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## TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

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A leader, initially described as clueless to his coach, confronts a hard truth about himself. In the process, he gains a four-step tool to guide him through tough conversations.

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### Wielding intelligence as a weapon

Martin's coaching was triggered when a peer named Maribel filed a complaint filed against him. As a result of our [first coaching conversation](#), he'd gone back to Maribel and asked for more feedback. One message Martin heard loudly from her was, "You make me feel stupid."

During our [second conversation](#), telling me about Maribel's message, he said he'd heard that before. He said, "I make other people feel stupid. Is that something you and I could work on?"

I said we could. I asked him, "What do you mean when you say you make other people feel stupid. That's such an interesting thing to know about yourself."

Martin gave an "aw shucks" roll of his head. "I'm smart, Tom. I've always been smart. Smarter than anyone in my family. Smarter than most of my teachers. I don't know how I got this way, but it's real. And sometimes I use it like a weapon. People feel stupid because I make them feel stupid. Not proud of it. But it's true."

"So, if I were Maribel, what would I have heard?" I asked.



“Oh, I was really angry about that. I still think she’s one-hundred percent wrong. She chose not to record particular data. She didn’t forget, she just prioritized something else. She says she would have gotten to it later, but this data is crucial to the lab running according to regulations. This is not an option she can choose. And I told her full out.”

“Raised voice?” I asked.

“Probably, yes.”

“Physically threatening?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m not a big guy anyway. I might have stomped my foot once or twice.”

“And how would you ‘use your intelligence like a weapon’ against me?” I asked.

He took in a breath, then without heat in the words, quoting himself, he said, “‘What’s wrong with you?’ ‘You know better than that.’ ‘A summer intern wouldn’t make that mistake.’ Things like that.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, if you were going to prescribe a way to stop making people feel stupid – but you still want to deliver an important message – what would you do differently?”

### **Start with a full stop**

He thought, then said slowly, “I’d have to get better control of myself. When I’m angry, I don’t hide it well.”

“How would you get better control of yourself?” I asked.



“In this instance with Maribel? I’d probably need overnight to calm down and not be stomping my feet.” He gave a little laugh. “I was literally ‘hopping mad.’ In the morning, I wouldn’t be.”

I gave a big nod. “Okay. Great. What you’re suggesting – a ‘time out’ – is the first of four steps in this whole process we’re going to talk about.”



Skeptically, he asked, “There’s a process for how to not make people feel stupid?”

I laughed. “Doesn’t have to be that specifically. It’s four actions for managing rough conversations. Difficult conversations. Crucial conversations. Whatever you want to call it. It’s a little four-step formula for getting good outcomes when strong feelings are involved.”

“And a time out is step one? I might like this. What’s number two?”

“Before we move on, can I slap a label on this idea? I call this time out, ‘Act, Don’t React.’ This is about being intentional. Don’t let your emotions hijack you into reactivity. Stop yourself. Ask yourself, what am I really upset about? Why does this matter? How might this sound to the other person? What might their side of it be? What do I want to get out of this besides just being pissed off? Think about your intention.”

“I do think about things like that, but not in the moment.”

“Who does when we’re emotional?” I asked.

He smiled slyly. “What if I don’t like being all rational, not reacting? I might miss being angry. But, seriously, I get it. The hard part for me will be remembering to take the time out.”



“Right,” I agreed, “it’s hard to stop the hijack.”

“So what’s number two?” he asked.

### **Concerns & clarity**

I said, “‘Express intention.’ If step one is meaningful, if you really think about others during your time out, your intention should get clear. And not only your intention. If you really imagine how your words might sound to someone else, it’s pretty easy to imagine which things might be hard for them to hear. During ‘Express intention’ you also get to voice your concerns. You get to say, ‘Hey, I’m concerned this might sound like I’m criticizing you. I don’t mean to. I just want to be sure we’re always following regulations.’ Or ‘Hey, look, I know I’m not your boss, and I don’t want this to sound like I’m telling you how to do your job, but I’m concerned about following the



regulations.' I express my intention – I want to follow regulations – and I express my concern – I am not trying to offend you."

"Those aren't things I usually consider. I would definitely need a time out to figure that. Okay," he said, "What's number three?"

"Be Clear," I said. "Imagine you had to turn your message into a bullet point, twelve words or less, what would the bullet say? 'Be Clear' about what you're trying to convey. Just being upset does not create clarity."

