
Powerful Questions and Difficult Conversations

Santa Cruz County
Results Count Community of Practice
March 2025

Agenda

9:00-9:40 am	Welcome, Check In and Baselines <i>Result: Participants are joined and oriented to their contexts and challenges.</i>
9:40-10:45 am	Asking Powerful Questions <i>Result: Participants build capacity for long lever, strategic questions.</i>
10:45-11:00 am	Break
11:00 am-12:15 pm	Practice and Debrief <i>Result: Participants deepen skill with real-time practice, support and feedback.</i>
12:15-1:00 pm	Lunch
1:00-2:20 pm	Difficult Conversations <i>Result: Participants have a map and are prepared for a difficult conversation.</i>
2:20-2:35 pm	Break
2:35-3:45	Practice and Debrief <i>Result: Participants deepen skill with real-time practice, support and feedback.</i>
3:45-4:00	Check Out <i>Result: Participants close the day.</i>

Current Realities

What's going well in your organization or department?	
What are 1-2 of the biggest challenges that you are facing and can do something about?	
In terms of the challenges, what difficult conversations might be underneath?	
What questions do you have?	
What 1 <u>non-work</u> challenge you are facing and can do something about?	
What questions do you have?	

Powerful Questions

- **Open-ended**, not answered with *yes* or *no*
- **Are inquisitive**, asking **What?** or **“How?”** (*not Why?*)
- **Focusing**, help orient to what you are listening for
- **You-oriented**
- **Appreciative**, trusting that the person has the answer

Past/Present Questions

These focus on
what's happening now or in the recent past.



- **Focus**: Gather information already known
- **Observation**: Invite expression, catalogue what's been noticed or experienced
- **Analysis**: Invite reflection, hypotheses, analysis of current state
- **Feeling**: Invite expression of responses or feelings to the current situation

Strategic Questions

Strategic Questions have a forward, future focus.

- Inspire ownership and accountability
- Create alignment
- Unlock what's stuck
- Lead to innovation, new solutions and fresh thinking
- Elevate thinking and drive greater performance.

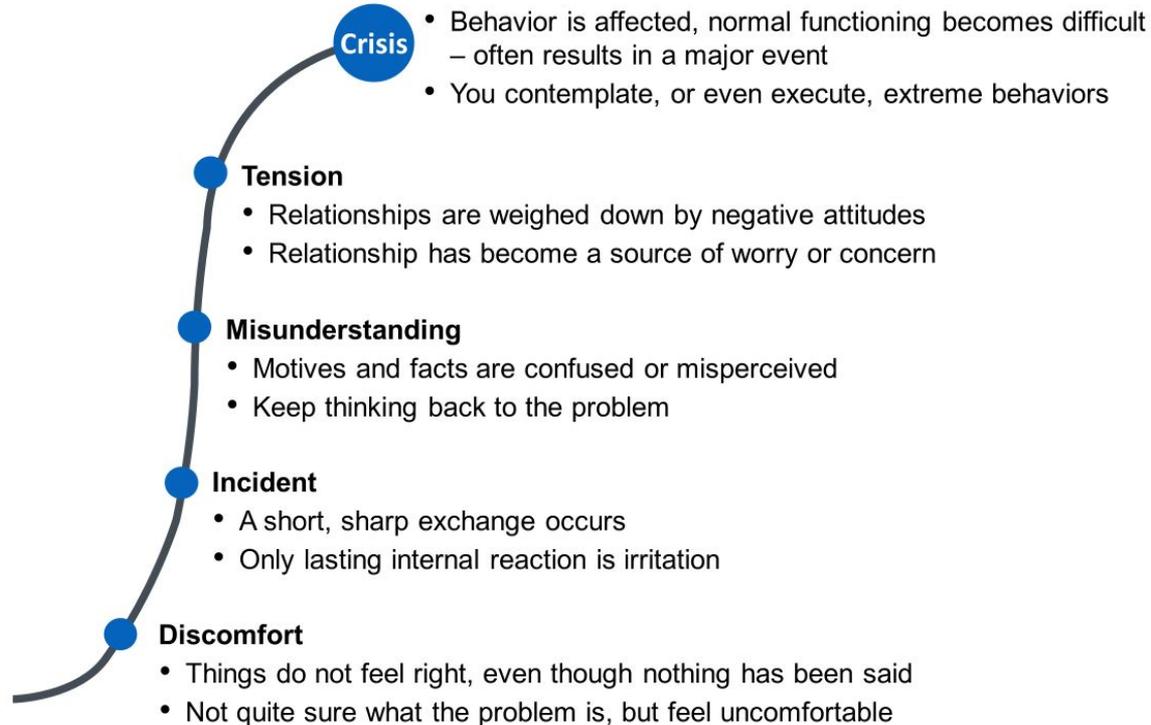


From *Strategic Questioning Manual*, Fran Peavey

“Long Lever,” Strategic Questions

- **VISIONING**: Invite imagining of the future. *What do you want to accomplish that might exceed your imagination or expectations?*
- **CHANGE**: Invite open-ended thinking about getting from here to there. *How might you do that?*
- **ALTERNATIVES**: Generate options. *What would it take to...?*
- **CONSEQUENCES**. If we choose the direction, *how might it play out?*
- **OBSTACLES**. Anticipate possibilities and cope ahead. *What might get in the way? How could we deal with that?*
- **SUPPORT**: Remind person they aren't in it alone. *What support do you need? How can I help?*
- **ACTION**: Build momentum. *What will you do next?*

