



Reclaim the Magic!

Tools for Leadership and Learning

Russell Consulting, Inc.

Surviving Difficult Conversations

*Navigating the Difficult
Conversation When the Stakes
are High and Emotions Run **Hot!***

Helping leaders build and sustain great organizations!



Jeffrey L. Russell



Jeff Russell, co-director of *Russell Consulting, Inc. (RCI)* with his wife Linda, specializes in helping leaders build productive, supportive, and motivating work environments. *RCI* helps companies develop their leadership and strengthen team performance to achieve their great

performance goals and outcomes. By guiding the exploration of key values held in common by organizational members and developing strategies and actions to express these values-in-action, *RCI* helps organizations achieve their strategic vision.

Through processes that include "visioning" retreats, Future Search conferences, process redesigns, improving decision making processes, implementing quality improvement strategies, and providing a variety of skill-building seminars, *RCI* enhances long-term organizational effectiveness and performance.

Consulting Expertise

Jeff consults with public and private organizations in the areas of:

- balanced scorecards/dashboards
- customer and employee focus groups
- developing leadership
- employee job engagement surveys
- employee retention programs
- Future Search conferences
- leading and implementing change
- organizational design
- self-managed teams
- systems thinking applications for business
- team assessment and intervention
- total quality management
- training needs assessment
- visioning and strategic planning

Training Expertise

Jeff conducts an array of leadership and team development seminars on such topics as:

- difficult conversations
- decision making and problem solving
- employee-centered performance reviews

- leadership and strategic thinking/planning
- leading change
- managing conflict and win/win negotiations
- performance coaching skills
- performance management
- team building fundamentals
- team leadership and facilitation skills
- total quality tools and techniques
- train the trainer

Professional Background

Jeff serves as an adjunct faculty member at UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, and UW-Green Bay. He is also on the teaching faculty of the UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee and UW-Green Bay Small Business Development Centers.

Jeff has a bachelor's in Humanism and Cultural Change and a Masters of Science degree in Industrial Relations from UW-Madison.

Before forming RCI, Jeff served as human resource coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA). At DOA, Jeff developed and coordinated their employee assistance, leadership and employee development, and equal employment opportunity/affirmative action programs.

Conference Presenter and Author

Jeff is a sought-after speaker at state, national and international conferences. Recent presentations include:

- ◆ ASTD 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009 International Conferences
- ◆ Jamaica Employer's Federation Conference, Ocho Rios, Jamaica, 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2009
- ◆ 2005 Minnesota Quality Conference
- ◆ 2006 and 2007 Biomedical Focus Conference
- ◆ Wisconsin State Trainers Conference, 2004 and 2005
- ◆ Wisconsin SHRM Annual Conference, 2004 through 2007
- ◆ American Society for Public Administration Annual Conference, 2005
- ◆ *Leading Change*, Shanghai, China, 2005

Jeff and his wife Linda have co-authored a number of management books including *Leading Change Training, Strategic Planning Training, Change Basics, Strategic Planning 101, and Ultimate Performance Management* (ASTD Press, 2009).

Helping You Create and Sustain a *GREAT* Organization

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A Difficult Conversation Is . . .

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A difficult conversation is any situation in which at least two parties are interacting and where (a) there are differing _____, perceptions, and needs/wants, (b) the feelings and _____ in both parties run strong, and (c) the final consequences or _____ that result from the conversation are *very* important to all parties.

Why the Self-Defeating Behaviors?

