

6 Skills for Building Understanding in Difficult Conversations

This document is intended as a companion to the 90 minute workshop, "Having difficult conversations."

Introduction: Structured communication

Structured communication is the art of breaking down communication, including everyday conversation, into a relatively small number of categories and practices. An important skill in structured communication is communicating with intent, which involves recognizing the way that your communication can affect other people and involves thinking about what your motivations might be. Three common intentions include persuading, explaining, and understanding. Structured communication means thinking about when to engage in different types of communication, when to listen versus talk, and how you can actively build understanding between all parties.

One way to handle difficult conversations is to think about communication as decomposable into separate tools such as questions, summaries, structured reflections, and positional statements. By structuring communication in terms of a few elementary components, you can both increase your own understanding of your peers while also ensuring clarity by making it easy for your peers to understand you. The core component of structured communication is the identification of feelings, values, topics, and positions.¹ These elements can be used in a structured reflection to help a person feel understood, while also checking to ensure that you understand correctly when "listening to understand." These elements can also be identified explicitly when "speaking to be heard."

Feelings are emotions. They end the sentence, "I feel ____." Note that "I feel like you are an idiot" is NOT a statement about feelings! Feelings are things like angry, happy, excited, confused, stuck, scared, uncomfortable, and so forth. *Values*, also called "interests," answer the question "what's important?" Values are things like privacy, cleanliness, accessibility, transparency, safety, creativity, and novelty. *Topics* are things about which a plan can be made like vehicles, rent, trash, money, or items. Topics can be just about anything, and identifying topics is one of the trickiest parts of structured communication. *Positional statements* are everything else: what you want, what you think, and what you believe.

Background: Top 5 Cognitive Biases Shaping Communication.

Agreement Bias. People have a tendency to want to find agreement. Be OK with the idea that you and they may never agree. Don't try to seek agreement, but instead just try to gain understanding. If you can get to that point, you're well on your way to healthy and enjoyable dialogue.

Anchoring. We tend to anchor on things said early in conversation, which can prevent progress. Especially when you're anchoring on your own words or previous views. Be willing to change in conversation: it's a sign of strength, not an admission of defeat.

Naive Realism. In one study², liberals described a video of anti-abortion protesters as violent but conservatives saw them as peaceful. When the same video was described as pro-gay-rights protesters, conservatives described them as violent and liberals described them as peaceful. We all think we see the world objectively and that everyone else is biased.

¹ I learned the practice of identifying feelings, values, and topics from Community Mediation Maryland which they term strategic listening. They also taught me strategic reflections, which I call structured reflections here.

² Kahan, D. M., Hoffman, D. A., Braman, D., & Evans, D. (2012). They saw a protest: Cognitive illiberalism and the speech-conduct distinction. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 64, 851.

Egocentric bias. In a survey³ asking who would go to heaven, people on average rated their own selves (87%) as more likely to go to heaven than Mother Theresa (79%). This survey reveals a bias: we all think we're being treated unfairly and yet all thinking we're acting fairly. In conversation, fairness matters because lots of things are distributive: speaking time, concessions, focal topic. So next time you feel unfairly treated—but that yourself are fair—you might want to think twice.

Fundamental Attribution Error. Drawing conclusions about a person from their behavior is pretty reasonable, but we often fail to sufficiently account for circumstance. We really don't know why a person says or does what they do—I don't know about you, but I make mistakes all the time. Go easy on people, and take them at their word when they share their experiences and motivations.

Skill 1. Communicate with Intent.

The words that we use and the way we say them effect people. We make a lot of choices—intentionally or otherwise—in the way we communicate. Communicating with intent means thinking about how we talk and how it may (or may not) support our goals and interests. Structured communication emphasizes 3 different intentions: wanting to understand, wanting to be understood, and persuading.

When we want to understand, we may ask questions about someone’s perspective to learn about things such as their feelings, needs, interests, positions, and beliefs. We may use reflective listening to check in with them to see if we understand correctly and give them an opportunity to correct us. Understanding people is helpful for many reasons, including the simple fact that people are much more pleasant to be around when they feel heard and understood.

When we want to be understood, we aim to explain rather than persuade. We tell someone what we want and why we want it, but we do not try to change their position or preferences. We want to be understood often for practical reasons, but also because it just feels good to feel heard.

Persuading is trying to change someone’s beliefs or positions. This document is not about persuading. But it is helpful to acknowledge that we often act to persuade, both intentionally and unintentionally. In the midst of an intense conversation, it can be helpful to ask—why am I talking this way and what do I want out of this moment?

Skill 2. Perspective Taking.

Perspective taking can’t be boiled down to any single trick or concept—it’s just generally doing whatever it takes to understand the other person’s perspective. But here is a simple exercise⁴ to get yourself started. Just answer the following questions:

	Them	You
Them	What do they think about themselves?	What do they think about you?
You	What do you think about them?	What do you think about yourself?

³ As described in Kellogg School of Management Negotiation Fundamentals course; see also: King, L. A., Eells, J. E., & Burton, C. M. (2004). The Good Life, Broadly and Narrowly Considered.

⁴ Exercise courtesy of this Forbes article by Tanya Tarr: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanyatarr/2017/08/03/how-this-4-minute-exercise-can-create-a-winning-perspective-in-negotiation/>

There are many other more detailed questions you can ask yourself, such as: (-) why are they saying what they are saying? (-) how has my communication style been impacting their mood? (-) what do they think I want? (-) how do they feel about my position? (-) why do they think I believe what I believe? (-) what are they requesting from me?

