

FACILITATING

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



FMCS

FEDERAL MEDIATION &
CONCILIATION SERVICE

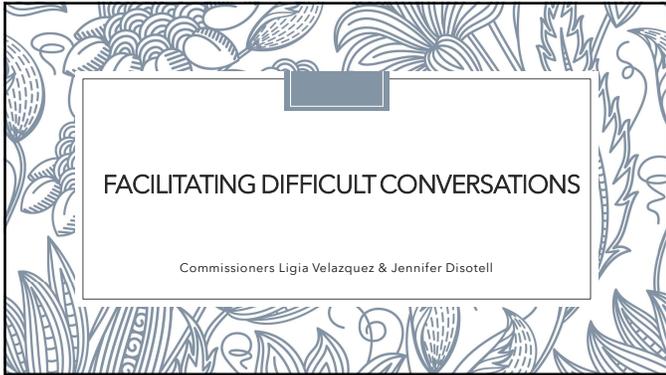
Facilitating Difficult Conversations



July 2020

Commissioner Jennifer Disotell

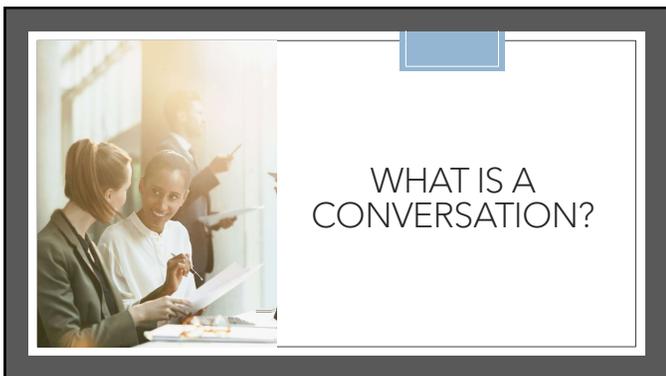
Commissioner Ligia Velazquez



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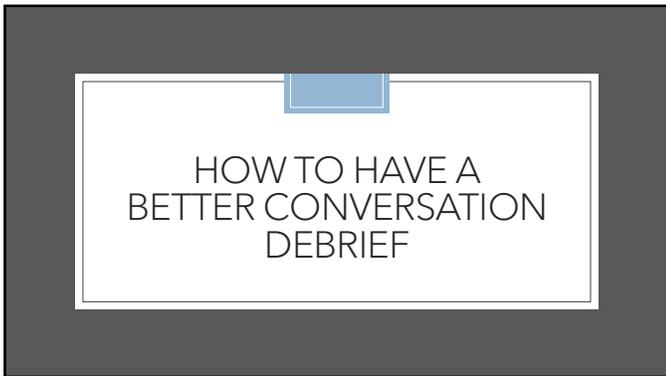
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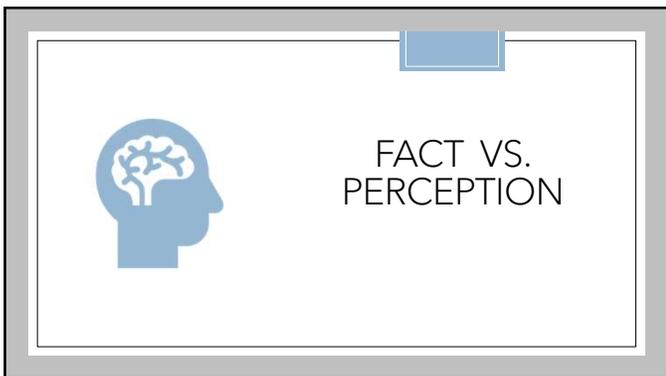
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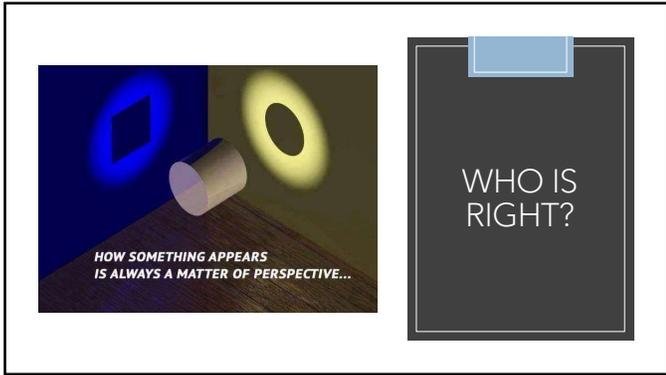
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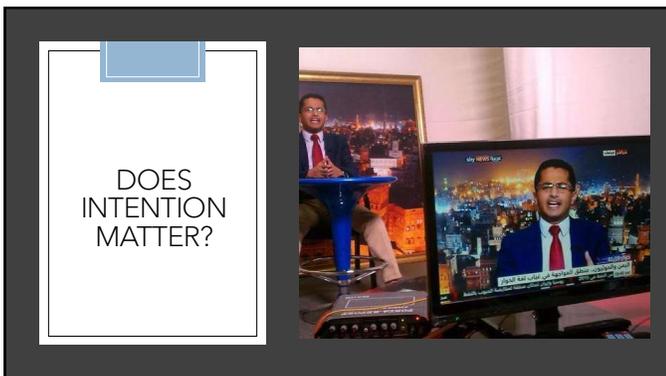
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What makes a conversation difficult?