Smiling, he said, "That's becoming clear!"

I went on. "You might be clear about a behavior. You'd say, 'I'd like to talk with you about recording data.' And you name it without blame. You don't get to say, 'I want to talk about the mistake you're making.'"

He laughed. "You're no fun!"

I laughed, too. "Bummer, huh? You can also address attitudes if you are clear. Maybe I'm your manager and I'm concerned about your engagement or your volatility. If I can be really clear when I identify the issue, I'm way more likely to get the outcome I want."

Tentatively, considering as he spoke, "With Maribel, I wanted her to follow the rules so we're in compliance."

"Right. That's clear. I'm not sure that's what she heard though," I said.

"Well, no," he said. "Obviously not!"

"By the way, is it appropriate for you to give a peer feedback like that? Does the team normally give each other feedback?"

He gave a snort. "We do not."

I shrugged. "That makes the conversation even tougher, right? But 'Expressing Intention' can be helpful in a moment like that. You say, 'Hey, I know I'm not your boss but...'"



He nodded. “‘Act, Don’t React’ connects to ‘Express Intention’ which connects to ‘Be Clear.’ Pretty tidy.”

“Glad you like it,” I smiled. “There one thing to be careful about with this ‘Be Clear’ bullet-point. Don’t use it as a catch-all. Don’t pull other situations in. Don’t resurrect past incidents. Don’t make accusations. You’re not trying to win an argument. You’re trying to be clear about one specific thing you think could be improved.”

He nodded. “Still one more to go, right?”

### **Consider the relationship**

“Indeed,” I said. “I often think of this fourth step as a big umbrella arching over the other three. ‘Attend to the Relationship.’ One way you’ll measure whether a tough conversation was a success is if the relationship is no worse off afterwards than it was before. You should be able to deliver your message and maintain, or build, a positive relationship. Both! Think about the relationship when you take your time out. Think about the relationship when you express intent and your concerns. Think about the relationship when you are clear with that bullet point. Every step of the way, attend to the relationship.”

“Using the relationship as a measurement? That would not occur to me. That’s going to be hard to remember.”

“Then let me put a different lens around it and see if it helps,” I said. “Let me make this fourth step a specific



behavior, like the others. ‘Listen to Learn.’ A friend of mine says there are three ways we listen to each other. We listen to win, like winning a debate. We listen to fix, when we’re trying to be helpful. And we listen to learn, when we’re genuinely curious. After you’ve expressed intention and been clear, listen to learn. There’s a story on their side. You don’t know it yet. Be curious. Listen to learn.”

He said, “You do that a lot with me.”

I shrugged. “Sure. I have no idea what you’re thinking and I’m curious. As a coach, I listen to learn a lot of the time.”

He shook his head ‘no,’ saying, “When I think someone’s stupid, I’m listening to win. No doubt about it. That’s how I use my intelligence as a weapon. I go in to win.”



“How do you think it would be to listen to learn?” I asked.

He snorted again. “When I think someone should’ve known better, I don’t want to listen to them. I want to smack up them upside the head.”

“Do you think you could listen to learn?” I asked.

“Maybe. I’d have to be willing to hear their side of it. What if it’s ridiculous? Do I actually have to consider it?”

“If you think it’s ridiculous, then I’d say you haven’t listened to learn yet.”

“What if I listened to learn and *then* decided it was ridiculous?” he asked.

“Suppose you do. What would you do next if you want to come out with the relationship as strong as when it began?”

“Maybe start over and take another time out!” He exhaled and gave a little laugh. “I feel like I’m in the slow group here. This isn’t easy for me.”

But Martin stuck with it.

Almost a year later, long after the coaching had concluded, I got an email from Martin on a Monday morning. He’d had a profound conversation with his teenage daughter over the weekend. He’d gone into it applying the four steps for a tough conversation and came out feeling their relationship was stronger than ever. Using those four steps as his compass during a difficult conversation helped him navigate towards [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).

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### Core Concepts:

To convey a tough message *and* maintain a positive relationship:

- Start with a full-stop. Act, don't RE-act. Identify why this conversation is important.
- Express intention. Say why you're having the conversation and what your concerns are.
- Be clear. Be simple. Identify what you wish were different specifically.
- Attend to the relationship. At every step, even in the conversation, consider the other person.

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