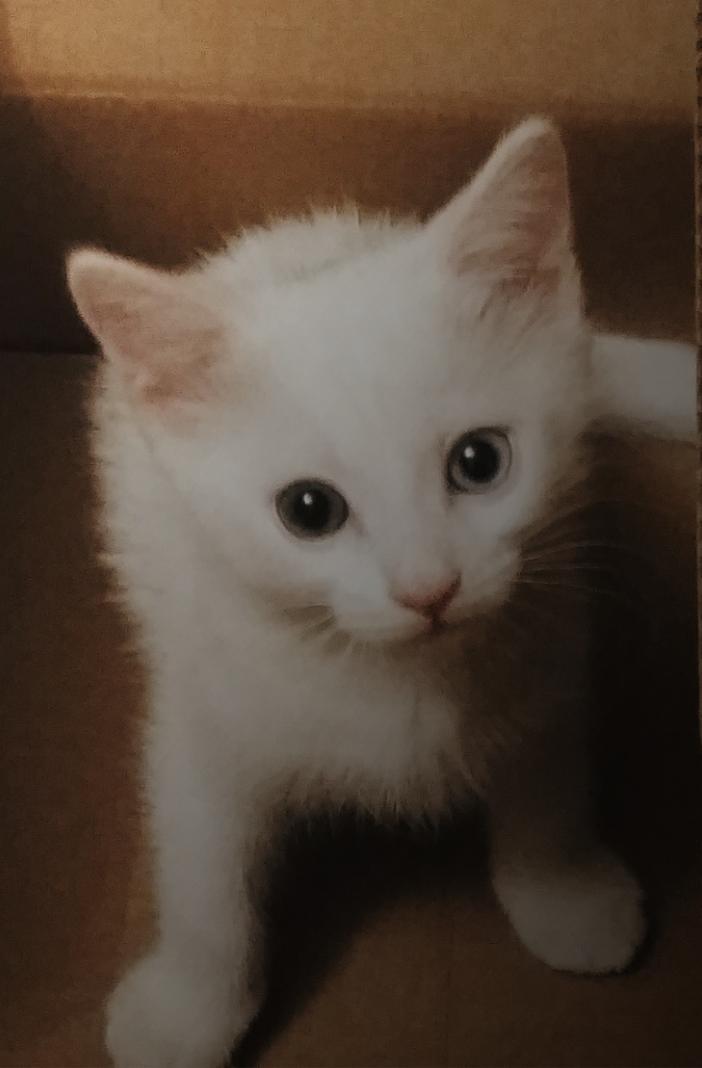


Constructive and Courageous Conversations



Curiosity can be relationship magic.

Digital connectivity and the rise of social media have changed the world. We're no longer held hostage by the tyranny of distance, and there is more-or-less an equal playing field upon which to find expression; we all have a voice, a creative outlet, and an audience. And yet with those benefits have come some significant pitfalls. Increasingly, we are losing the art of constructive conversation to the practice of polarisation. The Internet reverberates with deep divisions in beliefs and behaviours. It's no secret that we're struggling to listen and communicate meaningfully.

Ironically, this seems to have occurred just as we've begun to recognise the need to prioritise humanity in business. We want to have meaningful exchanges with our employees and colleagues, but our ability to navigate the important conversations that enable us to be better leaders, is being buffeted by unhelpful communication norms.

Think about the last time someone at work tried to express their opinions and point of view to you. Did you listen? Argue? Or switch off? Did you feel like there was an equitable exchange, or one-sided? And if they held an opposing or counterintuitive viewpoint, did they in any way change your mind?

There's a very good chance you replied "no" to the last question.

So, what do we need to rediscover about talking to each other that will set us up for success?

Be Constructive

Constructive conversations are an instrument for turning strategy into reality and understanding into meaningful support. In constructive conversations we are, as Joseph Joubert says, not looking for the victory, but for progress, or a mutually considered way forward.

Progress is more likely achieved when we can find some common ground that might lead us to a shared reality. This sense of alignment works as an antidote to the heat and disconnection of opposing arguments or alternate perspectives.

For instance, a useful response to a statement that opposes your beliefs might be: “I’ve never thought about it that way before. What can you share that will help me see what you see?”

Other ways of managing the communication divide include:

- Separating the ideas from the person’s identity
- Having at least one party willingly choose “curiosity” over “clash.”
- Expecting to develop your ideas through discussion
- Anchoring in shared purpose
- Checking our motives

It can also be helpful to think about conversations as “a climbing wall” that presents a series of challenges we can learn from and get a better view.

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Adaptive Principles

Embedded within constructive conversations are “courageous” conversations - the tough ones that we avoid if possible. Whether we are speaking to a challenging or sensitive employee, giving unwelcome feedback, or having to manage upwards, these can be hugely rewarding and facilitate learning and evolution, if handled well.

Here are some guidelines for managing the conversations we really don't want to have.

- 1 Affirm positive intent and a hold space for the conversation** – treat psychological safety as a priority, and create a safe container for dialogue
- 2 Listen first** – our role in the conversation might be to first help the other person feel heard
- 3 Be vulnerable** – sharing our own vulnerabilities will often lay open the way for establishing common ground
- 4 Be curious** – asking questions can help overcome another person's defensiveness
- 5 Look for opportunities to reframe** – take the time to practice some phrases that convey positivity and hope
- 6 Follow up with support** – committing to action validates the conversation and the future relationship

In any courageous or constructive conversation, our choice of language will influence our ability to make progress. There are many ways we can rephrase or restate our comments to manage their impact. Business leader, Julia Dhar, suggests using velvet hammer words such as I “noticed” and I was “wondering”, and what's the “likelihood” that are considerate, and non-threatening, yet potentially move a situation forward.

A constructive result from a difficult conversation builds trust and confidence between the people involved. And that, in turn, may increase the opportunity for greater candour.

If we take care to evaluate our motives, listen and suspend judgement, and seek common ground when engaging in any conversation, it will positively impact everything about our ability to lead.



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