1. **Our Fight or _____ Response:** In stressful and threatening situations, our brain's Amygdala hijacks our rational and higher-order "thinking" brain. It shifts blood flow toward our major muscle groups (legs and arms – for fighting or running [or both]) and away from our cerebral cortex.
2. **We're Not _____:** The difficult conversation often emerges spontaneously – which means we haven't thought through how to effectively navigate through this difficult terrain.
3. **We Don't Know What We _____:** Along with being caught by surprise, we respond to a difficult conversation with a variety of unproductive and unhealthy behaviors because we're driven by our emotions rather than what, upon reflection, is most important to us.
4. **We Don't have the _____:** No one has ever taught us how to engage in a difficult conversation well.
5. **We Fear Losing _____:** In a difficult conversation, we're often fearful of losing control, being unable to set our own agenda or do our own thing, or of not winning. And, when we lose control of the things that matter to us, our self-confidence and self-assurance erodes.
6. **We are Embarrassed or Feel _____:** A conversation becomes difficult for us when the other party has uncovered information about us or our actions that we find uncomfortable and embarrassing. And, when we are embarrassed we tend to push back hard to slap down the perceived threat or exposure or go underground with our feelings and resentments . . . which, in turn, influences our interactions with the other person.

[Significantly added to and adapted from *Crucial Conversations*, by Kerry Patterson, et al.]



Calming the *Amygdala* and Restoring Safety

The Amygdala Hijack!

An Amygdala Hijack is characterized by . . .

Strategies for calming our own Amygdala include . . .

Strategies for calming others' Amygdala include . . .

Why We and Others Might Not Feel Safe in a Difficult Conversation

- Feeling _____** – We may feel unsafe if we think that another person's intentions and goals are aimed at intimidating, frustrating, or preventing us from achieving what we want in a given situation. When others take actions or say things that we perceive as threatening, we tend to move into a defensive or aggressive posture to fight back against the threat.
- Feeling a Loss of _____** – We may feel unsafe if we think that another person is taking control of our situation, circumstances, fate, or future. Since a sense of control over our own life gives us a sense of stability, focus, continuity, and psychological comfort, when we perceive that another person is taking control away from us we tend to feel uneasy, anxious, and fearful.
- Feeling Embarrassed, Exposed, or _____** – We may feel unsafe if we are embarrassed by some perceived personal weakness, vulnerability, mistake, or failing that has been or may be revealed or exposed by another person. When others point this out to us we might feel exposed, vulnerable, and imperfect—as if our “failing” is due to a deep character flaw and, if we had only tried harder, been a better person, etc. we wouldn't be in this situation.
- Feeling _____** – We may feel unsafe if we think that another person is dismissive and disrespectful of our ideas, opinions, performance, contributions, effort, and so forth. When others dismiss or disrespect us we tend to take these perceptions personally rather than using this situation to better understand the motives of the other person, to examine why the person might say this, or to weigh the relative importance of the other person's perspective (does it really matter what they think?).



