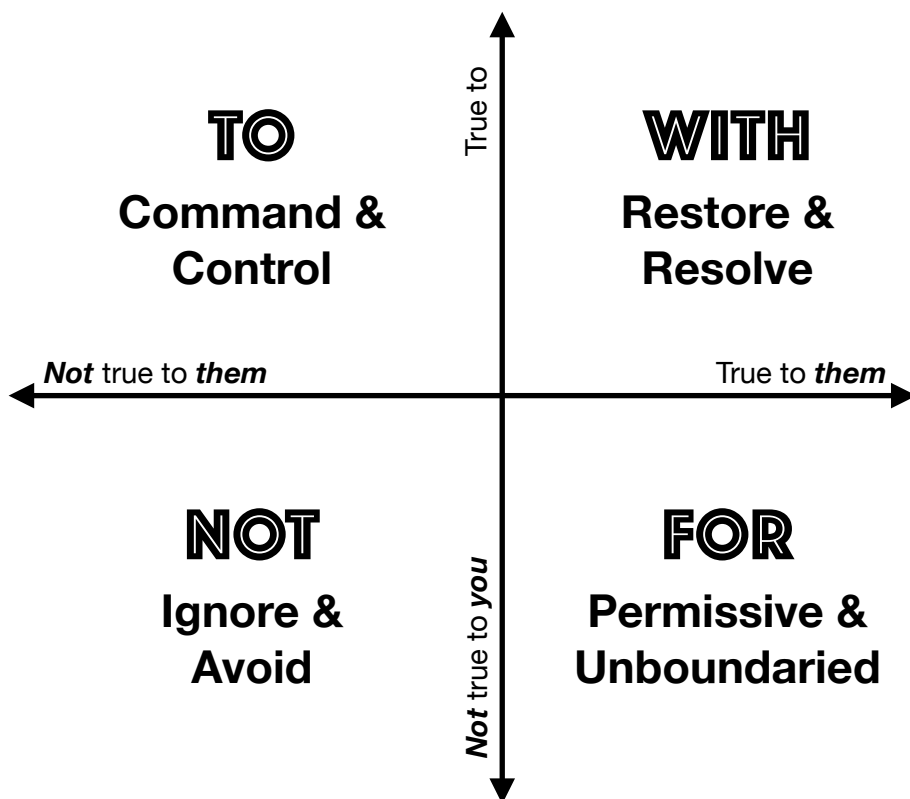


Having Hard Conversations

I am a huge believer in restorative practices — a very well researched way of managing conflict and tension through repairing harm and building relationships, rooted in indigenous people’s traditions of peacemaking and healing. Believe it or not, successfully navigating conflict can actually **build** community and connection, rather than make things harder.

The restorative practices model is built on the premise of WITH, not TO, FOR, or NOT. That means that the process honors what’s most important and true for both parties in conflict — both purposes, values, visions, and humanity.



Below you will find two scripts to support you and in having hard conversations. The first script, the “Restorative Conversation” is one you facilitate between two individuals, an individual and a group, two groups, or even a big messy dysfunctional group situation with a jumble of conflicts. The second script, the “Fierce Conversation” is drawn from Susan Scott’s book by the same title, and helps when you play a starring role — the feedback conversation, the boundaries problem, or the hurt feelings conversation.

The Restorative Conversation

The most important thing about using this script is that it must be facilitated with true empathy and caring for everyone involved. There's a huge difference between an accusatory, shaming, sarcastic "*WHAT* were you *THINKING?*" versus a gentle, curious, compassionate "what were you thinking?"

The goal is to help everyone involved rebuild their relationship with one another and design their own solution to the conflict. Let them do all the heavy lifting. Your role is to be balanced, curious, and to support their reconciliation however they might need.

The same general format may be used in many situations from few to many, from minor to weighty, from informal to very formal — playground disputes to interracial conflict to criminal justice settings.

There are four parts to the Restorative Conversation: W - A - R - M. What happened? Affect. Restore. Make a Plan.

Before you begin, make certain that the participants are physically and emotionally willing to engage in this process. It must feel safe to both parties. Often that means inviting support persons (make sure it's balanced). If supporters are present, supporters should have an opportunity to share how the problem impacted them (W&A), but allow the active participants the chance to take the lead on finding a resolution (R&M). Another way to make the conversation safe is to establish ground rules such as no interrupting, it's okay to call for a break, and staying focused on people's actions and choices, which can be changed, versus attacking someone's character and personality.

W - What happened?

Beginning with the accused (or, if it was mutual accusation, whomever is the least socially powerful) ask each party:

- From your perspective, what happened?
- What were you thinking at the time? OR What made you decide to do that?
- Was it the right thing or the wrong thing to do?
- Who else was there?
- Who was impacted by your actions or inactions? How were they impacted?



- How has this impacted you?

*Note: it's **not** important for the two parties to agree on what happened. Different people will often see the same event with completely different eyes. Focus on what each person was thinking and less on the events themselves.*

A - Affect

Beginning with the harmed (or if it was mutual harm, whomever is the least socially powerful) ask each party:

- What did you feel at the time?
- What do you feel now?
- How did your family and friends react when they heard about what happened?
- What has been the hardest/worst thing for you?

It's really important for the person(s) who did harm to others to truly see and feel the full impact of the harm they caused to others around them.

