

Challenging conversations

Presented by: Hilary Bryan
28 November 2025



Getting prepared

Who do you need to have a challenging conversation with?

- People external to your organisation: customers, suppliers, new contacts
- People or teams in other parts of your organisation
- Your own team or manager
- Friends and whanau
- Yourself



Examining your own mindset

Needs and fears: what are they? (*Cornelius and Faire*)

Your needs	Your fears
The other's needs	The other's fears

Your three brains: which one is engaged? (*Goulston*)

Lower reptilian brain	Middle mammal brain	Primate brain
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fight, flight, freeze, etc.• Not a lot of thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feelings and emotions• Can be powerful: anger, grief, love, joy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Logic and rational thinking• Mr Spock in action

Your reality: is it really the only map?

This is a basic of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Your map of reality is likely to be affected by biases, blindspots, beliefs and experiences. Others will have different maps. The map is not the territory and reminds us we see a situation through our own lens. We make our own movie. (*Goulston*)

Your aim: do you have an idea of what you want to achieve?

The conversation itself may change this. (We'll argue this later.) Your aim may be to clear the air; build trust; share ideas; be curious; deliver a difficult message; ask for help; ask for co-operation.

Only you know.

Your social presence: do you know how you come across visually and viscerally?

Every micro-gesture and facial expression says something about you. What you wear, how you sit and arrange a room says so much about you. We all leak.

Going deeper

A bit of neurochemistry to add to the mix

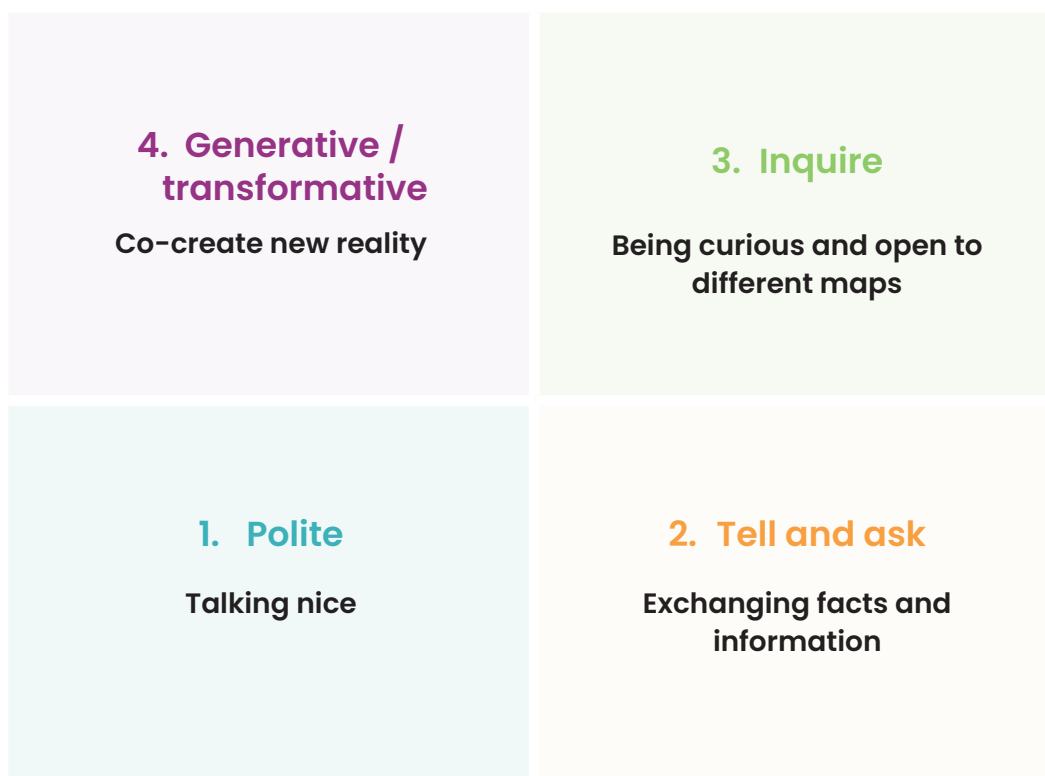
Conversations are all about words, body language and voice – right? Let's add another layer. When we converse with others we have biochemical and neurochemical responses, and we pick up electrical signals as well.