- High Stakes
- Opinions Vary
- Strong Emotions

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AND WHO IS IT DIFFICULT FOR?



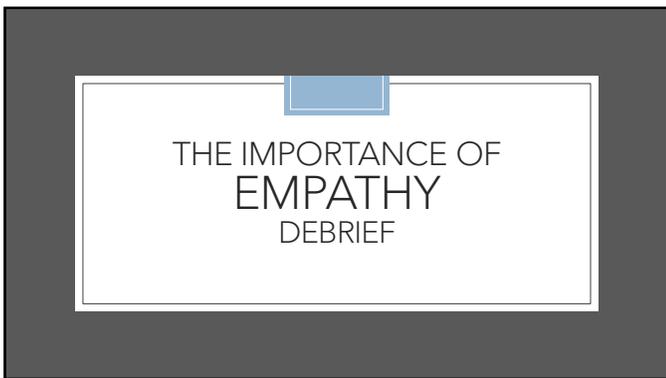
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THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY

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Qualities of a Good Facilitator

- Being Neutral
- Being a Process Expert
- Understanding the tools available

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HOW TO BE A GREAT FACILITATOR

KAREN FREIDMAN



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HOW TO BE A GREAT FACILITATOR

DEBRIEF



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Why is Facilitation Needed?

- Conflict
- Personality
- Process
- Substantive



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FACILITATION SKILLS TRAINING:
MANAGING DIFFICULT MEETING PERSONALITIES
DANA BROWNLEE

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DEBRIEF:

MANAGING DIFFICULT MEETING PERSONALITIES

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Facilitator Tools

- Neutrality
- Introductions
- Ground Rules

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Ground Rules for Facilitating Difficult Conversations

<p>Ground Rules for Facilitator:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Stay Neutral ◦ Ensure the Access and Comfort of the Participants ◦ Be Present and Focus on the Process, not the Substance ◦ Equalize Airtime ◦ Be Inclusive ◦ Thank Everyone for their Contributions 	<p>Ground Rules for Participants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Be Present and Minimize Distractions ◦ Respect Everyone's Story ◦ Suspend Judgement ◦ Share the Airtime ◦ Use "I" Statements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ For example, "I feel..." or "I experienced..." ◦ Listen to Understand ◦ Speak to be Understood
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Facilitator Tools

- Neutrality
- Introductions
- Ground Rules
- Bringing Awareness to Power Differentials
- Ensuring Equal Airtime
- Reframing
- Reflecting
- Rephrasing
- Using Appropriate Questions

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REVIEW

- A Conversation is just that - a space to talk. It is not a Problem-Solving Process or a Decision-Making Process and it does not have a goal.
- A Conversation is a place to understand and be understood.
- A Facilitator is a neutral and has no vested interest in the substance or outcome of a discussion. They are process experts.
- Practice. Practice. Practice.

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WHAT ARE YOUR QUESTIONS?

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Facilitating Difficult Conversations - Ground Rules

Ground Rules for Facilitator:

- Stay Neutral
- Ensure the Access and Comfort of the Participants
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- Equalize Airtime
- Be Inclusive
- Thank Everyone for their Contributions



Ground Rules for Participants:

- Be Present and Minimize Distractions
- Respect Everyone's Story
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- Share the Airtime
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 - o For example, "I feel..." or "I experienced..."
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The 3 Rs of Effective Communication in the Workplace

Reframing – the process of reiterating to a speaker what was said, in a neutral or positive way, in order to relieve tensions based on negative or accusatory statements.

