



The Look & Sound of Leadership™

Executive Coaching Tips

SINCE 1990

THE CONFLICT CONVERSATION

TOM HENSCHTEL
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What do you say when you're in an argument? And how can you prepare to *have* an argument? This month's coaching conversation dives deeper into the topic of "Conflict" that began last month. In this installment, scripts and concepts for mastering The Conflict Conversation.

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'Conflict House'

Ashley wanted coaching on how to argue.

I had told her about a concept I call "Conflict House," a place where people with conflicts have to go if they want to resolve their conflicts. Whether an argument is large or small, whether it goes well or is a disaster, every conflict happens inside Conflict House.

Ashley and I had discussed the two ways to enter Conflict House. The one used most often is marked "Right-Wrong." People who enter here are anointed with the powerful belief of being right. The second, less-frequented door is marked "Curiosity." Entering here causes everything that happens inside to become easier.

Once inside, there are only three rooms in Conflict House. You can visit them in any order. During any given argument, one room might be more important than the others. The next time, a different room might be more important. But, over time, you will visit each.

Inside the three rooms, different conversations take place. The three conversations are: What



Happened, Feelings and Identity.

People who learn to recognize which room they are in (which conversation they are having) navigate Conflict House more effectively than those who don't. Ashley wanted the code for recognizing the rooms. She and I had done our decoding in an [earlier coaching conversation](#).

Now she wanted to know what to say when she found herself in each room.

I suggested our conversation would be most useful if we used an actual situation from her life.

“Oh, I've got a humdinger!” she said. “It's about our kids and their damned phones.” She laughed. “See? I've already got feelings about it!”

Ashley told me that she and her husband, Jeremy, were arguing about rules for each kid's phone usage. She had read a lot of articles that had spurred her to want to talk about rules in the first place. This was an important issue to her.

Jeremy's argument wasn't with Ashley's reasons, but he felt strongly that he did not want to become an enforcer. He felt her rules would provoke endless battles with little benefit.

The 'What Happened' Conversation

Now, understanding the basics of the argument, I asked, “So when you're arguing about the kids' phones, what does the 'What Happened' story sound like?”

“We're not arguing about what happened any more. Every time something happens, we know what it is.”

“But I don't. Can you give me a 'for instance'?”

“For instance, McKayla, our high school freshman, slept with her phone in her room. That happened. No argument about it. The argument is what he and I *think* about what happened.”

“So you two don't argue about maybe what one or the other of you said about this in the past?”

“Oh.” She smiled sheepishly. “OK. Yeah. We do that.”



“What does *that* sound like?”

She shook her head, amused. “I’ll tell you one that infuriated me. We were arguing about what he said he had told McKayla. What he was telling me didn’t match what he’d said before. I called him on it. And he said, really sarcastically, ‘Well, if that’s what you *think you heard*, then it *must* be *true*.’ Ooh, that pissed me off.”

“How come?”

“It was so condescending. He clearly didn’t mean it. He was just poisoning the conversation so we couldn’t talk about the issue.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

“Because he knew he was wrong!”

I held completely still.

She noticed my silence and stopped to replay what just happened.

Finally, she looked at me and smiled, saying, “Right-wrong. I got into proving I was right. I lost being curious. That’s why you stopped, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Dang!” she said. “I jump to right-wrong a lot. Is there a way I could get better at staying curious?”

Competing truths

I asked, “How are you about holding competing truths?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“A competing truth might sound like, ‘I’m really angry with you right now’ *and* ‘I love you.’ Does it make sense



to you that both can be true?”

“Actually, yes. I do that with my kids all the time.”

“So what might the competing truths be about what Jeremy was telling you?”

She thought, then ventured, “He’s not saying what he said before. That’s my truth. And what would be his?” She ventured, “That he’s not intentionally lying to me.”

“If those were both true, how would that be?”

“It feels lighter!” She gave a surprised laugh.

“You did something important there. You assumed good intent. ‘He’s not intentionally lying to me.’ Assuming good intent will help you stay curious.”

She took stock. “Okay. So during the ‘What Happened’ conversation, I should assume good intentions and listen for competing truths. Does that get us to the ‘Feelings’ conversation?”

The Feeling Conversation

“If you like,” I said.

I asked Ashley what she knew about her feelings in relation to this argument.

“To be honest, Tom, sometimes I worry I’m a little out of control when it comes to my feelings about this. All the research says that these phones are changing everybody’s brains. So I need to protect my kids’ brains! That is not something I take lightly!”

“And what are Jeremy’s feelings?”

“Oh, he comes from a completely different place. He believes their brains are resilient. He believes a supportive environment, with encouraging, positive parents, is more important to their brain development than anything their phones can do.”



“You sound as if you’re fed up with it.”

She gave a weary laugh. “Ugh! I have feelings about his feelings!”

“That’s inevitable, Ashley. How could you not?”

“Well, I’m not sure all my feelings are helping the ‘Feelings’ conversation.”

“No, Ashley, that *is* the feelings conversation!”

“In what way?”

