



Conflict Conversations: Listen to Get the Picture

In conflict, communication is often disrupted by emotion and defensiveness. People struggle to identify and express how they feel and what they need. Sometimes they cannot find words to capture complex emotional experiences. Other times, organizational or cultural norms might prevent them from freely expressing themselves. Metaphors can help. Because they are not literal, they connect us with our listener at an emotional level, planting the seeds of empathy.

Metaphors weave their way through most conversations. (“I’m between a rock and a hard place here.”) The images associated with a metaphor move a conversation to a deeper level and provide clues to both feelings and underlying needs. People who are reluctant to reveal how hurt or overwhelmed they feel may be more comfortable expressing their situation as “a slap in the face” or being “a fish out of water” in a new job. In organizations where expressions of feelings are considered “touch-feely”, an employee would be reluctant to express a sense of “betrayal”, per se. They would not hesitate, however, to tell others how they “had the rug pulled out from under them”.

Such images, if we listen for them, can provide a window by which to uncover the root of a conflict. These metaphors reflect both a feeling and an underlying (and unmet) need. Someone may refer to being “hung out to dry” as a way to communicate their sense of being unsupported or even abandoned. At the root of their anger lies their (unspoken) need for support or accountability. When we identify these root needs, we can invite the other person to expand on what “support” would look like for them. In some cases, this clarification would resolve the conflict; in others, it would form the basis for further negotiation or problem-solving.

As listeners, we can also introduce metaphors to check out how accurately we have understood a speaker. (“So your department knows where it’s supposed to go but doesn’t have a road map.”) Even if we don’t have it quite right, the other person usually builds on the metaphor to clarify their point. (“It’s not that we don’t have a road map; we don’t have any gas for our car.”) A colleague once described how frustrated she felt working under a new boss whose style and vision differed from her own. “Sounds like you’re really not on the same page,” I reflected. She smiled. “We’re not even in the same library.” The imagery spoke “volumes” and left no doubt about how disconnected she felt. By providing everyday imagery, metaphors allow us to — if you’ll excuse another one — begin to weave the threads of our separate stories into the fabric of collaboration.

So next time you find yourself in a conversation (especially a conflicted one), listen beyond the literal meaning of the words for the word pictures the other person is painting for you. These will provide you vital clues to uncover the real story and resolve the conflict.