Conflict Curve



Conflicts can begin anywhere

Conflicts do not always escalate to crisis

4 Pillars of Trust

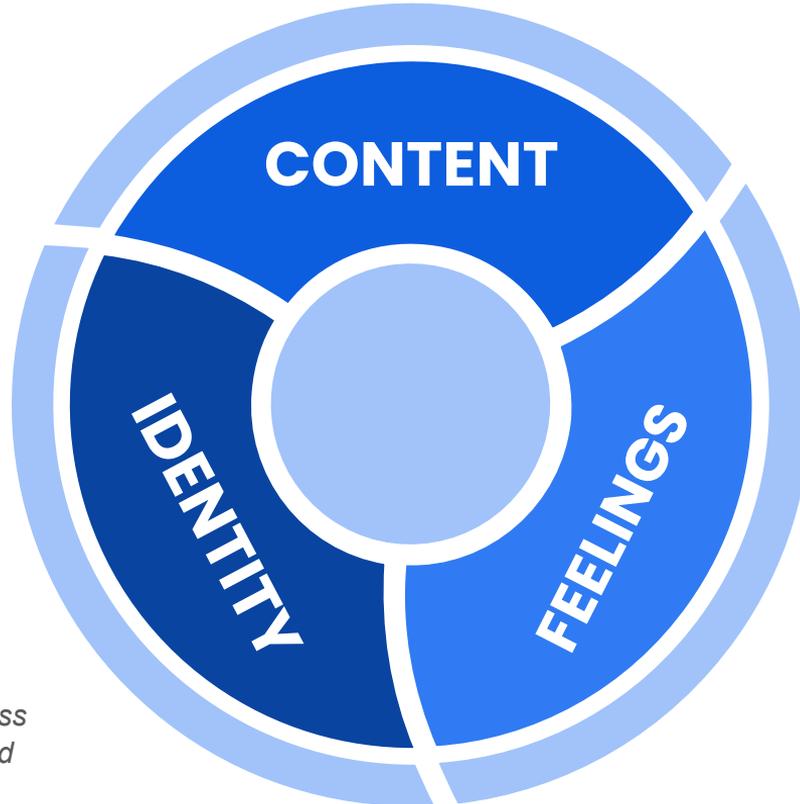
	Might be up for you	Might be up for the other person
CARE: You have the other person's interests in mind as well as your own when you make decisions and take actions.		
SINCERITY: Assessment you are honest, can be believed and taken seriously because your actions align with words and you show up with consistency.		
RELIABILITY: You keep your commitments, renegotiate as needed as early as possible.		
COMPETENCE: Having the ability – skill, knowledge, resources - to do a task or job. It's not about perfection but being willing to learn.		

Difficult Conversations

How identities impact interpretation and meaning making of the content.

What impact might our identities be having here?

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, Stone, Patton and Heen



Understanding the core challenge, conflict, tension or disagreement

What am I curious about?

How is each person feeling, what might be activated

What feelings does this conversation bring up?

Difficult Conv → Learning Conv

A difficult conversation can become a learning conversation, one that effectively resolves the problems present in difficult conversations. Here are 5 steps to get there:

Step 1: Prepare by going through the *Three Conversations* map for both sides, the next page.

Step 2: Check your purposes and decide whether to even raise the conversation. Good purposes include learning, sharing, problem solving. Blaming and judging aren't great purposes.

Step 3: If you decide to raise the issue, start from the *Third Story*. Describe the problem as the difference between your two stories and invite the other person as a partner in sorting things together.

Step 4: Explore their *Three Stories*. Then yours. Listen to understand and share without judgment. Reframe as needed.

Step 5: Problem solve together. Find new options that meet both sides' needs and ways to keep communication open.

Mapping a Difficult Conversation

What had happened was ...			What is happening for me ...	
Content	Contribution	Intention	Feelings	Identity
<i>What's my story about what happened?</i>	<i>What was my contribution?</i>	<i>What was my intention?</i>	<i>What feelings am I experiencing?</i>	<i>How does what happen threat or trigger my identity?</i>
<i>What might their story be about what happened?</i>	<i>What was their contribution?</i>	<i>What intention might they have been holding?</i>	<i>What might they be feeling?</i>	<i>Potential identity issues for them?</i>

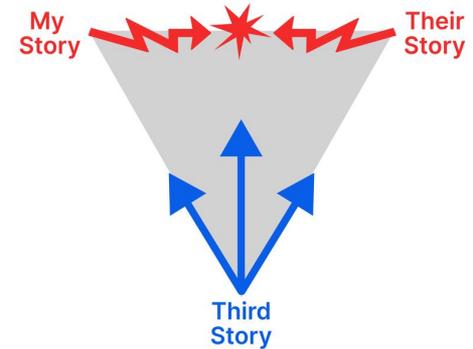
Third Story

To get to the “Third Story,” you need to embrace the “both/and.”

There are as many stories as there are people involved.

In a Third Story there is not judgment about who is right or wrong.

The Third Story captures differences, acknowledging each story as a part of the bigger story.



Third Story

Look back at the map on page 12 and answer the questions below:

What might you need to let go of in order to be able to hold a “Third Story”?	
What internal messages might make this challenging?	
How could you frame the Third Story?	
How can you approach a difficult conversation in a way that affirms what has happened in the past and opens a pathway to a Third Story?	