

Finding the Conversational Sweet Spot

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National **MCH** Workforce
Development Center
Advancing Health Transformation



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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



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ROADMAP

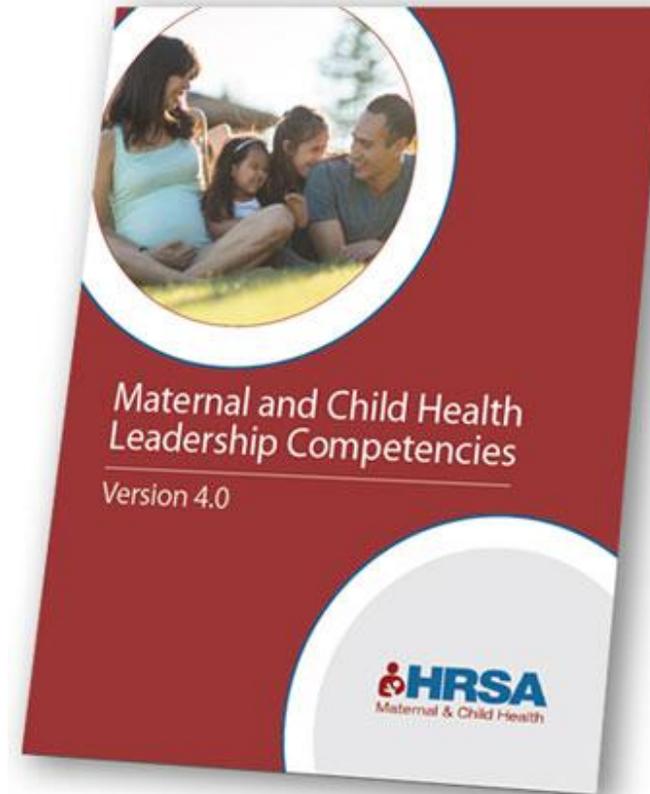
- Review the value of Communication
- Define Conversational Capacity and the Sweet Spot
- Practice the Sweet Spot tool
- Discuss practical application
- Create Team Agreements



Communication

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

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THE KEY TO OPEN, BALANCED, AND
NONDEFENSIVE DIALOGUE IN THE WORKPLACE

CONVERSATIONAL CAPACITY

The secret to building **SUCCESSFUL**
TEAMS that **PERFORM** when
the **PRESSURE** is on

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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





Reflect and Discuss



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

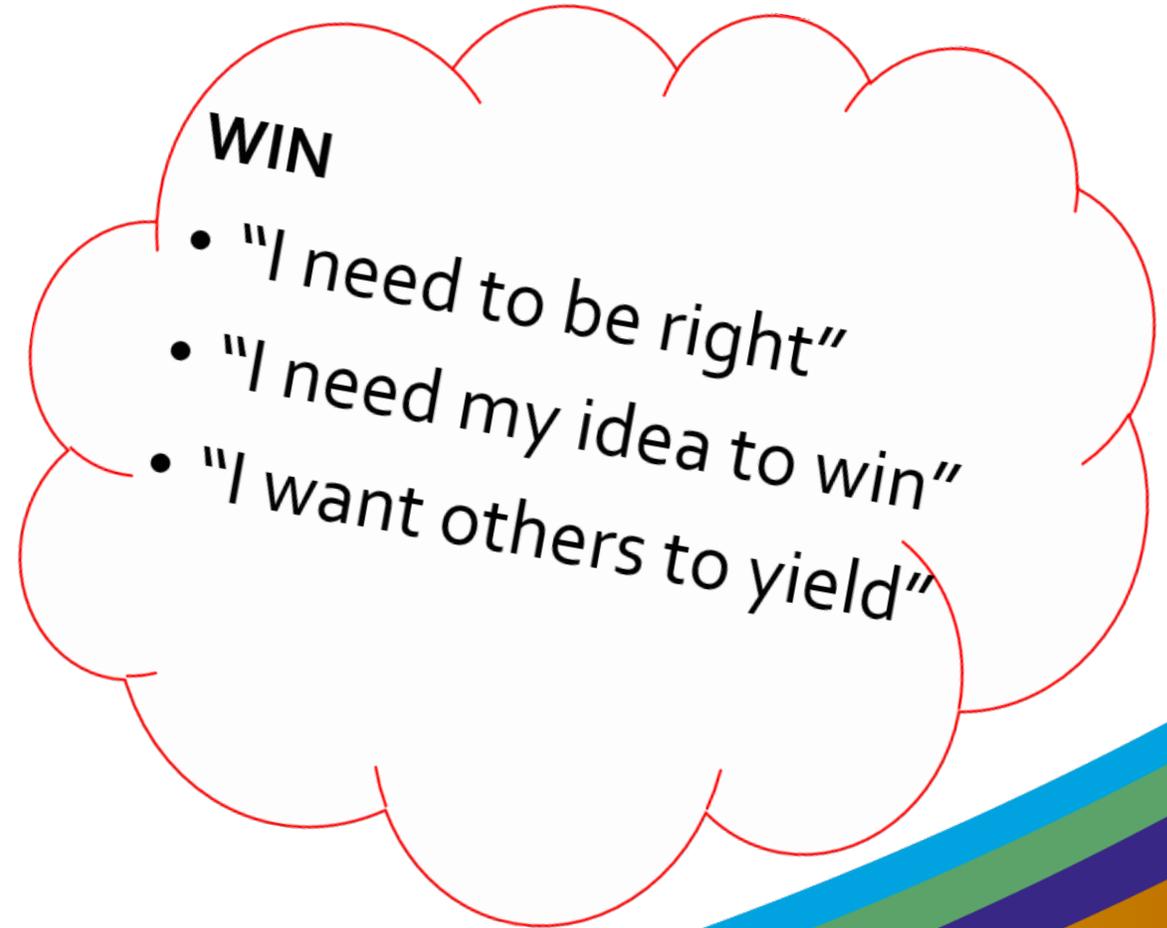
- "I want to be a team player"
- "I need to preserve this relationship"
- "I want to avoid conflict"
- "I want to be nice"