R - Restore

Beginning with the harmed (or if it was mutual harm, whomever is the least socially powerful) ask each party:

- What is needed to fix things/make things better?

Then ask the other party:

- What do you think of that idea? OR Do you agree? OR Is that fair? (*When they agree on something, write it down. If they continue to disagree, moderate or take a break.*)
- What else is needed fix this/make things better?

Continue going back and forth between parties asking "Anything else?" Until both parties run out of things to say and you have a list of things that will restore the situation.

M - Make a Plan

Beginning with the accused (or, if it was mutual accusation, whomever is the least socially powerful) ask each party:

- How can we make sure this doesn't happen again?
- Is there anything else I can do to help?
- Is there anything else you want to say?

Congratulate them for working things out. If necessary, arrange a follow-up time to check up. If important, make copies of the agreements for everyone to keep.

The Fierce Conversation

Susan Scott offers this script for the really hard conversations where you are an active participant ([Fierce Conversations](#), pages 148-164). This is THAT conversation you've been dreading where you cannot be a neutral facilitator: like delivering feedback or confronting someone's actions towards you or someone you care about.

This script offers a structured opening into the conversation in which you cover the W (What happened?) and A (Affect) then invite your partner to work with you to Restore and Make a plan. There are seven parts to the Fierce Conversation: Issue, Example, Emotions, Stake, Contribution, Wish, Invitation. The example that follows is an anonymized script from a client.

Because it's an opening statement, you want to keep it super short and sweet — no more than 60 seconds for the entire thing, or less than 7 seconds per part. Any longer, and your conversation partner can get readily overwhelmed and become unable to take it in.

1 - Issue

This is where you lay out what you see as the heart of the problem. Name only one issue, the most important one or the theme that threads through all of the stuff going on.

"Bruce, I want to talk to you about the way you pressure me to take action when I'm not yet ready."

2 - Example

Describe one or two specific examples that clearly illustrates the problem. No laundry lists. No rambling stories. No vague allusions. No "you always..." or "you never...". Be short, sweet and specific.

"For instance, when Jacinda brought up the idea of holding a fundraising gala, you immediately jumped on board and wanted to begin planning, while I wanted to stay open to other ideas and come up with an articulated process to choose between different development ideas offered by the group. And there was that meeting with Bruce last week when you pressed me to be specific about the action steps and which contacts I'd follow up with before we had even talked to the others on the leadership team about it."

3 - Emotions

Name the emotions you feel about this issue. Let the person know how you have been impacted. Take the time to look inward and identify the feelings you are having — that emotional self-awareness is healing for yourself plus it helps your partner empathize with you.

“I’m feeling frustrated and pressured within our relationship, and I’m concerned about the wellbeing of the team.”

4 - Stake

Why is this important? What is at stake for you and others — the team, your clients, your organization, and the relationships that are most important to you? It’s okay to use the words “This is what’s at stake,” so long as you can deliver the message with calm assurance and empathy, not as a confrontation.

“There is a lot at stake here. There’s an impact on moving forward as a team, sticking to a cohesive vision, and shaping the future direction of the organization. One of our values is collaboration and blazing ahead without bringing others on board goes against that. And, perhaps more importantly, I think our wonderful working relationship is also at stake. I don’t want us to have a falling out but things can’t go on this way.”

5 - Contribution

State your contribution to the problem. How might you have acted or refrained from acting in a way that exacerbates the specific issue here that’s a problem? By recognizing our own role and responsibility for the problem, it not only eases any defensiveness the other party might feel, but also begins to shift the conversation towards restoration — being WITH the other person.

“I acknowledge that I have contributed to this problem by not sharing my own feelings about being pressured and rushed. I haven’t told you how important it is to me, as President, to stay transparent and collaborative with everyone in our organization. And I contributed by not having this conversation with you about this earlier. For that, I’m sorry.”

6 - Wish

Now you can share your wish to resolve or restore things. Use the word *resolve* or *restore* to indicate that this is about repairing and strengthening your relationship, not ending things.

“This is what I want to resolve: how you and I, as President and Vice President, can move forward, the both of us, together, without either of us feeling pressured or one rushing ahead of the other.”

7 - Invite

Finally, invite your partner to respond. Really help your partner feel like they’re being invited to join a conversation and true dialogue.

“I’ve said a lot. I want to understand what’s happening from your perspective. What are you seeing and feeling?”

Conclusion

Both of these scripts have been widely field tested in work, personal, and school settings all around the world. After you’ve had some practice with them, you can hopefully take off the training wheels and make the scripts your own, infusing your own personality into them so that it feels natural. Honestly, I used the Fierce Conversation script two days ago with my husband, though it was much more free flowing and an open back and forth dialogue from the very start. (It ended well!)

This is a super short summary of how to have hard conversations that entire books, organizations, and full courses have been crafted around. For more information, check out these resources:

- The most comprehensive free resources about restorative practices: [International Institute for Restorative Practices](https://www.iirp.edu/) <https://www.iirp.edu/>
- This book is fantastic: [Fierce Conversations](https://fierceinc.com) by Susan Scott <https://fierceinc.com>
- For school leaders, consider [Discipline that Restores](http://restorativejusticediscipline.com) by Ron and Roxanne Claassen <http://restorativejusticediscipline.com>