

Tongue Fu Difficult Conversations Why Can't You Shut Up?

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You can view Professor Barkai's PowerPoint presentation for this topic at:

<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~barkai/pptadr.html>

A few Tongue Fu tools

“But” out

Don’t “should” on them

Avoid extremes

Stop defending yourself

Never say “No!”

Don’t make excuses

If is your mistake

Make requests, don’t give orders

See the issue

Get them under control

Who makes you mad?

Exit “no-win” disputes gracefully

Tongue Glue

Fun Fu

Fresh start

Tongue Fu

What to Say in Difficult Situations

Top 7 Tongue Fu Tips

By Sam Horn

<http://www.womensmedia.com/new/Sam-Horn-what-to-say.shtml>

Would you like to know what to say when you don't know what to say? This article explains how you can think on your feet and communicate more constructively with colleagues, customers, even kids. This article presents tips designed to help you respond pro-actively to challenging individuals.

What is Tongue Fu, you ask? "It's how to handle difficult individuals without becoming one ourselves," says Tongue Fu author and teacher Sam Horn.

Tongue Fu Tip #1.

When people complain, don't explain,

Take the AAA Train. Explaining why something wasn't done when it was supposed to be done makes people angrier because they feel we're making excuses. Instead, Agree, Apologize, Act. "You're right, Mrs. Smith, we were supposed to send that brochure to you last week, and I'm sorry you didn't receive it yet. If I could please have your name and address again, I'll personally put that brochure in an envelope and make sure it goes out today." Voila. Complaint over!

Tongue Fu Tip #2:

Has someone accused you of something you didn't do?

Don't defend or deny it. If someone blindsides you with an unfair allegation, "You women are so emotional!" and you protest with, "We're not emotional!" you've just proven their point. Instead, put the conversational ball back in their court with, "What do you mean?" Asking them to explain themselves will cause them to reveal the real issue and you can address that instead of reacting to their attack. Imagine an upset client claims, "You don't care about your customers." A hurtful denial of, "That's not true. We pride ourselves on our quality service" would only serve to turn this into a "Yes we do - No you don't" debate. Instead ask, "What makes you think that?" The client may harrumph, "I've left three messages and no one's called back." Aaahh, now you know what's really bothering her and you can give her the attention she wants and deserves.

Tongue Fu Tip #3:

Stop disagreements with a hand gesture.

No, not that one! If people are arguing and you try to talk over them, what will happen? They'll talk louder and the voice of reason will get drowned out in the commotion. Putting your hand up like a policeman will cause them to pause for just a moment, which gives you a chance to get your verbal foot in the door. Then say these magic words, "We're here to find solutions, not fault." Remind them that John F. Kennedy said, "Our task is not to fix the blame for the past, it's to fix the course for the future." If the conversation starts

deteriorating into a gripe session again, make a T with your hands and call out, "Time out. Calling each other names won't help. Instead, let's focus on how we can keep this from happening again."

Tongue Fu Tip #4:

Have to give bad news?

Don't use the apathetic words, "There's nothing I can do." A front desk manager at a hotel in Hawaii asked, "What can we say when people grumble about the rain? There's nothing we can do about the weather. We're not Mother Nature." I told her, "The words, 'There's nothing I can do' come across as a verbal dead-end. People will feel you're brushing them off, and they'll get more vehement in an effort to make you care. Use the words, 'I wish,' 'I hope,' or 'There's something' to let them know you're at least trying to help them. Say, 'I wish I could bring out the sunshine for you. I know you were looking forward to some beach time' or 'I hope it clears up soon. In case it doesn't, there's something I can suggest. Here's a list of rainy-day activities so at least you can make the most of your visit even if the sun doesn't cooperate.'" In the real world, we can't always give people what they want. We can at least give them our concern and viable options.

Tongue Fu Tip #5:

Has someone made a mistake?