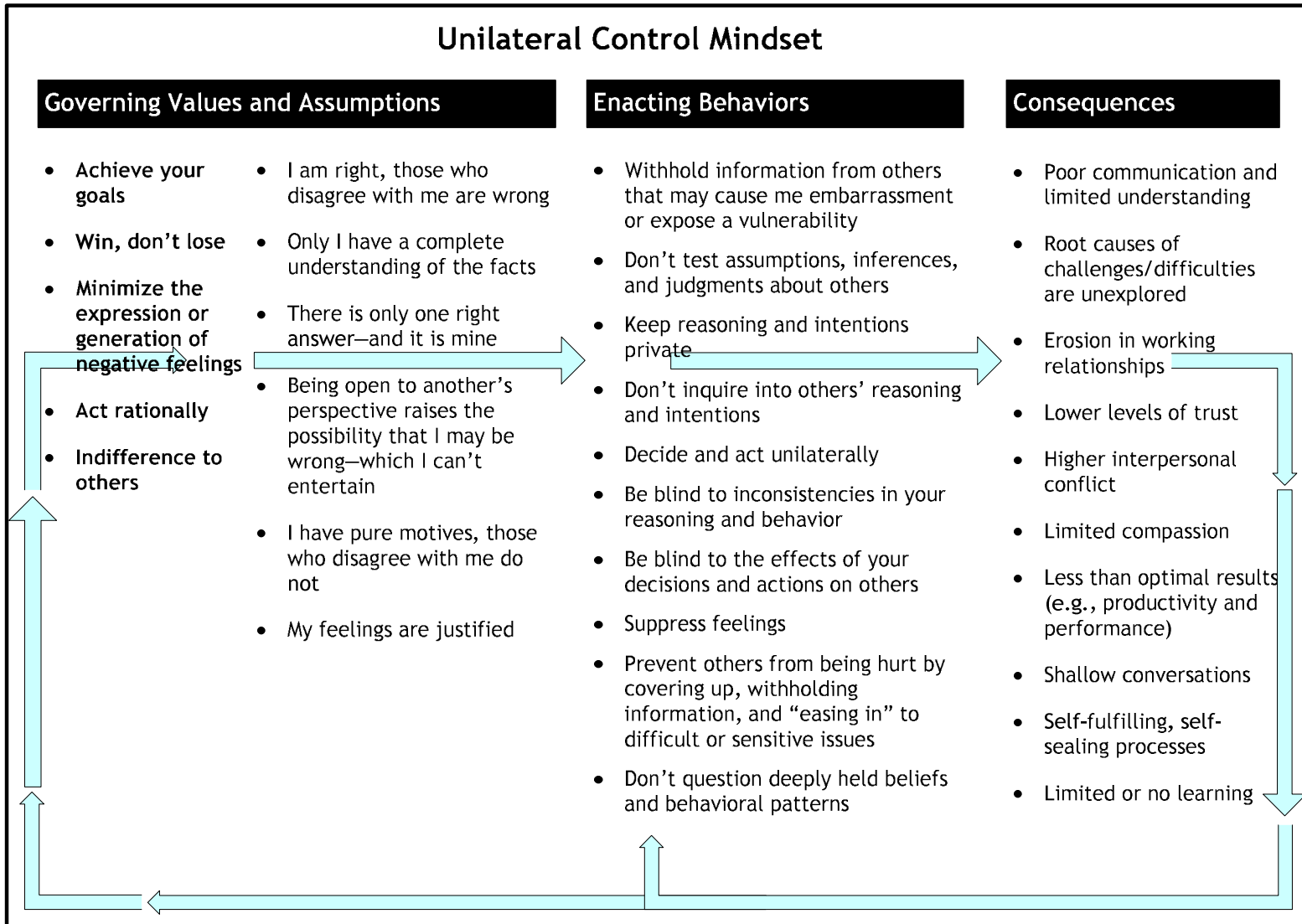
Restoring Safety in a Difficult Conversation

Restoring Safety for Yourself and Others

1. **Recognize the _____.** Know when you or the other person may be feeling unsafe.
2. **Stop the Amygdala _____!** Don't let your emotions and your flight/flight response take control over your thoughts and actions. Actively *calm* your mind and body.
3. **Step out of the _____ of the conversation.** Don't get swept up in the emotional back-and-forth "he said, she said" conversation. Instead, focus on understanding *why* you may feel unsafe or why the other person may feel unsafe. Ask yourself:
 - **What do I really want/need** and what **don't I want/need** in this situation? Think of the wants/don't wants for yourself, for the other person, and for the relationship.
 - **What do I need to do right now?** What should I do now to achieve my wants/needs, communicate my don't wants/needs, and create safety for the other person?
 - **What can I learn from the other person right now?** What am I hearing or seeing that might be helpful for understanding the discord between us?
4. _____ **to the conversation.**
 - a. **Offer a genuine apology** – Identify what you may be doing that has contributed to the person feeling unsafe and then apologize. To be effective, this apology *must* be sincere and genuine. Faking sincerity never works!
 - b. **Tell the other person what you don't want to see happen** – You don't want the other person to mistrust your intentions and purposes, feel embarrassed or vulnerable/exposed, or feel that you don't respect his/her opinions/ideas.
 - c. **Tell the other person what you do want to see happen** – What do you want to happen for yourself, the other person, and the relationship?
5. **Verify for signs that _____ has been restored.** Has your heart returned to a normal beat? Has the other person's vocal tone and intensity subsided? Is your cerebral cortex working again? Continue to monitor safety and provide assurances if and when the other person behaves in ways that suggests he/she feels unsafe.

