

# Communication Tools for Courageous Conversations<sup>1</sup>

In creative dialogue we:

- seek understanding, realizing that one person's perspective is only partial;
- hold genuine regard for self/others and commit to mutual growth/development as well as task accomplishment/problem resolution;
- present our authentic selves and respond to others appropriately and ethically.

Approaching communication as creative dialogue requires being able to confront others when we disagree. How do we overcome our own fears and concerns about others' reactions? By showing courage – not the absence of anxiety or fear, but the willingness to move forward in spite of it.

## ASSERTIVENESS

Often, we avoid conflict because we polarize between being *passive* (meeting others' needs at the expense of our own) and being *aggressive* (satisfying our own needs without regard for those of others):

- When *passive* we communicate from a one-down position. We go along with others' opinions and decisions to avoid a discussion or argument. Others' needs and wishes get met at the expense of our own. We may not even be aware of what we've given away:

*"Well, uh, I don't know, maybe we could...well, what do you think?"*

Sometimes our implicit desire to have our needs met at all costs shows up as *passive-aggressive* behavior. It's *passive* in that it's indirect (or manipulative); it's *aggressive* in that it doesn't show respect for the other person. Because the aggression is subtle and often below our level of awareness, we may be surprised when people react with anger or defensiveness:

*"Did you finish that project yet?"* (When you know s/he hasn't.)

*"Why do you keep nagging me?"*

*"I was just asking a question..."*

- When *aggressive* we aim to satisfy our own needs and wishes without regard for those of others:

*"I said we're going to do it that way, and I'm not interested in any discussion!!!"*

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Sliter, a Cincinnati-based coach who coined this term, also refers to it as "bellying up."

This kind of behavior is usually obvious to those targeted but not always obvious to the person who's *being* aggressive. Someone might, for example, take charge without asking anyone else's opinion, and fail to notice that other people feel bent out of shape.

Conflict can be handled directly and effectively with assertive communication: stating our wishes directly and honestly, while simultaneously taking *others'* needs into account.

This doesn't mean you do *all* the talking or that it's O.K. to be hurtful as long as you're being honest. When both people are being assertive there is mutual respect. In assertive interaction, both parties listen and seek mutually beneficial outcomes.

## **GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK**

Having a courageous conversation requires attention to how it feels to be told something that may be difficult to hear.

**Effective feedback** directs someone toward a goal without raising defenses. It is nonjudgmental information that is:

- specific,
- descriptive, and
- focused on behavior, not the person.

## **RESPONDING TO CRITICISM WITHOUT DEFENSIVENESS**

If you're on the receiving end of someone's directness and the feedback doesn't follow the above guidelines, instead of reacting defensively (e.g., trying to explain yourself), you can agree with a partial truth, a possibility, or a principle, then probe for more information.

For example, if someone were to say you don't take things seriously enough, here are three options:

**Agree to Partial Truth** – "I agree I'm not as serious as some people. In what way has that been a problem?"

**Agree to a Possibility** – "Maybe I'm not serious enough. Tell me more."

**Agree to a Principle** – "I, too, believe it's important to be serious about some things. What have I done or said that didn't seem serious enough under the circumstances?"