Finding the Conversational Sweet Spot

Ki’Yonna Jones
Change Management/Adaptive Leadership Core

February 8, 2022
Learning Objectives

• Increase positive engagements in work conversations

• Increase engagement and decrease unproductive behaviors

• Use Sweet Spot tool: balance candor and curiosity
Communication: A Strategy for Change

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
Conversational capacity is a skill that helps one to remain in the sweet spot during difficult conversations.

The Sweet Spot = Conversations balanced with Candor and Curiosity

What the Skill is NOT....

• A gimmick
• A trick
• Based in weakness or insecurity

What the Skill IS....

• Mental discipline
• Testing views with outside perspectives
• Grounded in strength and confidence
Balance of Candor and Curiosity

**Candor** = say what you think and why you think so

This takes COURAGE

**Curiosity** = ask for input and explore it

This takes HUMILITY
Advocate my position clearly & succinctly

Test my view. Seek what’s missing. Encourage dissent.

Inquire into others’ views. Explore their thinking.

Explain my thinking with data & interpretations

Candor

Curiosity

MY VIEW

YOUR VIEW
Why is this Balance Important?

“Our work depends on dialogue for success.”

“Our goals are to make informed decisions and solve challenging problems.”

“We intend to orchestrate change and provide useful feedback.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversational Capacity Mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pooling Perspectives:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeking Difference:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrating Perspectives:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Thinking:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Commitment  Confidence  Trust

Mindset By-Products
What Prevents Us from *Getting* to the Sweet Spot?
Loose 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

Minimizing Behaviors

MINIMIZE
- “I want to be a team player”
- “I need to preserve this relationship”
- “I want to avoid conflict”
- “I want to be nice”
Loose 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 **Low** Conversational Capacity

- 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
Results of *High* Conversation Capacity

• 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?
What Prevents Us from *Staying* in the Sweet Spot?

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

_Catch it._
_Name it._
_Tame it._
• I think we should do \(X\).
• I believe that \(X\) is the best choice at this time.

Advocate my position clearly & succinctly

MY VIEW

Explain my thinking, with data & interpretations

YOUR VIEW

• What leads me to think this is \(Y\).
• I came to this conclusion after seeing \(Y\).

Inquire into others' views. Explore their thinking.

• What might I be missing?
• Help me find the flaws in how I’m looking at this situation.
• What are some unintended consequences of this decision?
• I want to ensure this idea holds water, so let’s shoot a few holes in it.

Test my view. Seek what’s missing. Encourage dissent.

• I’m intrigued by the way you see this; can you give me an example?
• Help me see this through your lens.
When to Apply this Skillset

 Difficulty vs. Importance

- Difficult but not important
- Difficult and important
- Not difficult and not important
- Not difficult but important
Practice Scenarios

- A new initiative is set to roll out within the next two months. Several members on the planning committee don’t want to involve community members because of the tight timeframe but you feel differently.

- While observing the RFA process, you notice that there are areas where the organization can be more equitable; how do you communicate this to your funder?

- You have an urgent new priority that you are sharing with a direct report. How do you make sure they can meet the deadlines?
Practical Steps: **Personal**

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

- Clarify decisions to be made
- Create visual reminders
- Appoint a monitor
- Create a conversational code of conduct
Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress.

Mahatma Gandhi
“Our opponent in this contest is *our own ego*”

THANK YOU

KI’YONNA JONES, MHA/MBA
Change Management and Adaptive Leadership Core Training Associate
North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH)

kiyonnaj@email.unc.edu