Communication Sent: You have manipulated the statistics to show what you want!

Communication Reframed: What are your concerns about these statistics?



Restating – the process of accurately repeating a message in order to relay that the message has been received exactly as intended. This allows for any clarification of misunderstandings.

Communication Sent: Our members will not accept this offer as it stands. You need to meet their wage, benefits and pension demands before we can even take it to a vote.

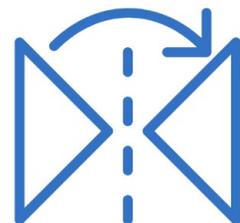
Communication Restated: What I am hearing you say is that this offer is not acceptable to your members as is. The wages, benefits and pension need to look different before you can take it out for a vote. Is that correct?



Reflecting – the process of reiterating to a speaker what was substantially and emotionally said, in your own words, so that the speaker feels heard and understood. This process creates a bond whereby the speaker feels that their perspective is respected and taken into consideration. It also allows others to rehear the speaker's interests in a way that may not have initially resonated.

Communication Sent: Your suggestion is crap and will not work!

Communication Reflected: It sounds like my suggestion is frustrating. What are the areas of concern?





Facilitator Questions

Exploratory Questions—Probe basic knowledge

What do you think about _____?

How does _____ make you feel?

What bothers/concerns/confuses you the most about _____?

What are some ways we might respond to _____?

Open-ended Questions—that don't require a detailed or specific kind of response

What is your understanding of _____?

What do you want to know about _____?

What is the first thing you think about in relation to _____?

What are some questions you have about _____?

State one image/scene/event/moment from your experience that relates to _____?

Challenge Questions—Examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations

What can we infer/conclude from _____?

Does _____ remind you of anything?

What principle do you see operating here?

What does this help you explain?

How does this relate to other experiences or things you already knew?

Relational Questions—Ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues

Do you see a pattern here?

How do you account for _____?

What was significant about _____?

What connections to you see?

What does _____ suggest to you?

Is there a connection between what you've just said and what _____ was saying earlier?

Cause and Effect Questions—Ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events

How do you think _____ relates or causes _____?

What are some consequences of _____?

Where does _____ lead?

What are some pros and cons of _____?

What is likely to be the effect of _____?

Extension Questions—Expand the discussion

What do the rest of you think?

How do others feel?

What did you find noteworthy about this comment?

How can we move forward?

Can you give some specific examples of _____?

How would you put that another way?

Hypothetical Questions—Pose a change in the facts or issues

What if _____ were from a different _____, how would that change things?

Would it make a difference if we were in a _____ society/culture?

How might this dialogue be different if _____?

What might happen if we were to _____?

How might your life be different if _____?

Diagnostic Questions—Probe motives or causes

What brings you to say that?

What do you mean?

What led you to that conclusion?

Priority Questions—Seek to identify the most important issue

From all that we've talked about, what is the most important concept you see?

Considering the different ideas in the room, what do you see as the most critical issue?

What do you find yourself resonating with the most?

If you had to pick just one topic to continue talking about, what would it be?

Process Questions—Elicits satisfaction/buy-in/interest levels

Is this where we should be going?

How are people feeling about the direction of this dialogue?

What perspectives are missing from this dialogue?

Everyone has been _____ for awhile, why?

How would you summarize this dialogue so far?

How might splitting into groups/pairs affect our discussion?

Analytical Questions—Seek to apply concepts or principles to new or different situations

What are the main arguments for _____?

What are the assumptions underlying _____?

What questions arise for you as you think about _____?

What implications does _____ have? (for _____?)

Does this idea challenge or support what we've been talking about?

How does this idea/contribution add to what has already been said?

Summary Questions—Elicit syntheses, what themes or lessons have emerged?

Where are we?

If you had to pick two themes from this dialogue, what would they be?

What did you learn?

What benefits did we gain today?

What remains unresolved? How can we better process this?

Based on our dialogue, what will you be thinking about after you leave?

Let me see if I understand what we've talked about so far... What have I missed?

Ok, this is what I've heard so far... Does anyone have anything to correct or add?

Action Questions—Call for a conclusion or action

How can we use that information?

What does this new information say about our own actions/lives?

How can you adapt this information to make it applicable to you?

How will you do things differently as a result of this meeting?

What are our next steps?

What kind of support do we need as we move forward?

How does this dialogue fit into our bigger plans?

Evaluative Questions—Gauge emotions, anxiety levels, what is going well or not

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

How are you feeling about this now?

What was a high point for you? A low point?

Where were you engaged? Disengaged?

What excited you? Disappointed you?

20 Ways of Responding to Intense Emotions

- 1. Acknowledge and affirm the emotion.** Acknowledging and affirming emotions helps complete them so the parties can move beyond them. Emotions are not static things that are negotiated, but a kind of energy or force based on concrete experiences and responses that need to be communicated, and will not release their grip until they are released, expressed constructively, and acknowledged. One way of acknowledging and affirming emotions is to label them and confirm your observation of what is being expressed, for example, "I am hearing a lot of sadness beneath your anger. Is that right?" Be careful how you label someone else's emotions and use the form of a question rather than a statement, as they may otherwise see you as manipulative and controlling.
- 2. Separate behaviors from emotions.** People often say, "He made me mad!" But emotions are what *they experience*, not what other people do to them. Parties need to separate other people's behavior from the emotion they are experiencing, for example, by saying: "I see that you're angry with me, but I'm not sure what I *did* that you are angry about." Or: "Could you explain to me *what I did* that triggered your anger?"
- 3. Conduct a perception check.** Confirm whether the emotions someone is expressing are too intense for the person on the receiving end, for example, by saying: "Does his expressing his anger bother you?" "What bothers you about it?" Or: "How can he express his feelings without you shutting down or becoming angry or defensive?"
- 4. Reframe the emotion to a level that can be heard.** Reframing can be done incrementally. All statements like "I'm angry" can be reframed along a continuum that runs from high to low intensity -- i.e., "I feel enraged," or "hostile," or "mad," or merely "upset." This continuum provides a range of alternative words people can use to convey the *exact* emotion they are feeling, or reflect the exact emotion of their opponent, which will allow the receiving party to respond appropriately and lead them to either deepen or complete their emotional processing.
- 5. Reframe to a higher intensity to express underlying emotions.** You can reframe to a higher intensity of emotion to release more powerful feeling, or to a lower intensity to regain control over the conversation or start a shift toward problem solving. Reframing to higher emotions tends to build trust, since it is clear that you are not avoiding honest feelings.
- 6. Redirect the emotion away from the person and toward the problem.** Draw the emotion to the issues, details, process, systemic causes, or if necessary to yourself, to reduce defensiveness and increase listening. You can say: "What is he doing that is getting you so angry?" or "Can you hear her anger and frustration over what happened?" or "Are you both willing to take responsibility for what happened and apologize for any pain you've caused?"

7. Stop the process by asking questions. For example, you can stop people who are arguing and ask them: "Excuse me, is this conversation working?" They will always say "no," in which case you can say, "Would you like it to work?" and "Can I give you a suggestion about how you might say that differently?" Or, you might ask hard questions about the intensity of the emotion, for example: "Her disagreement clearly upsets you. What does she have to do to reassure you that she is willing to respect your opinions?" or "Are you angry because you feel he is taking advantage of you?" or even "Regardless of whether that's true, why do you let yourself be taken advantage of by her?"

8. Search for triggering mechanisms. There is always something that triggers emotion. Try to ascertain whether it is being used consciously or unconsciously. If consciously, let the person know it is interfering with the other person's ability to understand them and ask them to discontinue. If it is unconsciously, try to draw their attention to what triggered it by asking questions, or to the ineffectiveness of their behavior by describing its effects and requesting that it be discontinued.

9. Separate intentions from effects. Describe the emotional effects of the behavior, then ask if those were the effects the person intended or *wanted* to achieve when they chose to engage in it. If those were the desired effects, ask if they are willing to take responsibility for the results they created by their choice. If they did not achieve the effects they desired, ask what effects they would like to achieve, if they *want* to solve the problem, and how they might communicate more effectively.

10. Reach process agreements about the future. Ask for permission to let the person know when their behavior is causing communication to break down, or ask them to let you know when it breaks down for them. Ask what they need from you to make the process work, and how you might identify early warning signs of a process breakdown, then negotiate detailed agreements on how everyone will respond if it does.

11. Set limits. If the emotion coming from someone is too intense, you can refuse to participate in the conversation any longer, for example by saying: "If you continue to yell, I will not be able to help you reach an agreement." If they continue, take a break and leave for a few minutes.

