

Conflict Resolution through Courageous Conversations

Talk given by Founder/C.E.O. Richard Norman Rickey

Recorded on September 9, 2023

We can solve most conflicts in our lives if we have courageous conversations with people. Unfortunately, we live in a day and age where most people have no clue on how to resolve conflicts with the people they disagree strongly with. Why is this? Well, many adults never witnessed their parents working through their differences in a healthy, productive manner. On top of that, at far too many of our high schools' kids are graduating with no skills in critical thinking, free argumentation, or problem solving. Our colleges and universities now have safe places for its students because they don't think they are resilient enough to be confronted with another point of view. When we look to our political leaders we see that they stay locked in their hard headed silo's, unwilling to engage the other side of the political isle in debate and compromise. Social media encourages us to criticize others without engaging them in person. So of course we seem more divided as a Nation, because we are. We have lost our ability to resolve conflict, so we ignore conflict, run from conflict, kick it down the road, and allow it to metastasize.

But the tools for conflict resolution are readily available to us. We just need to muster up some courage to engage the people we have fundamental disagreements with and employ the skills that allow us to resolve our differences.

Free speech and open dialogue, along with some debate and negotiation skills, are the tools we have in the tool box to repair relationships, bring about understanding, appreciation and compromise, and to live in relative harmony with others around us, while still maintaining our individualism.

Great organizations encourage their people to express themselves and to act courageously to confront conflict in order to resolve it. And in keeping with our Circle of Courage Philosophy of Education, where we promote courage in our students through independent thinking, the discipline of mastery, and the act of generosity, here at Orenda Education we encourage our employees to have what we call "Courageous Conversations" to resolve conflicts.

So what is a Courageous Conversation? Courageous conversations are different than informal talks to resolve conflicts because the stakes are higher. Let's say you are really upset about something at work. It could be that you disagree very strongly with a rule, policy or procedure, or with someone at work, to the level of frustration where you feel your temperature rise, heart beating a little faster, or fantasizing about what you might do to even up the score and get back at the person who has done you wrong. Maybe you feel some new job task thrust upon you (or taken away) is unfair, or could negatively impact your ability to be successful in your job. When emotions run hot it's time for a courageous conversation.

For the school teacher or staff member it is when you are angry at a school leader or fellow staff member. When you feel hurt or disrespected. When you start to say negative things about someone to other school staff members. When you don't respect a school leader's authority or when you are about to rally other staff to your point of view about a leader. When you fear a leader or staff member. It's time for a courageous conversation.

For the school leader it is when you see or hear of a teacher or staff member doing something, not doing something, or saying something that will harm student learning, and the school culture. When you feel disrespected, or not understood, and you begin to feel resentment toward the teacher or staff. When you think someone's attitude, behavior and language is a poison to the school culture. When you know a staff member is rallying other staff against you, or in opposition to a policy or procedure that you've implemented. It's time for a courageous conversation.

So how do you have a courageous conversation?

First, create the conditions for a Courageous Conversation.

Step 1. Decide on where to meet. The courageous conversation should take place in a safe place to talk without interruptions. A neutral site is best, especially if it's your first courageous conversation with this individual. This could be off-campus over coffee. This needs to be a one on one conversation, you and them ---- intimate and private, so do not "gang up", or "pile on" by bringing in some other people.

Step 2. Personal self-reflect. Before you meet, consider the following: What is your attitude and belief about the difficult situation? Check your motives. I call this a heart check. Ask yourself what is it you really want to accomplish with the conversation. Avoid wanting to win, shame, embarrass or "gotcha" motives. Instead, align your attitude with the idea that you will seek a mutual benefit, something both parties can obtain. Don't even have a courageous conversation unless your intent is honorable and unselfish. In other words, get your heart right first.

Step 3. Put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself, what do you imagine they want?

Next, come up with a common purpose or mutual benefit that both you and the other might have. For example, you could say "I want the school and students to thrive and imagine you want the same", or "I want to have fun and not have all this conflict", or "I want want to enjoy working here and with you", or "I want to feel safe working with you, and I know you want that as well", or "I want you to understand me, and I want to understand you better", etc. Make sure the topic of the conversation is specific enough so that some progress can be made on the mutual benefit and shared purpose. Narrow it down to a simple statement of disagreement, but also what you want, and a possible resolution. One paragraph at most.

Now let's talk about having the Courageous Conversation. How should it go?

Step 1. Start off with a statement on safety. Once together, start by assuring them that they are safe to express themselves without judgement. Also let them know this discussion will be held strictly confidential. What is said here, stays here. This will help to convince the other that the purpose of the conversation is to improve your relationship and understanding of each other.

Step 2. Now say something positive about the person, the value you believe they bring to the school. Something you have seen that they do well. Someway they have contributed to the school mission. If you can't think of any, maybe you haven't spent time getting to know them on a more personal basis or observing their work (which you must fix).

Step 3. Express and confirm a mutual purpose and benefit. Assure them that you care about their goals, what they want, and that you want to trust their motives. If you need to apologize for something you did in the past, do so. The tone of your voice and your body language should be calm, open and welcoming to what the other has to say.

During the Conversation the Key is to Maintain SAFETY & MUTUAL BENEFIT.

Stay calm and respectful. Remember as you talk that you are there to pursue honesty, peace, and safety, not win-lose. Avoid "gotcha's", win at all costs, and counter punches to hurt or embarrass the other. Don't become defensive yourself. How? Know how to detect safety issues by paying attention to the content of what the other is saying.

Watch for signs you, or the other person, is feeling fear. If you do, you must address it, reaffirm safety, and then state what you don't want – such as fear, silence, or resentment – before continuing. Instead, clarify again what you both want, and then bring those mutual goals back to the conversation table.

If the Conversation Gets Off Track, Bring it Back to Safety and Mutual Purpose

It's not unusual for one of you to fall back into old patterns and become angry, hurt, or push the others buttons during the conversation. Here are some distractions and disruptions tactics to look out for that can derail a productive courageous conversation.

The dodger tactic. A person changes the topic, or brings in a host of other conflict issues to overwhelm the other person. One person has a litany of complaints against the other.

Response: Don't take the bait. Bring the conversation back to a shared singular purpose and mutual benefit you both agreed upon.

The twister tactic: A person misrepresents your point of view or tries to stick you with some label or tag that doesn't represent your true thoughts or intentions.

Response: Correct the record. “No, that is not what I’m saying, or what I want. Here is what I mean”. Get it back to safety and mutual benefit.

The wrangler tactic: Nothing is ever good enough for this person. They just want to argue and don’t stay focused on one shared purpose or mutual benefit. All they really want to do is keep you frustrated. They won’t accept that your point of view has any validity.

Response: Don’t brawl with them, or let them change the rules. Get it back to safety and remind them of the common purpose and mutual benefit we started the conversation with.

The liar tactic: This person offers not just one lie, but many misrepresentations of you. They try to overwhelm you with the burden of proof.

Response: Plug the lie(s) by picking out just one lie and replace it with facts and the truth. You can’t respond to every lie. Refocus the conversation back to safety and mutual purpose.

In summary, recognize the purpose behind these derailing tactics and the old strategy of win-lose, but also recognize it is getting off track and **re-commit to seek mutual purpose and safety**. Revisit the mutual benefit, or invent a new purpose and brainstorm new strategies if needed.

Well, there you have it. If you follow these principles, you should make some significant progress toward a resolution you can both live with. It may take more than one courageous conversation, and that is OK. We just want our people to dialogue, engage, and seek understanding and mutual appreciation. Yes, this type of conversation can be difficult, but at Orenda Education we trust our people to muster up the courage to have them.