Put simply, we pick up others' energy within ten feet of them. So, online conversations lack this element. (*Wright*)



Then we add a layer of our old beliefs and ideas. Lastly, we say things, hear things, feel things and make sense of things, but not at the same time. And when there's not a match, we retreat into our own heads and make a movie. And that movie – our judgments are made in 0.07 seconds. (*Glaser*)

Different levels of conversation



How open are we to levels 3 and 4? (*Kahane and Scharmer*)

Different conversation approaches

How much can you plan a conversation? It’s not a play with a script. One way to think about different approaches is to move between several during one conversation. Here are just some.

<p>Radical candour</p> <p>Challenge directly and care personally</p> <p>Say what you need to say respectfully</p> <p>Close the gap between your private thoughts and what you want to say (<i>Scott</i>)</p>	<p>Coaching</p> <p>Ask great supportive and challenging questions (More on this later)</p> <p>Uncover new realities</p> <p>Explore options and actions (<i>Cox</i>)</p>
<p>Negotiation</p> <p>Slow down</p> <p>Label the other person’s emotions</p> <p>Use “That’s right”</p> <p>Find common ground</p> <p>Explore options</p> <p>Reach win-win (<i>Voss</i>)</p>	<p>Influencing</p> <p>Be a Happy Warrior (warmth / trust before strength) (<i>Cuddy et al</i>)</p> <p>Play to the other person’s context (<i>Carucci</i>)</p> <p>Use behavioural economics (<i>Thaler and Surstein</i>)</p> <p>Frame your message (<i>Thaler and Surstein</i>)</p> <p>Make your message sticky (<i>Heath</i>)</p> <p>Tell stories (<i>Simmons, and Denning</i>)</p>
<p>Feedback</p> <p>Your story</p> <p>Their story</p> <p>Dialogue</p> <p>Potential emotional response</p> <p>Agree way forward: may be mutual or via instruction (<i>Korn Ferry</i>)</p>	<p>Assertiveness</p> <p>“I” statements</p> <p>Open, honest and clear statements about feelings and needs</p> <p>Asking for what you want</p> <p>Maintaining respect for the other person (<i>Shane</i>)</p>

What you say isn’t what’s received (*Malandro*)

<p>Sender: Content</p>	<p><i>I’ve got some new ways we can work better. Let’s talk through them.</i></p>
<p>Receiver: Relationship</p>	<p><i>Who are you? Do I trust you?</i></p>
<p>Receiver: Personal story</p>	<p><i>This will mean more work and lots of so-called trial and error. The last time we did this, it ended in disaster and long hours.</i></p>
<p>Receiver: Emotions</p>	<p><i>I’m stressed and overwhelmed just thinking about it. Help!</i></p>



Conversation essentials

Close the mirror-neuron gap: empathise

This is all about connecting and building rapport. We all have mirror neurons in our brains that allow us to feel what others are feeling. They're like our empathy neurons. People you want to connect, and build rapport, with are constantly sending out messages saying:

I want your approval and for you to tune into what I'm feeling.

Every time someone says something they mean and that's heartfelt, they're really saying:

I'm hungry for you to reciprocate and feel what I'm feeling.

If that hunger isn't satisfied, there's a mirror neuron gap. If you recognise what the other person is feeling, you're closing the mirror neuron gap. Then it keeps going. When you mirror what the other party feels, they're wired to mirror you in return. That's what builds a connection and rapport.

You don't have to agree with the other person, or even like them. You're acknowledging what they're feeling. Make the other person feel felt. (Goulston)

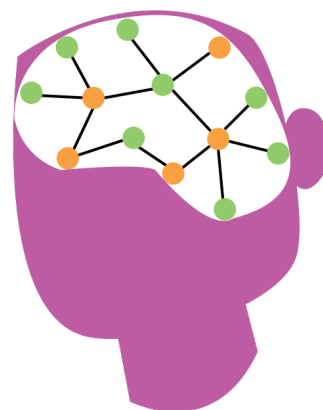
Useful phrases

"That's right" "Tell me more" "It seems like...is really making you feel disrespected."

Build trust and be open and vulnerable

Zak argues that trust begets trust.

In experiments I began running in 2001, my lab showed that when someone is tangibly trusted by a stranger, the brain synthesizes the signaling chemical oxytocin. We found that the more trust one is shown, the more the brain produces oxytocin...Trust is part of our evolutionary old repertoire of social behaviours. I call oxytocin the moral molecule because when the brain releases it, we treat others well, like we would a family member...Oxytocin-stimulated empathy means if we were to hurt someone, we would share that person's pain...Our brains reward us for co-operating and treating others well, including being trustworthy when we are trusted. Trust begets trust. Trust begets oxytocin, which begets trustworthiness in return.



Here are some ways to build that all-important trustworthiness and the psychological safety that goes with it as part of conversations. (Stone, Patton and Heen)

Tell your story and state it's your story – not the whole territory.
<i>The way I see things is...</i> <i>What I keep thinking is...</i>
Be open, honest, self-disclosing and vulnerable. Say what you're feeling. (Remember those level 3 and 4 conversations.).
<i>This situation has really hit me hard and left me feeling powerless.</i> <i>I keep replaying our meeting last week and each time I'm left more confused.</i>
State what's important to you, what's at stake and its impact on you.
Explain how the issue affects your identity and where your story comes from.
<i>I like to see myself as someone who gets on with everyone. I'm questioning that now.</i> <i>This happened once before in a different job, so I'm doubting myself every time I talk with one of the team.</i>
Apologise if you need to.
<i>I'm sorry I haven't raised this before. I take full responsibility for that.</i> <i>I'm sorry our working relationship hasn't got off to a great start.</i> <i>I should have been around for you more in your first two weeks here.</i>

Build rapport

Empathy is what you feel. Rapport is when the other person feels it back. Paraphrasing, repeating key words and asking questions, particularly follow-up questions are listening basics. The key point is always listening without judgment.



Ask great questions (*King*)

Open	<p><i>What are your thoughts about...?</i></p> <p><i>How do you see things going?</i></p>
Follow up (very valuable)	<p><i>Could you go into that in more detail?</i></p> <p><i>What exactly do you mean by...?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me more...</i></p>
Reflective	<p><i>Is what you're saying that...</i></p>
Core objective	<p><i>What's the best outcome of this whole situation for you?</i></p> <p><i>If you could get one thing out of this conversation what would it be?</i></p>
Relationship	<p><i>How are you? How are we?</i></p>
Asking permission	<p><i>May I say something that's on my mind?</i></p> <p><i>May I ask a more personal question?</i></p> <p><i>May I say something provocative?</i></p>
Golden	<p><i>What would it take for you to...?</i></p>
Diagnostic inquiry	<p><i>How did you react to the changes made to your report?</i></p> <p><i>What emotions did the situation you've described trigger for you?</i></p> <p>Focus the other person's attention on specific aspects of their story: feelings, reactions, underlying motives, actions taken or planned.</p>
Confrontational inquiry	<p><i>You've mentioned the poor relations between different parts of the office. How have you contributed to this?</i></p> <p><i>You've used the word - stressed - four times. What's within your control to manage your stress better?</i></p> <p>This isn't about confronting the person, but their story.</p>

Managing your emotions: Oh no to ok (Goulston)

Oh no! (Reaction)

This is a disaster. You mean you want me to...

Oh help! (Release)

Oh help, this is a terrible mess and I'll get stuck with cleaning it up – again – this always gets dumped on me.

Oh give me strength! (Recentre)

I reckon I can fix this, but it'll be messy and certainly not fun.

Oh well. (Refocus)

This isn't life changing. I've got an idea what I need to do to fix it.

OK. (Re-engage)

I'm ready to fix it. Let's get going.



To move through this sequence in a conversation, you need to articulate the words and feelings, rather than suppress them. You'll need to do this silently if you're with someone. Putting words to your emotions cools down your middle mammal brain and gets your primate brain into gear.

So, don't lie to yourself: *it's all fine – no problem*. Recognise and articulate your feelings first and then work through the steps above.

What if you reach your Czechoslovakia?