“Naming your feelings can help you understand why you’re in Conflict House in the first place.”

She tried to figure that out herself, then asked for help.

I said, “Pretend I’m you, Ashley. I might say to my husband, ‘I have really strong feelings about this, Jeremy. I feel strongly about protecting our kids’ health. That’s important to me. Which is why I get angry when I feel you not siding with me.’”

“Okay.” She drew out the word skeptically. “That’s me, as if I could name those feelings like that. But okay. How does that help me understand why I’m in Conflict House?”

“It helps you look at your own upset. You can begin to weigh your feelings.”

Less than fluent with her feelings, she gave me an exaggerated blank stare.

I said, “Imagine for a minute we’re picking out furniture together. You feel really strongly about how much you hate that armoire. At some point, if we’re healthy, we’re going to calibrate our feelings. If I don’t feel as strongly about the armoire, *and* if I want to nurture the relationship, my choice is pretty clear.”

“How do I know he’s not just using his feelings as a bargaining chip?”

“Does he do that?”



Talking feelings

“No, he doesn’t. But I’ve got someone on my team who uses her emotions like a nuclear threat. ‘Don’t upset me or I’ll explode!’ It’s going to end in a lawsuit, I can bet.”

“I’m so sorry. But that’s not Jeremy’s style, is it?”

“No, it’s not. But can I go back to something? If I say that thing – ‘I feel strongly about protecting their brains, and I’m angry you won’t side with me.’ – what’s he supposed to say next?”

“If I’m in Conflict House and I hear someone talk about feelings, I can do one of two things. I can use her feelings to jump us into the Identity room. Or I could stay in the Feelings room by acknowledging her feelings and encouraging her to tell me more about them.”

“Really? How would I do that?” she asked.

“I’d say, ‘Tell me more.’”

“That works?”

“It does. It’s like a Jedi mind trick, Ashley. Ask people to tell you more, and they do. It’s great.”

Quietly she said, “I could invite him to tell me about his feelings, too, couldn’t I?”

“You could.”

“I don’t think I ever have.”

“Then it’ll be interesting.”

“And if he does tell me about his feelings, what do I say? Tell me more?”

“You could. What’s most important is acknowledgement. Don’t debate his feelings. Don’t diminish them. Believe that his feelings are what he says they are – even if they seem stupid to you.”



“Assume good intent,” she said.

“Right,” I said.

“What about that second choice you mentioned? Using feelings to jump us into the Identity room?”

The Identity conversation

“Ah! OK. So let me ask you about Jeremy. You told me he doesn’t want to be an enforcer. He doesn’t want to be in a constant battle with the kids. I’m guessing he feels pretty strongly about that. Am I right?”

“Oh, yeah!”

“OK. So what might those feelings tell you about his identity?”

“To him, there’s nothing worse than being a controlling parent. He thinks being a good parent means pointing out to the horizon, then letting the kid figure out how to get there.”

“So his feelings are connected to whether he sees himself as a good parent, right?”

“Right,” she said slowly, seeing the connection. “That’s his identity, being a good dad.”

I watched her take that in. Then I asked, “What about you?”

“What *about* me?”

“You have strong feelings about using the current research to protect your kids’ brains. What might those feelings tell you about *your* identity?”

She thought, then laughed. “This is harder!” Then she said, as if asking a question, “That I’m a bad mom if I don’t protect my kids?”

“Sure! So setting rules to protect your kids makes you a good mom?”



“I guess.”

“So let me play it back to you. Jeremy thinks he’s being a good dad when he lets the kids find their own way. You think you’re being a good mom when you implement rules for their own good. Sound accurate?”

“Sounds horrible!”

“Why horrible?”

“Well, it’s no wonder we can’t agree! If he wins, I feel like a bad mom. If I win, he feels he’s a bad dad.”

“Competing truths might let you both win.”

“Oh, damn! I can’t shake that right-wrong thing, can I?”

“But I agree with your premise, Ashley. Both of your identities are wrapped up in this argument. And that’s a large part of why you’re stuck in Conflict House.”

“So how do we ever get out of here?”

“Well, I don’t know the actual resolution you’ll reach, but I can show you the steps.”

“Great!”

“First, before you ever enter Conflict House, do what we’ve done here. Do your homework. Figure out your ‘What Happened’ story. And consider what the other person’s might be. Sort out your feelings. And think about the other person’s, too. And think about how your identity is tied into the whole thing. Do all of that *before* you have the conversation.”

She said, “It’s a floor plan of Conflict House.”

Having that floor plan eased Ashley’s progress towards [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).



Core Concepts:

- All conflict has recognizable components
- Approach conflict with curiosity, not “right-wrong”
- Assume good intent
- Listen for competing truths
- Name and weigh your feelings – and the other person’s, too
- Feelings just “are” – don’t debate or diminish them
- Explore where your identity connects to your feelings
- Do all of the above before having the conflict conversation

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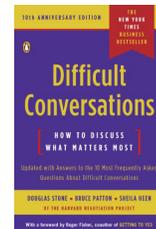
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