



# Enterprising Rural Families™

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## Difficult Conversations- Tackling the Tough Ones (Part 2)

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This newsletter is an instrument of the *Enterprising Rural Families: Making It Work* program of University of Wyoming Extension. For further information concerning the Enterprising Rural Families program or on-line course contact

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### TIP OF THE MONTH

#### FAMILY SYSTEM

**Motive:** harmony

**Principle:** compassion and caring

**Rewards:** given because of membership or need

**Promotions:** based on longevity, is inflexible, born into position

**Training:** implicit, not standardized

**Separations:** usually messy, no clear guidelines

#### BUSINESS SYSTEM

**Motive:** profit

**Principle:** efficiency and objectivity

**Rewards:** given for performance

**Promotions:** based on skill and seniority, hard work can result in a new position

**Training:** explicit, necessary to get good job, standardized

**Separations:** less painful, clear guidelines, common process

Difficult conversations may call into question a person's competency, goodness or whether they are loveable or not, good or evil, a team player or a good parent. A balanced sense of self says, "I'm a competent person and sometimes competent people make mistakes." If someone is attacking your sense of self, having taken the time to journal your feelings and identify your emotional triggers (explained in Part 1 of this article, January, 2012) will allow you to do what you need to do, in order to correct the situation, rather than have an identity crisis.

Susan Scott, author of "*Fierce Conversations*" advises "As a leader, you get what you tolerate. People do not repeat behavior unless it is rewarded." This applies to behavior on the farm, in the family and within our friendships. Have you an employee that is hanging on to this job until a better one comes along? Has Grandpa's physical limitations created challenges to his safely operating equipment?

We need to pay attention in a conversation to try not to trigger the other person's identity, attack the person, or say things that feel to them as a personal attack. If, in the conversation, they lose their sense of balance assure them that you are not trying to say this as a judgment about them as a person; that you are speaking about a behavior or situation. When we are real with ourselves and allow others to be real, the change occurs before the conversation ends.



In conflict resolution, or collaborative problem solving, we teach the difference between interests and positions. An interest may be that we can safely walk on our sidewalks. A position could be ... you have to shovel your sidewalks by 8:00 a.m. An interest may be that the farm is a successful family enterprise. A position could be that family business should be left to the most responsible child. An interest may be for Grandma to live safely and securely on the ranch. A position could be that the ranch cannot accept the risk of Grandma driving.

Being mindful of what my interest is in this issue can make difficult conversations less accusing. Coming from my interests is less likely to make

the individual I'm having a conversation with feel, less valued, incompetent or unloved. Using interest based discussion can help with the identity and core value issues which would be at play in the difficult discussion

*Positions are statements or demands framed as solutions.*

*Interests are broader than positions and are essentially what is needed for satisfaction.*

*Interests are the reasons behind the position and may articulate needs, hopes and concerns.*

### **Common mistakes made regarding difficult conversations**

*We enter the conversation angry about being in the situation and fall into combat mentality.*

*We over simplify the problem because emotions are involved; we don't really enter into the problem and take on a "no-problem" attitude.*

*We don't bring enough respect into the conversation.*

*We get hooked emotionally-react to thwarting ploys, lash out or shut down. Take the time to know which of your core values are being challenged.*

*We rehearse because we are sure it's going to be difficult. This is not a performance. It is a real conversation and we need to be really participating.*

*We make assumptions about our counterpart's intentions. If you get lost in the fog, a handy phrase to remember is, "I'm realizing as we talk that I don't fully understand how you see this problem."*

*We lose sight of the goal. Have a clear preferred goal going into the conversation.*

Managing the internal (what's going on inside of me about this topic) conversation requires learning which issues are most important to one's identify and learning how to adapt one's identity in healthy ways. Working on our communication skills to increase clarity and understanding is important.

### **"I" Statements**

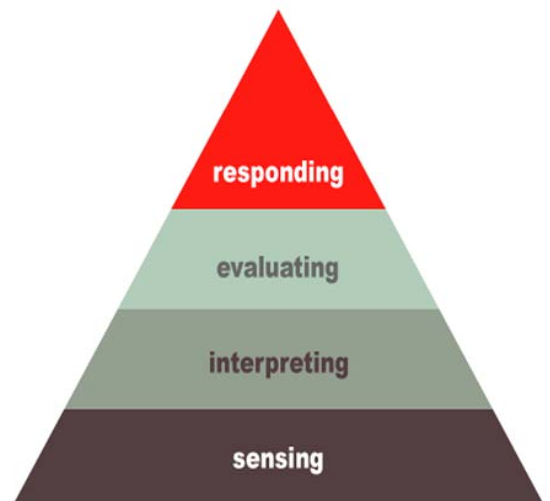
When using "I" messages rather than you statements I take responsibility for my feelings. I statements enable us to avoid blaming or accusing the other person. I statements reduces defensiveness and de-escalates the conflict. This is a communication technique which enables the expression of strong feelings in a way that preserves the relationship.

### **Active listening**

Listen to understand. Taking the time to understand does not mean you are agreeing. When you hold yourself to an all or nothing standard, listening to understand is quite impossible.

Active listening transforms a conversation. It is one of the most powerful skills you can bring to a difficult conversation. It helps you to understand the other person. And it helps them understand you. This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, try to understand the complete message being sent.

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down. Be candid, open, and honest in your response. Sometimes a difficult conversation may not require coming to agreements about the topic, it may simply require being frank. Say you want to have a conversation with your children about how you interpret fair in the fair and equitable distribution of your assets. What is fair and what is equitable are very differently defined within circumstances families find themselves.



*Steps of active listening: listening/sensing the message; interpreting; evaluate; respond/feedback*

By not listening to what others are telling us we are pretending to know what the problem is and without realizing it may be risking our relationships, business or career. Sometimes difficult issues should be raised; other times it is best to let them go. It's not worth embarking on a difficult conversation if you do not have a goal that makes sense. The goal should not be to change the other person. In *Forgive for Good*, an excellent book about the process or science of forgiveness, the author Dr. Fred Luskin, a research psychologist at Stanford University speaks of learning to identify our "unenforceable rules". Rules we make up for other people but it turns out we can't enforce. I cannot make anyone else think or feel what I want because I've had a conversation with them.

In a difficult conversation, we usually start from our story, which is not always the best approach. Think of your story as the first story. The other person will have their story, which is a second story in the issue. Each of us will be viewing the situation through our emotions and world-view lenses. Where you want to begin the difficult conversation is with the neutral or third story.

As a mediator, I begin the conversation by asking each party to tell me their story. I listen to the story and repeat the story. If something that has been said seems unclear to me I may reframe what I heard and ask if I've understood this correctly. Sometimes the reframe helps clarify what is meant. Sometimes the individual will say no that's not what I meant and it helps them to better state what they were trying to express. Another listening tool is paraphrasing. To restate the story... removing the emotions and judgments from the statement. Then when the stories have been shared we move on in the mediation process.



*A third story (mediator) can shift the conversation from arguing to understanding.*

How can a neutral third perspective help you begin this conversation? The third story describes the problem as a difference, not stating a judgment about who is right. The purpose of the third story start is to shift the conversation from arguing toward understanding. It takes you from having to defend or concede your position.

### The following steps will help you prepare for a difficult conversation



- ▶ What is the problem from my story?
- ▶ What would my counterpart say the problem is?
- ▶ Emotions are a source of information. Allow them to help you navigate to the core of the issue.
- ▶ What is the third story? How would a neutral third person state this?
- ▶ What is my preferred outcome? What is at stake if nothing changes?
- ▶ Desire to resolve the problem.



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