In 1939, Czech President Hácha met Hitler in Berlin. He pleaded for mercy for his country. Instead Hitler worked himself into a rage and offered two options: resist and be crushed, or sign a capitulation document. Hácha collapsed and, when recovered, chose the latter.

The point is that none of the approaches we've talked about so far would have worked. Some conversations don't result in a better relationships, greater understanding or a win win.

Conversing with psychopaths

They're about 1% of the population, but they're not all serial killers. They're mainly male and psychologists estimate about 3% of business leaders may be psychopaths. They're successful. Common traits are:

- arrogance
- callousness
- dishonesty
- showing little or no remorse
- exploiting others
- being charming and manipulative. (Morin)

So what to do?

Goulston is clear: don't even try. Run. Morin has six approaches:

1. Keep your emotions in check: stay calm.
2. Don't be intimidated: be assertive.
3. Don't buy into their stories: stick to facts.
4. Turn the conversation back on them: their behaviour, not that of others.
5. Communicate online.
6. Get help and debrief afterwards.

And then there are narcissists

They tend to:

- love themselves and think everyone does as well
- see themselves as the best
- believe others don't measure up
- think rules and obligations don't apply to them
- not seek equal relationships
- offer criticism and expect you to accept it
- see their perspectives as right. (*Navarro*)

The above six psychopath points may apply here as well. Manage yourself and your expectations, as per psychopaths.

A final word about victims

Here are the three roles in the classic drama triangle.



Victims tend to get stuck in helplessness and their story of persecution. Then when you try to help (rescue) they persecute you for being inadequate or not understanding their situation.

Is there an alternative? Yes, coach, challenge and create new opportunities for the victim.
(*Karpman*)

And lastly, back to you

Here's one way to think about the qualities you need to plan and hold great conversations.

(*Korn Ferry*)



References

- Cornelius H, & Faire, S. (1994). *Everyone can win*. Australia: Simon Schuster.
- Cox, E et al (2014). *The complete handbook of coaching*. LA: Sage.
- Cuddy, A, Kohut, M & Nettinger, J. (2013). Harvard Business Review, July – August 2013. *How experts gain influence*.
- Denning, S. (2001). *The springboard*. Woburn, MA: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Glaser, J. (2014). *Conversational intelligence*. Bibliomotion. Brookline.
- Goulston, M. (2010). *Just listen*. AMA: USA
- Heath, C & D. (2008). *Made to stick*. London: Random House.
- Karpman, S. (2014). *A game free life*. California, USA: Drama Triangle Productions.
- King, M. (2021). *Social chemistry*. USA: Dutton.
- Korn Ferry. (2019). *Performance management: a bold perspective on how individuals, teams and organizations excel*.
- Malandro, L. (2003). *Say it right the first time*. McGraw-Hill. USA
- Morin, A. Psychology Today, August 13, 2018. *5 ways to successfully deal with a workplace psychopath*.
- Navarro, J. Psychology Today, December 28, 2017. *Narcissist or psychopath—how can you tell?*
- Scott, K. (2018). *Radical candour*. New York: MacMillan.
- Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce conversations*. London: Piatkus Books.
- Shane, S, A. (2024). *Speak up, stand out: mastering the art of assertiveness*. Independently published.
- Simmons, A. (2007). *Whoever tells the best story wins*. New York: Amacom.
- Stone D, Patton B, & Heen S. (2000). *Difficult conversations*. London: Penguin Books.
- Thaler, R & Sunstein, C. (2009). *Nudge*. London: Penguin Books.
- Voss, C. (2016). *Never split the difference*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Whyte, D. (2014) Interview with Kim Rosen. Downloaded from Spirituality and Health.
- Wright, R. The New Yorker, March 23, 2020, *How loneliness from coronavirus isolation takes its toll*.
- Zak, P. Harvard Business Review, January – February 2017. *The neuroscience of trust*.

Thanks for coming!

From The Training Practice team – Hilary, Rachel, Kristen, James

Check out our website, with our latest thinking and events: trainingpractice.co.nz

Follow us on [LinkedIn](#)

Get in touch: 027 222 1498 | office@trainingpractice.co.nz

RSVP to our next Tea & Toast:

Enhance your customer experience