If something's gone wrong and we tell people what they should have done, they will resent us - even if what we're saying is right. Why? People can't undo the past. If they're being reprimanded for something they can't change, they'll channel their feeling of helplessness or guilt into antagonism towards us. My mom used to tell me, "We can't motivate people to do better by making them feel bad." Telling people what they "should" have done makes them feel bad and doesn't teach them how to do it better. From now on when people make a mistake, coach what happened with the words "next time" or "in the future" instead of criticizing what happened with the word "should." Now, you're shaping their behavior instead of shaming it, and they're learning instead of losing face.

Tongue Fu Tip #6:

Develop a repertoire of Fun Fu remarks.

Erma Bombeck (bless her soul) said, "If we can laugh at it, we can live with it." Are you sensitive about something? Perhaps you've put on a few pounds. You have a choice. You can be hyper-sensitive about this and give people the power to embarrass you, or you can come up with clever, non-combative comebacks and keep your wit(s) about you. Want an example? I ran into a very tall man in an airport. The people in front of me were laughing and pointing at him. I thought, "How rude!" until he got closer and I saw his t-shirt which said, "No, I'm not a basketball player!" The back of his shirt said, "Are you a jockey?" This man told me he used to dread going out of the house because everyone made smart-aleck remarks. He finally decided if he couldn't beat 'em, he might as well join 'em. "This is nothing," he said with a smile, "I have a drawer full of these shirts at home. My favorite says 'I'm 6'13" and the weather up here's fine.' Ever since I started wearing these shirts," he added, "I've had fun with my height instead of being frustrated by my height." Coming up with just the right remarks can help you lighten up instead of tighten up.

Tongue Fu Tip #7:

Turn "can't because" into "sure, as soon as."

Imagine a staff member asks, "Can I have my paycheck early? I'm going on a trip this weekend" and you answer, "No you can't have your paycheck because it hasn't been approved by payroll." That's the truth, however it's a tactless way of rejecting a request. The words "can't because" are like a verbal door slamming in people's face. Want good news? You can often approve requests with the words, "Sure, as soon as" or "Yes, right after." Re-word your reply to, "Sure you can have your paycheck, as soon as it's approved by payroll. Why don't we give them a call, explain the circumstances and see if there's any way they can speed things up." One manager said, "I can't wait to use this idea at home. My kids see me as a 'big meanie' because they're constantly asking for permission and I'm always telling them 'no.' Next time they ask if they can go outside and play with their friends, instead of telling them, 'No you can't, because you haven't done your homework,' I'm going to say, 'Sure you can, right after you finish your homework.' Instead of seeing me as the one who's keeping them from what they want, this makes them responsible for getting what they want. It changes the whole dynamic of our relationship."

Sam Horn suggests a group of "words to lose" phrases that should be replaced with "words to use."

WORD TO LOSE	WORDS TO USE
But	And
Should	Next time - From now on - In the future
You'll have to -- You need to	If you would ... Could you please ...
Can't because	Sure, as soon as
There is nothing ... There is no way ...	I wish ... I hope ...
I don't know ...	That's a good questions and let me ...

With these Tongue Fu tips, we can keep people from becoming difficult in the first place or at least not add fuel to their verbal fire by using responses that help instead of hurt. By communicating diplomatically, people have more incentive to respond in kind.

Tongue Fu at School

From the website: <http://tonguefu.com/>

30 Ways to Get Along Better with Teachers, Students, Principals, and Parents

In Tongue Fu at School you will learn how to:

Persuade nonstop talkers to stop, listen, and see your point of view

Keep from saying something you regret (Tongue Glue!)

Use the AAA Train to clear up complaints

Handle hassles with humor vs. harsh words (Fun Fu!)

Coach poor performance so students learn (vs. lose face) and are motivated to self-correct

Use words that turn resentment into rapport

Keep anger and emotions under control so you keep a positive perspective

Resolve disagreements by focusing on solutions, not fault

Think on your feet instead of thinking of the perfect response . . . on the way home

Diplomatically say "No" without jeopardizing your friendships (or job)

Create quality relationships through compassionate, respectful communication

Continue to be the kind of person you want to be - even when others aren't

Find out for yourself why the Executive Director of the National Education Association (1983-2001) Don Cameron said, "This book is not only long overdue, it is vitally important."