12. State concerns openly. For example, you might say: "How do you respond - do you get frustrated when he starts yelling?" "Do you think you can talk about this issue without yelling?"

13. Model the behavior you want. Encourage people to express their emotional concerns and model respectful communication, for example by saying: "I'm frustrated about our conversation right now, because...." or "It disappoints me when you do that."

14. Name the emotion. It may be useful to encourage the parties to actually name the feelings that are involved and say, for example: "Do your feelings get really hurt when she ignores you?" or "When he criticizes you so harshly, do you

feel he thinks you're worthless?" Again, if you name another person's emotion, it's best to do it in the form of a question.

15. Link the behavior that causes the emotion to consequences for the other person. For example, by saying: "He gets angry when you say he can't do the job, then he get depressed, and his performance *really* goes downhill. Is that right? Is that the result you want?"

16. Identify specific behaviors that provide solutions. Some examples of statements that cite specific behaviors and solutions are: "If he helped you with the work, would you be convinced that he cares?" "If not, what would convince you?" or "How would you like him to ask you to do it in the future, so you can feel satisfied that he respects your ability?"

17. Identify what can be done to respond more skillfully. This is something everyone can all do when someone's behavior begins to bother them. They can tell the person specifically what it would take for them to let go of their anger or frustration, or better, model the response they want and ask what it would take to change their behavior.

18. Lower tone of voice and slow the pace of speech. Often, the most effective way to defuse a powerful emotion is simply by lowering and calming your tone of voice, and slowing your rate of speech. Try it, it nearly always has a strong de-escalating effect on those who hear it.

19. Sit silently and just listen. One of the most powerful reasons for intense emotion is the absence of listening. If you become quiet and simply listen to both sides they will start to run out of steam after a while and you can re-start the dialogue. Listening is a sign of respect, and active, empathic listening calms people by making them feel heard.

20. Acknowledge and validate their listening. It is often useful to acknowledge people who, in spite of their difficult and powerful emotions, are nonetheless willing to discuss the issues, and compliment them for their courage in being willing to do so. You can then ask if they are willing to continue talking about these issues until they can think of a solution that is satisfactory to both of them.

CLUES THAT REQUEST A HEART-BASED CONVERSATION

Clues that signal a person's desire for heart-based conversations or deeper order of resolution may initially take the form of a trivial statement that *begs* to be contradicted. Here are four examples of such statements followed by my translation and some initial questions that can deepen the conversation:

1. *Declaration:* "He doesn't think I'm a very good person."
 Translation: "I don't think I am a very good person, am vulnerable to what he thinks of me, and am exaggerating what he thinks because I need some reassurance that he doesn't hate me."

 Opening Questions: [to the other person] "Is that right? Do you think she is not a very good person?" [to her] "Why does it matter to you what he thinks?"

2. *Declaration:* "She did it for no reason."
 Translation: "I really don't know why she did it but am afraid to ask because she could have done it because of something I did that I don't want to admit, or for some reason that will force me to stop playing the victim."

 Opening Questions: "Would you like to know why she did it? Why don't you ask her?"

3. *Declaration:* "He's lying."
 Translation: "What he said does not match my experience, I feel defensive about what he said, and I need him to listen to my experience before I can listen to his."

 Opening Questions: "What truth do you see that is not reflected in his statement?" "What do you think is the underlying truth he is trying to communicate to you?"

4. *Declaration:* "I don't trust her."
 Translation: "I am feeling insecure about what is going to happen, distrustful about her intentions regarding me, and need to hear that she is really committed to making this relationship work."

 Opening Questions: "What are you afraid she will do?" [to the other person] "Is that what you intend to do? Why not? Do you want this relationship to work? Why?"