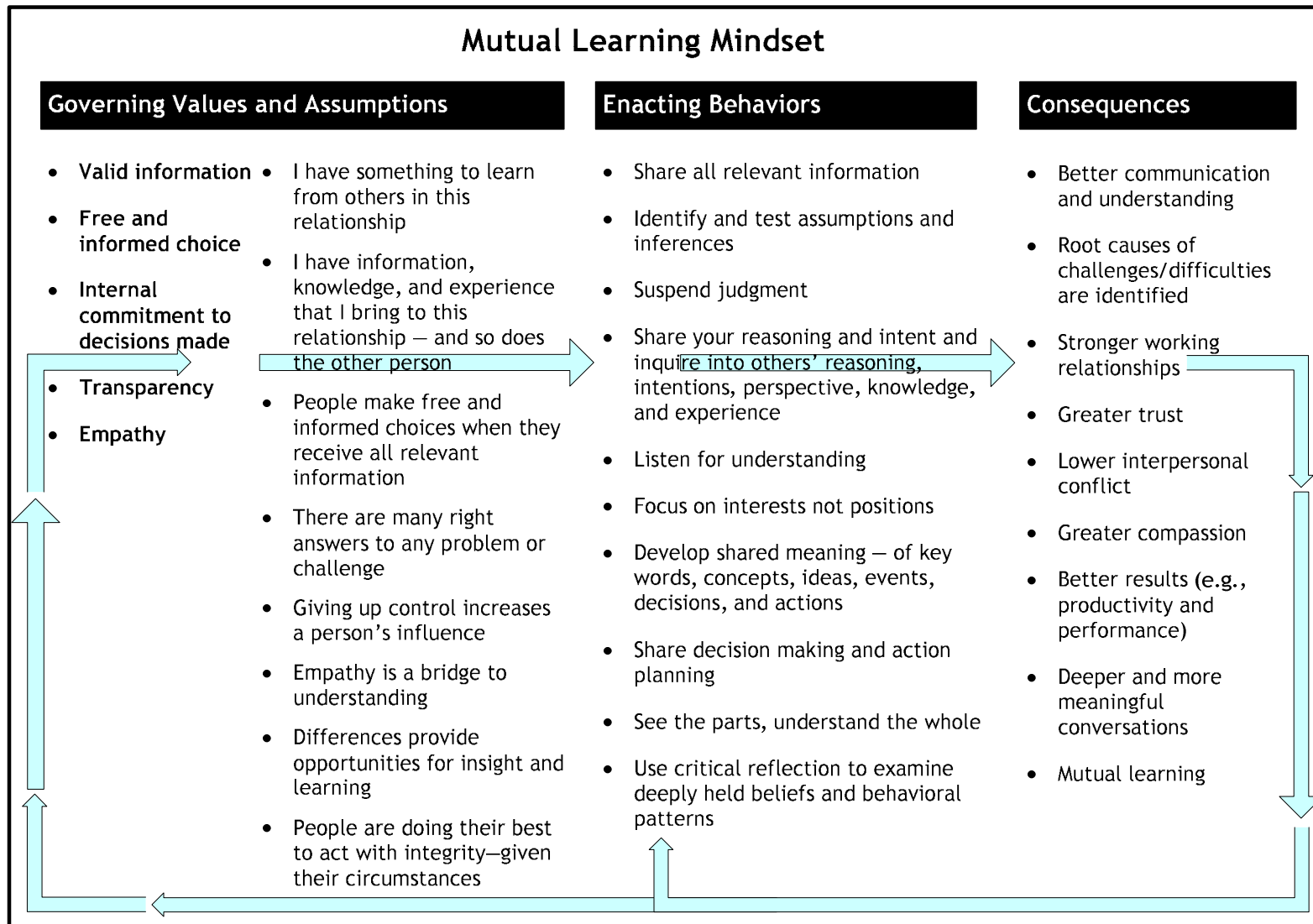
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Unilateral Control Mindset – A Losing Proposition





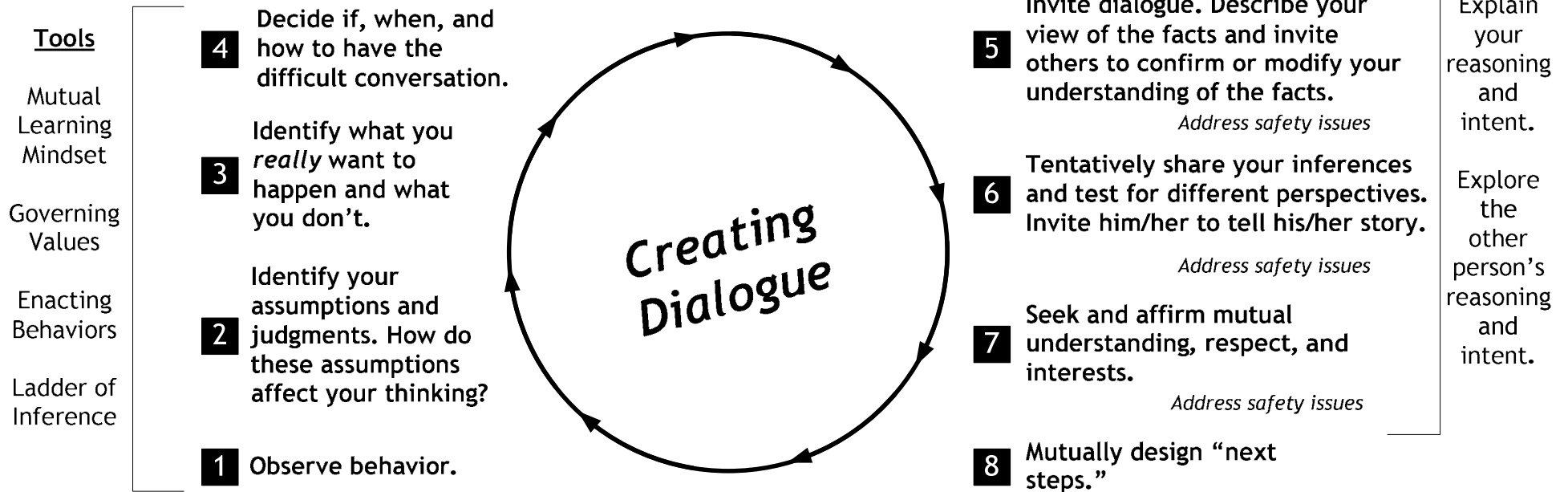
Mutual Learning Mindset – A Winning Approach



Dialogue: A Thoughtful Approach to Difficult Conversations

Diagnosis and Planning Steps

Creating/Sustaining Dialogue Steps





An Integrated Model for Difficult Conversations

The *Creating Dialogue Model* guides you through the critical steps from observing a behavior in another person to working with that person in dialogue to mutually determine the next steps toward resolution.

Diagnosing and Planning Steps

1. **Observe behavior:** Directly observing the behavior of another person or group involves the verbatim words that they use and the actions that they take. At this level, you are operating more as a camcorder – recording only what you hear and see. You are adding no interpretation, assumptions, inferences, or judgments.
2. **Identify Your Assumptions, Inferences, and Judgments:** Based upon the observed behavior, you make some assumptions and infer some meaning. You then tend to form a judgment or conclusion about something unknown (e.g., motive) based upon what is known to you (the observed behavior). In tracing your path from your observations to your judgments, you are attempting to slow down your leap up the *Ladder of Inference* to better understand the story that you tell yourself about another's behavior. You also examine what *actions* you are taking as a result of these assumptions and inferences (e.g., withdrawing into yourself, withholding information, using sarcasm, etc.).
3. **Identify what you *really* want to happen – and what you don't want to happen:** Reflect upon the relationship that you have with this person. What do you *really* want for yourself out of this relationship, what do you want for the other person, and what do you want for the relationship itself? You also explore what you don't want for each party. In this step you are attempting to identify your underlying interests – and whether these interests are important enough to you to pursue entering into dialogue with this other person.