... Laurence J. Peters of Peter Principle fame perhaps best expresses Horn's philosophy of communication: "Tact is the art of putting your foot down without stepping on anyone's toes." Cooperation, in a sense, is a trickier subject than the three Rs, so it should be taught in school, argues Horn. Here, the veteran consultant and seminar developer applies her trademarked process for cultivating good working relationships to anyone who spends time in a school setting (including students). Brief, easy-to-digest chapters cover communication and language (including "Words To Use" and "Words To Lose"), the creation of a "climate of cooperation," and conflict-resolution skills as they apply in school. . . . this work should find an appreciative audience among teachers and administrators.

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, (1999).

From the Conflict Resolution Information Source
<http://www.crimfo.org/booksummary/10170/>

Difficult conversations are anything that someone does not want to talk about, such as asking for a raise or complaining to a neighbor about his barking dog. People are usually reluctant to open a difficult conversation out of fear of the consequences. Typically, when the conversation does occur the parties think and feel a lot more than they actually say.

Underlying every difficult conversation are actually three deeper conversations. The "What happened?" conversation usually involves disagreement over what happened, what should happen, and who is to blame. The feelings conversation is about the parties' emotions, and their validity. The identity conversation is an internal conversation that each party has with herself, over what the situation tells her about who she is. The authors identify common errors that people make in these sorts of conversations. The key to having effective, productive conversations is to recognize the presence of these deeper conversations, avoid the common errors, and turn difficult conversations into learning conversations.

What Happened

The first mistakes that people make as they consider what happened is that they assume they are looking at a factual matter, and they assume that their view of the matter is right. Often parties agree on the bare facts. They differ in their interpretation of what the facts mean, and of what is important. To move toward a leaning conversation, parties must shift from certainty about their own views, to curiosity about the other's views of the situation. Parties should also try to understand why they interpret the situation in the particular way they do. The authors recommend adopting the "And Stance," acknowledging both your own views *and* their (differing) views.

The second set of mistakes concerns understanding the parties' intentions. People tend to assume that they know what the other's intentions are. However, our beliefs about another's intentions are often wrong. We base our assumptions on our own feelings; if I feel hurt then you must have meant to be hurtful. We also tend to think the worst of others, and the best of ourselves. Another mistake is to assume that once we explain that our intentions were benign, the other party has no reason to feel hurt. To avoid the first mistake, parties must avoid making the leap from impact to intent. Ask the other what their intent was. Remain open-minded about your own interpretation of their intent. Avoid the other mistake by acknowledging the other's feelings, and by considering the possibility of your own complex motives.

A third mistake in the "What happened?" conversation occurs when parties focus on assigning blame. "Focusing on blame is a bad idea because it inhibits our ability to learn what's really causing the problem and to do anything meaningful to correct it." (p. 59). The solution is to focus on mapping each party's contribution to the situation. Contribution emphasizes understanding causes, joint responsibility, and avoiding future problems. Acknowledging one's own contributions can help shift the other party away from blaming. Contributing to a situation does not imply being blameworthy for that situation; leaving your car unlocked contributes to its being stolen, but certainly does not make you to blame for the theft. Parties may contribute to a problematic situation by having avoided dealing with it in the past or by being unapproachable. Differences in personality or role assumptions can contribute to creating a situation. Using role reversal and adopting a disinterested perspective can help in creating a thorough map of the contribution system.

Feelings

Difficult conversations are difficult because there are feelings involved. Expressing emotions is risky, however. Thus, many people frame difficult conversations in ways that ignore their emotional content. Unexpressed feelings can leak back into conversation, and can preoccupy people so that they are unable to be good listeners. The solution is for the parties to identify and understand their feelings, negotiate them, and share them clearly.