QUESTIONS TO INITIATE OPEN-HEARTED CONVERSATIONS

1. Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourselves?
2. What do you hope will happen as a result of this conversation? Why is that important to you?
3. Why are you here? Why do you care? What did it take for you to be willing to come here today?
4. What kind of relationship would you *like* to have with each other? Why?
5. What is one thing you like or respect about each other? Can you give an example? Another? How does it feel to hear each other say these things? What would happen if you said them more often?
6. Is there anything you have in common? Any values you share?
7. What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so strongly about this issue?
8. What role have you played in this conflict, either through action or inaction?
9. If you had 20/20 hindsight, what would you do differently?
10. Is there anything you would like to apologize for?
11. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would each of you rank that apology? What could you do to make it a 10? Are you willing to try right now?
12. What is one thing you would like him to acknowledge you for? What is one thing you are willing to acknowledge him for?
13. What do you think she was trying to say in that apology/ acknowledgment? [To her] Is that accurate? [If not] Would you like to know what is accurate for her? Why don't you ask her?
14. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of what you just said in reaching her? How could you make it more effective? Would you like some feedback? Why don't you ask her?
15. Is this conversation working? Would you like it to work? *Why* would you like it to work? What is one thing she can do that would make it to work for you? [To her] Are you willing to do that? Would you be willing to start the conversation over and do those things now?
16. What is the crossroads you are at right now in your conflict?
17. Will you ever convince him you are right? [If not] When will you stop trying?
18. What would you most like to hear her say to you right now?
19. What would you have wanted him to have said instead?

20. What does that mean to you? What other meanings might it have? What do you think it meant to her? Would you like to find out? Why don't you ask her?
21. Can you imagine what happened to him also happening to you? What would it feel like? Would you like to know what it felt like to him? Why don't you ask?
22. Would you be willing to take a moment of silence right now to think about that?
23. Has anything like this happened to you before? Who? When?
24. What are you *not* talking about that you still need to discuss?
25. What issues are you holding on to that the other person still doesn't know about?
26. What price have you paid for this conflict? What has it cost you? How much longer are you going to continue paying that price?
27. What would it take for you to give this conflict up, let go of what happened, and move on with your life?
28. Do you really want this in your life? What would it take to let it go?
29. What would change in your life if you reached an agreement?
30. If this were the last conversation you were going to have with each other, what would you want to say?

Remember, in heart-based mediations, you *are* the technique. You can only help others by first learning to open your own heart to identify the leverage points where transformation and transcendence are hidden. These points are located in every conflict, in "soft spots," equivocal statements, "power words," intense emotions, pointless exaggerations, wounded accusations, energetic denials, and overly defensive attitudes. If heard correctly, these are not statements, but *requests* and invitations to deeper, heartfelt, profound conversation.

QUESTIONS REGARDING DIFFICULT BEHAVIORS

[Excerpt: Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith, *Resolving Conflicts at Work: 8 Strategies for Everyone on the Job*, 2nd Ed., Jossey Bass/Wiley (2005)]

- What is the specific behavior they are engaged in that you find most disturbing? (Try to describe it in precise words.)
- Why is that disturbing to you?
- Why do you think they are engaging in it?
- Was there anyone in your family of origin who engaged in similar behavior? How did you respond?
- How are you responding to the difficult behavior?
- Is the other person benefiting in any way from your responses to their behavior?
- Have your responses been successful so far in stopping their behavior?
- How could you change your responses to stop rewarding them for behaviors you find unacceptable?
- How are others in the organization responding to their behavior?
- Is there anyone in the organization who is handling their behavior skillfully, or is not bothered by it? What are they doing differently?
- What organizational benefits are they deriving from their behavior?
- Have you given them honest feedback about their behavior? If so, how did they receive it?
- Has the work group as a whole given them feedback?
- What feedback have you *not* given them about their behavior? Why not?
- What would it take for you to give them fully empathetic and honest feedback?
- What could motivate them to change their behavior? What would motivate you?
- How could you reward them for behaviors you find more acceptable? How could you support them in changing?

DANGEROUS QUESTIONS

There are some questions that are deep, profoundly personal, and dangerous, yet can produce extraordinary insights by drawing people's awareness inward to the secret source of the conflict within themselves. They should primarily be used in caucusing, coaching, or for homework. For example:

- What have you done to create the very thing you are most troubled by?
- What have you been clinging to or holding onto that it is now time for you to release?
- What are you responsible for in your conflict that you have not yet acknowledged to the other person?
- What do you most want to hear the other person say to you that you still haven't mentioned?
- What do you long for in your relationship with the other person?
- What is the refusal, or "no" that you have not yet communicated?
- What is the permission, or "yes" you gave in the past that you now want to retract?
- What is the resentment you are still holding on to that the other person doesn't know about?
- What is the promise you gave that you are now betraying?
- What is it they or you did that you are still unwilling to forgive?
- What price are you willing to pay for your refusal to forgive? How long are you prepared to continue paying that price?
- What promise are you willing to make to the other person with no acknowledgement or expectation of return?
- What gift could you give the other person that you continue to withhold? Why?