

Changing Discourse Patterns

Skills for Conducting Hard Conversations

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A Standard Discourse Pattern in the Context of Disagreement

A: States a position or request.

B: States an opposing position or explains why the request is impossible.

A: Explains why B's position is wrong.

B: Tries harder to explain why B's position is correct
OR explains why A's position is wrong.

A: Tries harder to explain why A's position is correct
OR explains why B's position is wrong.

How this sounds in a dialogue

A: I want X. (Often in more polished language, like “I advise that we do X.” or “As we look at our options, X seems most beneficial.”)

B: I want Y (and/or) X is a bad idea.

A: But don't you see, Y is a bad idea for these reasons.

B: No, you don't get it, Y is a great idea. (And/or) No, you don't get it, X is a really bad idea for all of these reasons.

A: No, no, no, you don't get it, X is a great idea and Y is a really stupid idea. (or) I can see why you would want Y, and I really understand that, X is still really the way to go.

Standard discourse often leads
to or is an enactment of a
power struggle.

One problem with power struggles is that they typically end with winners and losers.

Also, power struggles often become violent.

On the personal level, power struggles are deeply painful and disconnecting.

At the core, when we look at discourse patterns, we are also looking at how we use power.

How one might want to deal with a potential power struggle will differ, depending on whether one is in an “up” or a “down” position.

Whether one is “up” or “down,” are there other ways?

Are there ways out of the standard discourse pattern of power struggle?

Are there ways that are less likely to yield winners and losers?

A possibility for an alternative
way:

EMPOWERMENT
and
EMPATHY

Empowerment

Honestly, courageously speaking and acting on what I value, what I see as deeply important. (Requires self-awareness.)

Empathy

Open-hearted, compassionate ability to hear, understand, and potentially act on what another person values, needs, and sees as important.

‣ **What empowerment and empathy, held together, mean:**

‣ If you want to do something that contradicts values of mine, I will use my power — mobilize the resources at my disposal — to protect and advocate for the things I hold dear. (Sometimes this can just mean having a conversation I was afraid of having.)

‣ If you want something different from me, I will listen to you and strive to see the humanity and the potential common ground in what you are saying. I will work for solutions that work for everyone.

What does this look like in
dialogue?

The Overview:

1. One person gets heard.
2. The other person gets heard.
3. Having calmed down our flight/fight/freeze responses, having attempted to see the others' humanity, with both persons' deepest values and concerns on the table, we try to solve this in a way that works for everybody.

A Sample Dialogue

❧ A: I want X.

❧ B: Thanks for letting me know. I'd love to understand your thinking on this. Will you tell me more?

❧ A: These are the many ways that X matters to me and seems really important: _____.

❧ B: I think I've understood why X matters to you, but let me see if I've really got it. My sense is that X speaks to your core values of _____, _____, and _____. Am I getting it?

❧ A: Yes, thank you. (Or) No, not quite.

❧ B: Is there more that you would like me to understand about where you're coming from? (Or) Ah, please explain again.

What happened in this
conversation so far?

What happens next?

The second person gets to try to be heard

- B: Thank you for letting me know what matters to you about this issue. Are you open to hearing what I am feeling and thinking about it, with hopes that we might find some common ground?
- A: Yes.
- B: What really matters to me is _____ and _____. I'm really struggling with _____, _____.
- [NON-STANDARD DISCOURSE ALERT].
- B: Would you be willing to reflect back what you have heard about what matters to me?
- A: Okay. I think you said, "Blah."
- B: Ah. [Deep breath.] I was trying to say something a little different. Is it okay if I try again?

» A: I guess so.

» B: Thanks. What really matters to me is _____ and _____.
I'm really struggling with _____, _____. Would you be
willing to reflect back what you have heard about what matters to me?

» A: Here is what I heard: _____.
Did I get it?

» B: Yes, thank you. And there is more. Do you have space to hear
that?

» A: I think so.

» B: This additional thing: _____. Could
you reflect that back, as well?

» A: I heard this: _____

» B: thank you, I think you got it.

Step 3: Frame the Dilemma

- B: What we've figured out is that _____, _____, and this is really important to you, and _____, _____, are really important to me. Does that sound right?
- A: Yes.
- B: Shall we take a look at what we might come up with that works for both of us?

Another Possibility for Step 3: A Shift in Perspective

- ❧ A or B: Having heard you on this, I feel differently. I've come to see how much _____ matters to you, and now I realize that this matters to me, too. I'm also less attached to _____, which I had thought was very important. So I'm feeling differently from where we started. Here's what I'm thinking now.

Whether or not the problem is solved, with
any luck:

- The relationship is not in worse shape
- Maybe there is a little more trust of mutual goodwill and caring
- There are some kind of possible next steps for continuing to work on it
- There's a template for going for partnership, rather than going for power-struggle, when future differences or disconnections arise.

Journal Writing

- Please reflect in writing on the ideas of changing discourse patterns and “power struggles” and how they might be relevant in your own life.
- Do you have questions about the idea of changing the discourse patterns? Concerns?
- Are there specific kinds of discourse changes you feel inspired to try out?