These questions often seem easy to answer, but our immediate reactions often betray cognitive biases like the fundamental attribution error and naive realism. It is worth giving these questions some real attention rather than operating on autopilot.

Skill 3. Listen to Understand.

Reflective listening is the act of saying back what you've heard using summarizing, paraphrasing, reframing, and neutralizing⁵. Consider the following vent from a neighbor dispute: "I shouldn't have to move my grill when they put their stuff all over the place, in the stairwell, and I told them they can't grill in the stairwell because the smoke vents up into the apartments at the top. They think they can just do anything they want. They just act like nobody else matters, and they have these parties and maybe there are 2 or 3 families involved. But it's a shared space! And, the issue with the leaking roof is just one part of the bigger problem. They were painting the stairwell, and they just stop halfway up the second floor. They just don't go to the 3rd floor. It's like we're invisible up there."

Any reflection involves a distancing phrase, the reflection itself, and a check-in phrase⁶. A distancing phrase ("So it sounds like..") signals that you are trying to understand, that you might be wrong, and you're sharing what you think you heard. A check-in phrase ("is that right?") is similar, and gives the speaker a chance to correct you.

A *summary* simply summarizes everything you heard, in detail, with the language given by the speaker. *Paraphrasing* reduces this content to the core essentials. *Reframing* refocuses language on what the speaker does want, rather than what they don't want. Finally, *neutralizing* removes positional statements from the reflection.

Putting these pieces together yields the core mediation skill: a *structured reflection*. This is a seriously core skill: a mediator in a 2 hour session may do little more than offer structured reflections⁷ and ask questions. A structured reflection involves simply saying back what you heard using feelings, values, and topics (as described above in "structured communication"). It's a simple and powerful technique, but very difficult to employ in practice because it is not a natural way to speak.

An example of a structured reflection for the vent above: "It sounds like you feel ignored (feeling), and that you're looking for fairness and inclusivity (values) in the way shared space (topic) is used."

Skill 4. Speak to Be Heard.

Speaking to be heard is simply the reverse of strategic listening. Whatever vent you would normally give: decompose it, and give it in a structured format. For the vent given above, the speaker might simply say:

⁵ These four terms are from the Northwestern University School of Professional Studies mediation course book.

⁶ "Distancing phrase" and "check-in phrase" are from Community Mediation Maryland training materials

⁷ This statement is true at least for mediators with Community Mediation Maryland, where the practice is called a "strategic reflection." Practice varies widely; for example, Chicago Center for Conflict Resolution mediators make substantial use of summarizing without neutralizing. The Maryland practice is preferable for more personal matters with extended time for discussion; Chicago practice often involves distributive matters with limited time.

“I feel ignored and excluded when parties happen. It’s important to me that shared space be utilized fairly, and that maintenance is conducted evenly.”

Skill 5. Separate the people from the problem.⁸

It is important to consider personal relationships in conversation, and to avoid negative situations and toxic people where possible and appropriate. (Don’t feed the trolls.) However, once you are in a conversation it can be valuable to focus on the substance of the conversation rather than personal issues. This means, for example, attempting to avoid engaging with occasional personal attacks if you receive them, and avoiding making personal attacks. Sometimes these attacks sneak out unintentionally, especially in political contexts where a person might declare something like: “anybody who supports that candidate is a <insulting term>.” But this can be handled when you are the offender—simply acknowledge, apologize, and move on. And if you are the victim, maybe just let it slide the first few times.

Generally speaking, the goal of structured communication is to try to turn your interlocutor into a collaborator, not an opponent. The goal with which you and your collaborator(s) are engaged is the following: identify facts on which you agree, facts on which you disagree, values on which you agree, and values on which you disagree.

One aim with explicitly (at least in your own head) identifying these elements is to minimize possible areas for confusion. It happens frequently that people appear to disagree when in fact they are simply misunderstanding each other. This can occur in simple ways like using the same terms differently. This confusion can also happen when people “talk past each other,” for example if they consistently use different words or phrases in the same context. Ask yourself in such cases, are you and the other person actually talking about the same thing? One test for this is to pay close attention to the statements you’re making and the statements they’re making. If your statements don’t directly contradict their statements, then you might be talking past each other.

One general tactic is transparency. If you’ve lost focus of the conversation, just acknowledge that—there’s a good chance the other person has too. If you’re feeling something strong about the way the conversation is progressing, share that—you want to be understood. If the conversation gets stuck, you might try a “conversational reset”—acknowledge that the conversation isn’t working, check-in with the other person about how it’s working for them, identify facts/values, and take it from there.

Skill 6. Ask open-ended questions.

The most important thing when asking question is to ensure they are open-ended. A closed-ended question asks for something as limited as a yes-or-no answer (“do you have a car?”). A medium-ended question asks for a specific type of information (“what kind of car do you have?”). An open-ended question invites a person to talk about what’s important to them (“how would you describe your car?”).

A closed-ended follow-up to the vent above might be, “did the stairwell ever get painted?” A more open-ended follow-up might be, “how does maintenance usually happen in the building?” Good practice is to pair a reflection with a question, such as: “It sounds like you feel cheated, and that fairness in maintenance is important to you. How are decisions about maintenance usually made in the building?” (Be careful when skipping the check-in phrase in the structured reflection.)

⁸ The recommendation to “separate the people from the problem” comes from Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin.