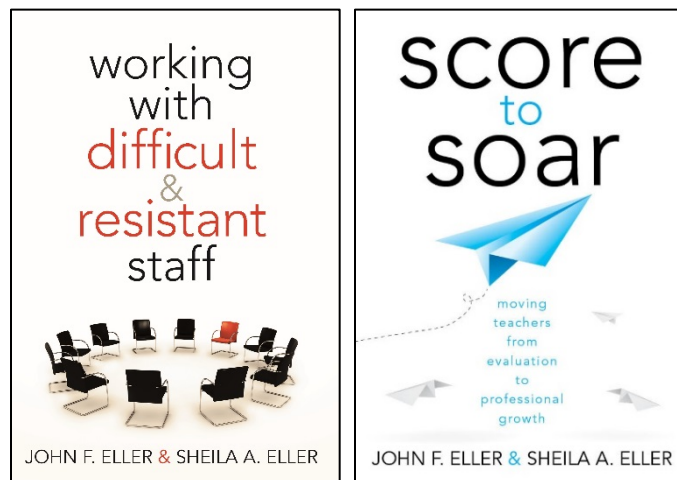


Working Productively with Difficult, Angry, or Upset People March 24, 2022

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Temporary Suspension of Opinion

Temporary suspension of opinion is an internal skill that allows the receiver of communication to withhold sharing an opinion about the message that was heard. Suspension is used to increase the opportunity of increased thinking and problem solving on the part of the sender. Presently, suspension is not used with much frequency in our society. We normally experience the opposite of suspension, cases where people are impatient with our thought process and who move in to give advice too quickly. This results in others finishing our sentences, prematurely giving their opinions and others not listening to our thoughts because they are busy formulating their own responses. When people use suspension, they are using it on a conscious basis for a selected period of time for the purposes of truly listening, understanding another perspective or to increase the problem solving capacities of the sender.

Temporary suspension of opinion is a strategic skill that requires much concentration on the part of the listener. It requires that the listener is interested in listening to the sender of the message and understanding their perspective. Edgar Schein of MIT originally described this idea. His original thoughts were “To suspend means to set aside our perceptions, our feelings, our judgments and our impulses for a time and listen to and monitor our own internal experience and what comes up from within the group.” (Schein, 1993)

Eller, J., & Eller, S., (2006).

3 Levels of Temporary Suspension of Opinion

1. Listening Level

2. Diagnostic Level

3. Emotional Level

Paraphrasing/Reflecting

Paraphrasing statements help you to summarize the conversation or major points discussed in a meeting or conference. Paraphrasing statements allow you to rephrase what the other person told you and help summarize their thoughts and perspectives. Here are some examples of paraphrasing statements:

Paraphrasing Statements
"I feel you are saying that you don't understand."
"It seems to me that you are confused."
"I hear you saying that you have three issues with my comments."
"You appear to me to be angry."
"I hear you saying you want . . ."

Reflecting statements are like paraphrasing statements but more direct and clear. Many facilitators feel they are more effective than paraphrasing statements. Here are several reflecting statement types we use in our work with others. Three types that we focus on are listed below:

Content: Returning what the sender told you in a slightly different form than it was said to you.

- "You shared the three main . . ."
- "Your major concerns are . . ."
- "You said . . ."

Emotion: Reflecting back the emotion you perceive the sender is feeling.

- "This is very upsetting to you . . ."
- "You are feeling stress . . ."
- "You are frustrated by . . ."

Inferential: Providing the other person a stream of content you've received and combined to assist the sender in seeing the whole picture.

- "Your three major points are . . ."
- "The first idea you shared was . . . The second . . ."
- "In general you have . . ."

From Eller J., and Carlson, H., (2009)

Framing

An effective tool to help set a good tone at the start of a meeting and to help shape the discussion in a meeting is framing. In framing, the speaker sets the boundaries for the session and the discussion that will occur in the meeting. The speaker draws a verbal boundary around the discussion or session. The speaker also assumes some control over the difficult person by setting the boundaries for the discussion. The following framing statement examples should provide some clarity about this strategy:

- ◆ “As we work together today, we need to make sure that our discussion focuses on ideas that we will want to consider...”
- ◆ “Our [conversation] keeps getting off track because we are looking at the obstacles to your work. What we need to focus on right now are the potential benefits of what we are doing. At the end of our meeting, we can look at those issues that will hinder our progress.”

Considerations for Framing Statements at the Beginning of a Meeting

- ◆ Start using framing as a strategy that will be incorporated in the beginning of a meeting.
- ◆ Think about the perspectives that the participants will be bringing to the meeting; try to imagine what distractions from the posted agenda content could take them off track.
- ◆ Plan an opening that sets the parameters for the meeting; design statements that will establish these parameters, such as
 - ◆ “Today we are here to talk about . . .”
 - ◆ “The major points we need to address are . . .”
 - ◆ “As we work together we need to . . .”
 - ◆ “Even though there are other new topics that could be addressed in our meeting, we need to focus on . . .”
 - ◆ “At our last meeting, we got off track because of . . . In this meeting, we need to get . . .”
 - ◆ “Since we have limited time and personal energy, we are going to make sure that we stay on . . .”

From Eller (2004)

Difficult Conversation/conference Planning Template

Here is a conferencing template to use when confronting an employee for a problem or negative performance.

Set a professional tone for the meeting

Provide an overview for what is going to happen in the meeting or conference

Define the problem or issue that needs to be addressed. Include any examples you have illustrating the problem or issue.

Tell person why the behavior or issue is not meeting standards or expectations

Define the needed behavior change, new skill that needs to be implemented or other change needed. Include examples of what the change will look like once implemented.

Define the effect of using this skill or behavior change

Ask the person to share original problem, new skill or behavior change that will be implemented, and the impact of the making the change

Set clear expectation and develop a timeline for the integration of the new skill or behavior change into their work or practice

Adapted from Eller & Eller, 2011

Sample Statement Starters for Holding Difficult and Professional Conversations

Setting the tone in the conference

“Thank you for meeting with me today and talking about this professionally important topic...”

“I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today to clear up this issue...”

“I know it’s not always easy to talk about these types of situations but I do appreciate that you are willing to work with me to get to the bottom of this issue...”

“I know we have not always agreed on issues in the past but thank you for meeting with me to today to come to some common ground on this situation...”

“Even though we come from different perspectives on this situation, we can work together to design a plan to address the issue and move forward...”

“Thanks for your willingness to get together and address this situation...”

Outlining the conference process

“As we work together today to address the issue, we will use the following format:

I’ll share my concerns with the...

I’ll give you a chance to respond to what I share with you about...

Once both you and I are clear about the issue and how it came about, I’ll have you share your strategies to address...”

“In our meeting today I need to make you aware of some concerns I’ve heard related to...I don’t need you to respond to them yet but just listen to them. After the meeting, I’ll ask you to go back and think about what I’ve shared with you in relation to...Then get ready to meet with me in a few days to share your perspective and develop a plan to...”

“In our time together today, I just need to address...that I need you to stop doing immediately...”

“In our conference today I’ll share my concerns related to your situation, then you can share your points/perspective on it. Finally, we’ll develop a plan to address...”

“We both know the major issue here so we’ll start off the meeting with an update from you. I’ll share the progress from my perspective and then we’ll decide the next steps in the process...”

“In this meeting, I’ll share the details of the concern I briefly outlined when I was in your classroom, provide you with an opportunity to respond, then together we can develop a plan...”

“In our meeting today, I want to share my concerns...give you a chance to think about them...and get together later to...”

Addressing the problem in the conference

“In my observations, I’ve noticed that you are...This is not in compliance with our standards and needs to be addressed immediately...”

“In watching you interact in staff meetings I’ve noticed that you...This behavior is diminishing your professional position with the staff. You need to...”

“In talking with...it has come to my attention that...This behavior needs to stop immediately and...”

“Tuesday, I saw you... You know this behavior is outside of the boundaries of my expectations and needs to be addressed immediately...”

“Last Wednesday in the assembly I saw you... This kind of behavior is not meeting our standards for teachers. You need to address this behavior and correct it immediately...”

“I’ve noticed in the last few walk-through observations that I conducted that you have been... This behavior is not meeting district standards...”

Checking the person’s understanding of the issue

“Even though this meeting was difficult, we were able to accomplish several key points today. Please take a few minutes to highlight those and your plans for addressing...”

“It’s my expectation that you will be able to implement the major points that we talked about in our conference today. Take a few minutes to outline those points and your plans to improve...”

“I know these conferences are not always easy for you but I can see some progress in... Help me understand what you got out of today’s meeting and what will change as a result...”

“Please tell me specifically what you took away from today’s conference and how you plan to change your behavior...”

“Take a moment to summarize what we talked about today, what my expectations are in relation to this type of behavior, and what you need to do to address...?”

“We’ve talked about several topics today. What are the main points you are taking away from this conversation...?”

“I want to make sure you are successful in changing... What are my expectations and when do I want you to be implementing them...?”

“If you were going to share the major points of our discussion with... what would they be...?”

“This conversation was very productive and related to something very important to your future here at... What’s your understanding of my expectations related to your behavior...?”

“Before we leave today, let’s take a minute to review what was discussed and what we agreed on as a result of our time together today...”

Follow up statements to ensure the person will make the change

“Now that we both are on the same page... I plan to come to your classroom next week to see you...”

“In order to support you through this change, I plan to stop by next week to talk with you about how you have...”

“As you develop... you need to send them to me so I can review them before...”

“Since you understand what I need you to change, I expect to see... in your future lesson plans... I’ll be reviewing them and giving you feedback...”

“Since we now have a plan in place for addressing concerns, I expect you to set up an appointment with me in the future when we...”

“I want to make sure that you have the support you need to... Let’s meet to talk about this issue on a monthly basis...”

“After you have had a chance to... set up a time to meet with me to fill me in on... Let’s say that we’ll meet again in 2 weeks...”