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What to do when you think a conversation could go badly

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Tip #4: What to do when you think a conversation could go badly

A colleague recently asked me, what to do when you know in your “core” that the conversation you are about to have during a compliance interview, with a coworker, or with a family member has the strong potential to ignite defensiveness and/or confrontation. Knowing that we can only control our own behavior, the answer is two-fold.

First, the focus needs to be on your own mindset. I recommended that my colleague assume positive intent on behalf of the other individual. That means, you cannot tell yourself a story that your conversation will fail before you have the conversation. Instead, you must assume that you and the individual you are going to speak with will both come from a place of curiosity, and both of you will ask questions and engage in meaningful conversation.

Second, I advised the use of a technique called “contrasting.” Contrasting involves using don’t/do statements that:

1. Address others’ concerns that you don’t respect them or that you have a malicious purpose (the don’t part).
2. Confirm your respect or clarify your real purpose (the do part).^[1]

For example, in a compliance investigation, you would say: I *don’t* want you to think I have asked to meet with you to accuse you of wrongdoing. I *do* want you to know that I am here to have a conversation with you regarding the facts of the situation that you know of at this point.

By using the “don’t” statement first with the person, you can address the concerns you think the other individual may (or does) have with the conversation. They then know your intentions in the conversation up front, and by following with the “do” statement second, you can clarify your intent in the conversation, thereby allowing them to listen and hear specifically what you want to discuss.

Assume positive intent and give this don’t/do technique a try. It has been a game-changer for me in conversations where defensiveness settled in and/or allowed me to level set expectations for a meeting prior to encountering a defensive response from the other party.

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