It can be hard to know what one is feeling. Simple emotional labels can mask complex bundles of feeling. Often people translate their feelings into judgments, characterizations and attributions about the other person. The need to blame often indicates unexpressed emotions. Understanding and reevaluating the thoughts, perceptions and beliefs that gave rise to the emotions enables us to negotiate with our own feelings, shifting or moderating them. The first step in expressing feelings is to acknowledge that they are an important part of the situation, whether they are "rational" or not. Parties should convey the full range and complexity of their feelings, and they should avoid rushing to evaluate the feelings expressed. To be effective sharing requires that the parties acknowledge each other's feelings.

Identity

Some conversations are difficult because they threaten or challenge a person's sense of who they are: their identity. Difficult conversations may call into question a person's competency, their goodness, or whether they are worthy of being loved. All-or-nothing thinking can make people more vulnerable to identity crises--as either lovable or worthless, good or evil. Managing the internal identity conversation requires learning which issues are most important to one's identity, and learning how to adapt one's identity in healthy ways. Adaptive thinking comes from adopting an "And Stance" toward the complex elements of one's identity, and rejecting all-or-nothing thinking. The authors note

that "the more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation, and the higher the chances it will go well."(p. 119) Other ways to maintain a balanced sense of self in difficult conversations include not trying to control the other's reactions, instead preparing for their reaction, imagining yourself in the future, or just taking a break from the conversation.

Letting Go

Sometimes difficult issues should be raised; others times it is best to let them go. There is no simple rule for deciding which is which, but the authors do suggests some things to consider in making such decisions. Working through the three conversations on your own will give a clearer understanding of the situation, and so a better basis for deciding. Some apparent conflicts between people turn out to be mainly conflict within one person--an identity crisis, for instance. The contribution map may show that there are better ways to address a situation than by discussion. It is not worth embarking on a difficult conversation if you do not have a goal that makes sense. One common, but infeasible, goal is to change the other person. Three goals that do support conversation are to learn the other's story, to express your own views and emotions, and to problem-solve.

If you decide not to raise the issue, the authors offer four attitudes that may help you let go. First, you are not responsible for fixing the situation; the most you can do is your best. Second, remind yourself that the other party has limitations too. Third, separate the issue from your identity. Fourth, recognize that you can let go and still care about the issue.

Learning Conversations

If starting a conversation is the choice, then the authors offer ways to make productive openings. Most conversations fail because people begin by describing the problem from their own perspective, which implies a judgment about the other person and so provokes a defensive response. Instead, start conversations from the perspective of a "third story" that describes (or at least acknowledges) the difference between the parties views in neutral terms. The opening should then invite the other party to join in a conversation seeking mutual understanding or joint problem solving.

Listening is a crucially important part of handling difficult conversations well. It helps us to understand the other person, and the feeling of having been heard makes the other more able to listen themselves. The key to being a good listener is to be truly curious and concerned about the other person. Techniques that can help you show that care and concern include asking open questions, asking for more concrete information, asking questions that explore the three conversations, and giving the other the option of not answering. Avoid questions that are actually statements. Do not cross-examine the other. Another technique is paraphrasing the other person to clarify and check your own

understanding. Acknowledge the power and importance of the other person's feelings, both expressed and unexpressed.

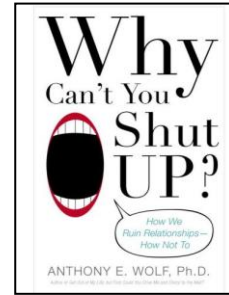
Expressing oneself is the next step. First, each person must recognize that her views and feelings are no less (and no more) legitimate and important than anyone else's, and she is entitled to express herself. Once you have found the courage to speak, start by saying explicitly what is most important to you. Do not use hints or leading questions. Use the "And Stance" to convey complex feelings and views. Do not present your views as if they were the one-and-only truth. Avoid exaggerations such as "You always," or "You never." Share the information, reasoning and experience behind your views. Help the other person to understand you by having them paraphrase, or asking how they see it differently.

