Finding the Conversational Sweet Spot

Ki’Yonna Jones

Stephen Orton
SPEAKERS

• **Ki’Yonna Jones**
  Training Associate
  North Carolina Institute for Public Health
  Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC

• **Stephen Orton**
  Senior Fellow, Public Health Leadership
  North Carolina Institute for Public Health
  Gillings School of Global Public Health, UNC
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Increase positive engagements in work conversations
• Manage triggers that arise in difficult situations
• Use conversational Sweet Spot tool to balance candor and curiosity
ROADMAP

• Review the value of Communication
• Define Conversational Capacity and the Sweet Spot
• Practice the Sweet Spot tool
• Discuss practical application
• Create Team Agreements
Foundational Skills

• Share thoughts, ideas, and feelings **effectively** and with cultural and linguistic proficiency in discussions, meetings, and presentations with individuals and diverse groups (1)

• Understand nonverbal communication cues in self and others (3)

• Listen **attentively** and **actively** (4)
Communication as a Change Strategy

Foster environments for learning by:

- Raising critical questions that challenge current operating assumptions
- Facilitating and engaging in reflection and generative conversations
- Finding new connections with others’ perspectives and assets
- Framing the opportunity
The Sweet Spot

Open, Balanced, Non-Defensive

Combines CANDOR with CURIOSITY
Why is this important?

It determines our ability to make informed decisions, solve challenging problems, orchestrate effective change, provide useful feedback, and deal with conflict.

It is of foundational importance for any activity that depends on unregulated dialogue for its success.

What are the adaptive challenges facing your team? Is your conversational capacity sufficient enough for dealing with those challenges?
Balance of Candor and Curiosity

Candor = say what you think and why you think so

Curiosity = ask for input

Conversational capacity is the ability to remain in the sweet spot during difficult conversations
Can you think of examples of when you have been in the conversational sweet spot and describe what that felt like?

Group Share
What causes us to leave the Conversational Sweet Spot?
Minimizing Behaviors

Losing Candor

- Cover up views, ideas or info
- Downplay the situation to keep it safe
- Water down issue/ sugarcoat
- Prematurely withdraw
- Ask leading questions
- Avoid the issue change the subject
- Use email to voice concerns

MINIMIZE
- “I want to be a team player”
- “I need to preserve this relationship”
- “I want to avoid conflict”
- “I want to be nice”
Losing Curiosity

- State position as fact
- Dismiss/discount alternative views
- Solicit support
- Use hyperbole
- Preach
- Interrupt
- Ask dismissive questions
- Don’t inquire into alternative views

Winning Behaviors

WIN
- “I need to be right”
- “I need my idea to win”
- “I want others to yield”
Consequences of Leaving the Sweet Spot

**Low**
- Problems are covered up
- Threatening issues are avoided
- People avoid responsibility for problems
- Trust breaks down
- Destructive politics flourish
- Sterile conflicts abound
- Risk taking is dangerous
- Effectiveness is derailed

**High**
- Informed and effective decisions are a high priority
- Critical issues are discussed openly and responsibly
- Conflicts are leveraged for learning
- Threatening issues are jointly managed
- Trust and respect grow deeper
- Perspectives and assumptions are explored and tested
1. When do I minimize, shut down, or retreat?

2. When do I dig in, double down, try to “win”?

What does this LOOK like?

How does that affect the conversation?

Share with a partner
What *triggers* us to leave the Sweet Spot?

- Personal issue
- How important the issue is
- Status or Expertise
- Behaviors of others
- Personality
- Perceived risk of speaking up (or not)
- Culture

What are YOUR triggers?
New Skillset, New Mindset

Deny our tendencies to minimize or win and allow the commitment to informed choice guide our behavior.

Requires a behavioral and mind shift.
This is different from compromising which still operates from a position perspective (maximize your own gain).

Understand where assumptions differ and interests align.
Intentional Dialogue

Advocate my position clearly & succinctly

Explain my thinking with data & interpretations

Inquire into others’ views. Explore their thinking

Test my view. Seek what’s missing. Encourage dissent.
I think we should do $X$. I believe that $X$ is the best choice at this time.

What leads me to think this is $Y$. I came to this conclusion after seeing $Y$.

I’m intrigued by the way you see this; can you give me an example?

What might I be missing? Push back on me here, what do you think?

Help me see this through your lens.

I’ve said what I think; now I’m interested in what others think, especially those who see it differently.
Questions to Ask

• Do you see it differently?
• What’s your reaction to what I’ve said?
• What’s your perspective on this?
• If I’ve got a blind spot about this issue please help me to see it.
• Right now I feel like my idea makes good sense. What might I be missing here?

DON’T ASK
- I’m right, aren’t I?
- You don’t see it differently do you?
- Don’t you agree?
- Who agrees with me?
- It’s obvious isn’t it?
- You’d have to be crazy not to
When should I apply this tool?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Difficulty</th>
<th>Low Difficulty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Importance</td>
<td>You have better things to do with your time. This is high effort/low return territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Importance</td>
<td>Chit-chat, casual conversation, routine issues. We do fine here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Importance</td>
<td>This is challenging territory. More disciplined, balanced dialogue is useful here. If conversation is exceptionally challenging, seek coaching &amp; practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Importance</td>
<td>What are you waiting for? Use these conversations to practice the skills and expand your competence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Self-reflect

• Think of a specific, difficult conversation you’ve had
• Write what each person said in the left column
• Identify your winning or minimizing behavior and triggers in the middle column
• Applying what you’ve learned write a ‘new script’ in the right column

Take ~10 minutes
Practice Scenarios

• Deciding whether to eliminate a program or position
• Redesign of a room in your home
• Selecting a family vacation
• Deciding to stop doing things a certain way that you know doesn’t work (due to funding, historical pressure, etc.)
Awareness to Competence
Practical Steps: **Personal**

- Keep a Trigger Journal
- Teach to loved ones
- Role play important conversations
- Give Notice to others
- Practice Mindfulness
Practical Steps: **Teamwork**

1. Clarify decisions to be made
2. Create visual reminders
3. Appoint a monitor
4. Create a conversational code of conduct
Think about how do you want to be together as a team:

What are the rules or guidelines that govern your behavior as a team?

How will you hold yourselves accountable to the guidelines?
Team Agreement Examples

Formula:

We will (behavior agreement) by (indicator that we are doing the behavior).

Examples:

• We will honor each other’s perspectives by asking curious questions
• We will learn from failure by not making harsh judgements of individuals
• We will appreciate the stage we are in by not prematurely rushing out of the investigation and learning phase
Remember this…

- Negotiate interests, not position
- Goal is to reach **consensus** not agreement
- Find value in different perspectives
- Ego is the enemy of effectiveness
- Use team agreements as an accountability measure
Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress.

Mahatma Gandhi