Winning Behaviors

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





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



Reflect and Discuss



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



Bridging Differences

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

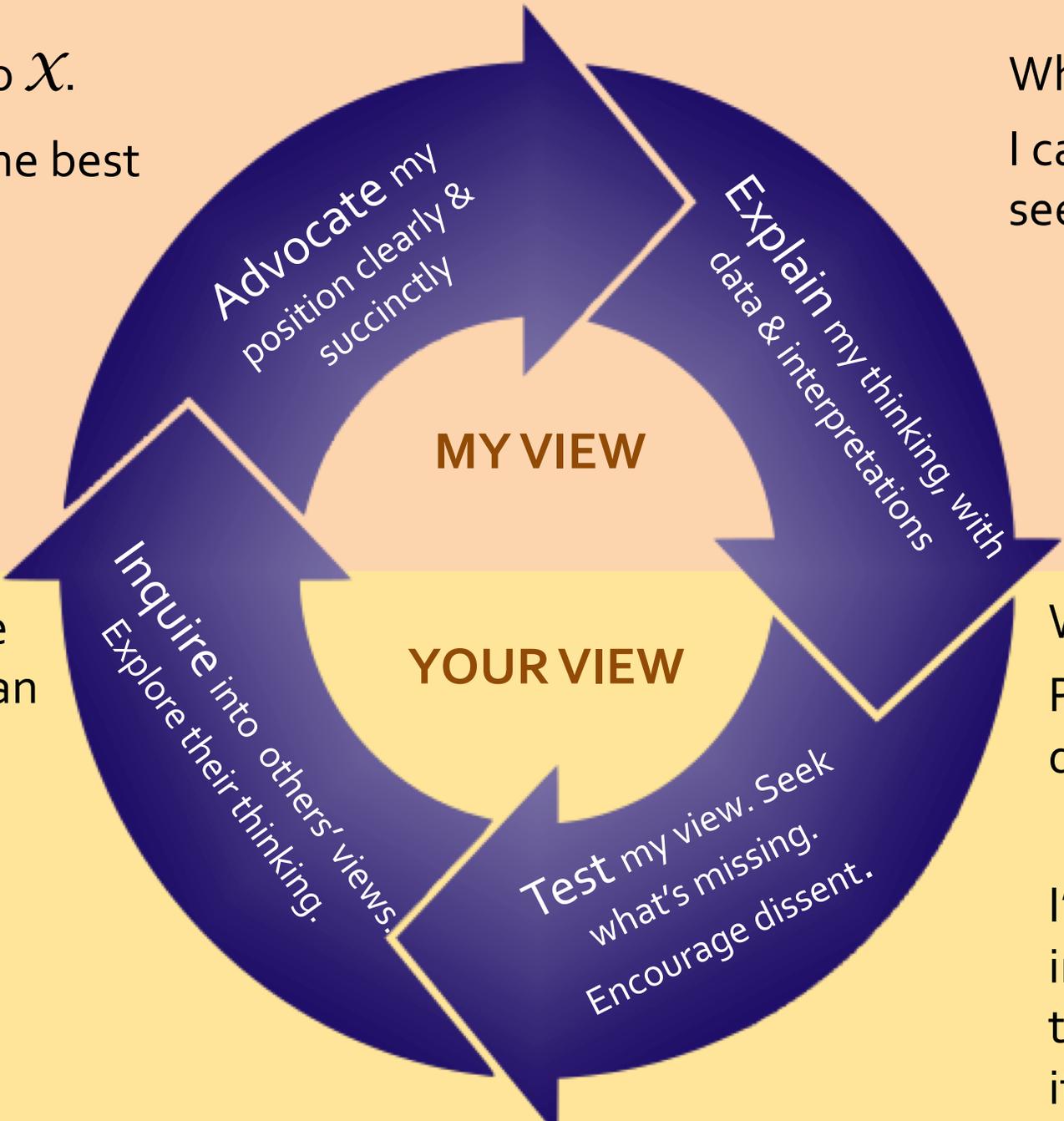
Candor



Curiosity

I think we should do \mathcal{X} .
I believe that \mathcal{X} is the best choice at this time.

What leads me to think this is \mathcal{Y} .
I came to this conclusion after seeing \mathcal{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?



10

HIGH

You have better things to do with your time. This is high effort/low return territory.

This is challenging territory. More disciplined, balanced Dialogue is useful here. If conversation is exceptionally challenging, seek coaching & practice.

DIFFICULTY

LOW

Chit-chat, casual conversation, routine issues. We do fine here.

What are you waiting for? Use these conversations to practice the skills and expand your competence.

1

10

LOW

IMPORTANCE

HIGH



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.)

PRACTICE
makes
PROGRESS,
NOT
PERFECT.



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*

Clarify
decisions to be
made

Create visual
reminders

Appoint a
monitor

Create a
conversational
code of
conduct



Dinner Break



Practical Steps: *Team Agreements*

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



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