Unfortunately, not everyone has read this book! Often the other party in a difficult discussion remains focused on blaming and arguing about who is right. The authors describe three powerful unilateral techniques for keeping the conversation on a constructive track. The first technique is reframing. "Reframing means taking the essence of what the other person says and 'translating it' into concepts that are more helpful--specifically concepts from the Three Conversations framework."(p. 202) For example, blame statements should be reframed in terms of contributions. Listening is a powerful tool. The authors say that "the single most important rule about managing the interaction is this: you can't move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood."(p. 206). When in doubt about how to proceed, listen. The third technique is naming the dynamic. When the other party persistently puts the conversation off track, for instance by interrupting or denying emotions, explicitly name that behavior and raise it as an issue for discussion. This makes the other person aware of the behavior, and it brings out more unexpressed thought and feelings.

Often simply raising and clarifying an issue is enough to resolve the difficulty. Sometimes however, parties will still disagree about how to go on. For those situations, problem solving is the final step. First, remember that it takes two to agree. The other party needs to persuade you just as much as you need to persuade her. Gather information and seek missing information. Ask what would persuade the other person. Tell them what would persuade you. Ask them what they would do in your position. Try to invent new options for dealing with the problem, and consider what principles could guide a fair solution. When the parties cannot find a mutually acceptable solution, each must decide whether to accept a lesser solution, or to accept the consequences of failing to agree and walking away. When a person does walk away, they should explain why, describing their interests, feelings and choices.

Why Can't You Shut Up? How We Ruin Relationships – How Not To

Anthony Wolf



This book is about conflicts with our closest relationships. Within each of us is a “baby self” that tends to come out at home, with people we are closest to, and with those we feel the most comfortable with – our immediate family members – spouses, partners, parents, children, siblings – and close friends, roommates, co-workers, and even bosses. Sadly, at times, we treat family and friends much worse than total strangers. The “baby self” is lazy, extremely bossy, mindlessly piggy, and disrespectful of others.

The very simple, but very effective strategy set out in this book is that when you are in a verbal conflict with close friend or family member, and there is much to be lost, and very little to be gained – take the advice which a modification of the title of this book ---

Just Shut Up!

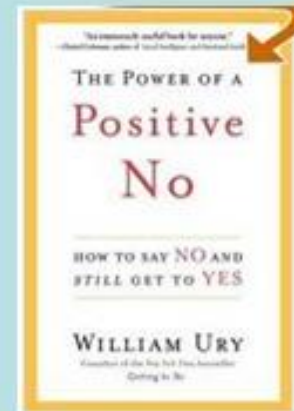
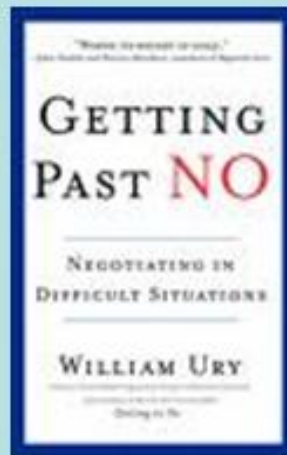
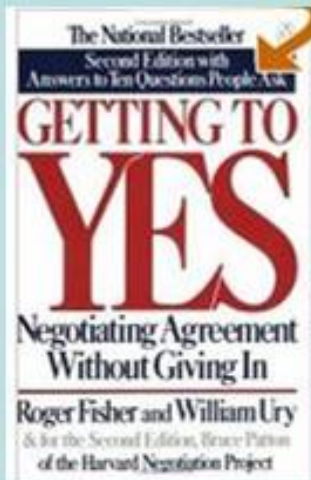
Of course it is much easier to say than to do.

Guidelines

- Think: Stop talking if there is nothing to be gained (and lots to be lost).
- Don't repeat yourself. Make your point once (and sit down / shut up).
- Don't get sidetracked. Ignore it. Don't take their bait.
"You're just like your father" or "You always say that!"
- Give your advice once and move on. Don't require them to recognize it as the most brilliant suggestion ever.

Other interesting books by the same author include:

- Mom, Jason's Breathing on Me: The Solution to Sibling Bickering, and
- Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me & Cheryl to the Mall:
A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager



Looking for additional reading or listening?

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