also become the scapegoat for everything going wrong in the organisation. While their anger towards him was clearly the result of his behaviours, I thought it unlikely that he was the only person responsible for the company's results.

In letting him know I was sympathetic to his point of view, I could then start to gently bring him to a more objective awareness

of his behaviours. From that foundation of trust, we could begin to change his perspectives, increase his empathy for others, which shifted him to a greater awareness such that he could begin to move to the next level of perspective, Evolution.

### Evolution

When we are thinking broadly about future possibilities and are ready to dream, plan, strategise and learn is when we are in an Evolutionary frame of mind. Evolutionary thinkers are the most open and ready to learn. They tend to be the deep thinkers who may be reluctant to take action, preferring to consider the greater ideas to moving too quickly. As such they may be more interested in higher-order learning versus practical tools and tips. Giving them additional reading options will help satisfy their need for building knowledge and wisdom.

### Listen for the commitment

While it can be difficult to see at the time, every action or complaint is grounded in a commitment to something that is important and relevant to the other person, given their current perspective. When you understand what that perspective is, you can begin to listen for and hear their commitment. You'll also be less likely to move them to your out-group, be less stressed about the conversation and more able to maintain an objective view of the situation.

Letting them know that you authentically understand and respect their commitment and perspective, even if you disagree with their point of view, breaks down barriers, allowing for a collaborative conversation that is more likely to lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

While there are no guarantees, you'll be much more likely to see a positive shift in their behaviours and they'll have a greater chance of experiencing the benefits of your learning initiative. ■

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