Given what you want and don't want, ask yourself if how you're behaving *now* (i.e., how you are reacting – based upon your assumptions and judgments – to what was said or done: withdrawing, using sarcasm, controlling the situation, etc.) moves you closer to or further from what you really want and don't want to happen. Next, identify how you *should* behave to ensure that you get what you really want and avoid what you don't.

4. **Decide if, when, and how to have the difficult conversation:** In this step your task is to assess whether the inferences you have made (if accurate) warrant the energy required to enter into dialogue with another person – to have the difficult conversation. If the issue is frustrating enough, has a long-term negative consequence for you, is likely to get worse, and so forth, then you may decide to have the difficult conversation. You then need to decide when to have this conversation and how you will begin the dialogue.

Creating and Sustaining Dialogue Steps

5. **Invite dialogue. Describe your view of the facts and invite others to confirm or modify your understanding of the facts:** The first step of entering into and *sustaining* dialogue involves inviting the other person to enter into dialogue with you and then, if he or she agrees, sharing the *facts* as you have observed them (at Step 1). You then ask the other person or persons whether your observations were correct. If the person or person has a different perspective, it gives you the chance to correct or adjust your understanding and to subsequently change your inferences if warranted.

6. **Tentatively share your inferences and test for different perspectives:** In this step you tell the “story” that you created following the observed behavior in a *tentative* way. You want to make sure that the story is communicated as *tentative* to demonstrate that you are open to other interpretations. For example, you might say: *“I’m starting to get the impression that you don’t think much of my work,”* or *“It seems to me that you’re not interested in working with me on this project”* or *“I don’t think this is what you intended, and yet I’m beginning to feel that you don’t think my work is as important as yours.”*

Once you have shared your tentative inferences, invite the other person to share a different interpretation. Saying something as simple as: *“Do you see this differently?”* or *“Am I off base here?”* or *“Am I missing something?”* or *“I’d like to hear your thoughts on this.”*

Invite the person to share his/her assumptions and inferences – You not only invite the other person to offer *his or her* interpretation of events and behaviors that you’ve described, you also invite him or her to share his/her own reactions to *your* words and behaviors. You might say: *“I have discussed how I’ve interpreted and reacted to things that you’ve done. I’d like to hear your thoughts on my actions and their effect upon our relationship.”*

Note: If you detect any signs that indicate that *safety* is in jeopardy (due to perceived disrespect, the person feeling threatened or embarrassed, or perceived bad intentions on your part), step out of the content of the discussion and deal with the safety issue head on. Share your “don’t want” and “do want to happen” desired outcomes. For example: *“I don’t want to suggest that I don’t respect your work. I really value what you bring to the team. All I am trying to do is to indicate that when you’re late with assignments it creates a problem for me.”* or *“My intention here isn’t to challenge your authority. I simply want to ensure that my voice is heard in the decision making process.”*

7. **Seek and affirm mutual understanding, respect, and interests:** With both of you now holding a better understanding of the situation and its facts – and the stories that you each tell yourselves about these facts – you can now shift your attention to finding and affirming common ground. If you’ve surfaced and addressed your respective assumptions, inferences, and judgments and if you continue to address safety issues as they arise, the discovering and affirming of mutual interests should be made easier.
8. **Mutually design “next steps:”** Based upon the common ground that emerges in Step 7, work collaboratively with the other person to mutually decide upon the solutions and strategies that you will implement. Specifically you both need to agree upon what each of you will do and when it will be done. Set a date for follow-up to ensure that you each follow through on commitments made.