

Advanced Dialogue Tactics

PURPOSE

To create the impetus for change; To clarify the strength of conviction; To release tension; To encourage openness; To stop wasting energy in disguising unexpressed feelings.

To present view effectively—eliminate the “Aw, what’s the use” feeling. Effective presentation of interests and acceptance by the other side creates a willingness to modify one’s position.

Maintain Optimal Tension and Emotional Expression. Too little tension reduces interest to use information and creates a lack of urgency. To increase tension:

- Increase exposure—face-to-face, no one else present.
- Focus attention on the basic (away from the symptomatic) issue.
- Ask about the consequences of a failure to agree.
- Ask about current “here & now” feelings and perceptions.
- Paraphrase feelings, listen to hostility.
- Verbally and via head nodding and other gestures, reinforce the open expression of genuine feelings.

Maintain Optimal Tension and Emotional Expression. Too much tension shuts down options—we revert to dominant well learned habits and narrow our attention and information channels. To decrease tension where there is a history of emotional displays, a low degree of impulse control, a re-stimulation of transferred out-of-context feelings, a manipulated expression designed to punish, or when the receiver can’t respond:

- Stop and create time for a private session for more support and understanding.
- Take a break together.
- Use humor at neither person’s expense.
- Provide feedback and suggestion of how to express in a less volatile way.
- Generate strict guidelines with prior agreement to contingency plans. E.g., No personal attacks; “First, I’d like each of you to have an opportunity to say how you experience the problem without any interruption. I’d like you to hold your questions until the end of the presentation. Here’s pens and paper for you to jot notes and questions so they won’t be lost.”
- Ask that each person talk only to you and avoid any eye contact with each other.
- Separate people—no face-to-face meetings, discussing their issues through a stepwise process, including writing.
- During a heated exchange that’s escalating, draw the attention to you and then back to the issue at hand. E.g., Stand up slowly, pace around the room and ask them to refocus by pointing to the issue on paper.

Balance Power. Power imbalance creates less trust. The less powerful person feels less trust because “those with authority tend to use it” and so there’s no point in being forceful. The more powerful person feels less trust because any cooperative move by the other is seen as compliant—“They had to do it because of my power”. Also, since they have more power, they feel they don’t have to justify their view.

- Suggest guidelines that balance power. Ensure equal air time.
- Help a less powerful person clarify their points. Sometimes, speak for them.
- Include others in the meeting to provide support for the less powerful person.
- Provide more reassurance to the less powerful person. Help them build skills.
- Meet at a site that favors the less powerful person.
- Ask the more powerful person to place them selves in a less powerful position.

Adapted from: Moore, C.W. The Mediation Process. Jossey-Bass, 1987. Walton, R.E. Managing Conflict. Addison-Wesley, 1987.