

*This is the 3rd article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at:
atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation*

Our Courageous Conversations are critical, sometimes defining, acts of leadership. They deserve focused and skillful preparation to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. Here are some tips and best practices.

Tip #1. Prepare your POP

Hopefully, you would not launch a campaign or facilitate a major meeting without being clear what you were trying to accomplish. Yet all too often, we launch into critical conversations without clear goals.

If you are not familiar with the **POP** model, see our tool: *The Fabulous POP Model*

POP stands for:

Purpose
Outcomes
Process

Begin your conversation prep by getting clear: What is the **Purpose** of this conversation? Without a clear and positive purpose, we are in danger of launching into conversations with such unhelpful motivations as “*proving I’m right*” or “*wanting them to feel badly for what they did*.”

Here are some typical examples of **Purposes** for Courageous Conversations:

- Resolve tension between departments around finances.
- Rebuild trust with our coalition partner.
- Get clear on the boundaries and roles between Board and senior staff.
- Confront my deputy on her poor performance.

Clarifying the **Purpose** is the first step. Next, we want to be crystal clear on the **Outcomes** (specific goals) for the conversation. What do we want to be different at the end of this conversation, and how will we know if we have achieved this?

Example #1:

Purpose:

- Rebuild trust with our coalition partner.

Outcomes:

- We each understand the others’ experience of what’s not working.
- We share an understanding of lessons learned.
- We have agreed on:
 - Who will take the lead in each of the three communities we’re working in.
 - What support each of us will provide to the three leads.
 - How to handle media relations and coverage of our joint work.

Example #2:

Purpose:

- Deal with my deputy about her poor performance.

Outcomes:

- My deputy is clear on the specific ways in which her performance has been subpar.
- A three-month trial period to improve performance has been established.
- My deputy is clear on what will constitute minimum acceptable standards.
- We have agreement on check-ins and support along the way.

The last P in POP stands for **Process**. How do we structure the conversation to increase the likelihood of achieving our outcomes?

For **Example #2**, this might look like:

- Step 1. Give specific feedback to my deputy.
- Step 2. Provide opportunity for my deputy to respond to feedback; listen to her experience and her own assessment of the situation.
- Step 3. Establish clear benchmarks for what needs to change.
- Step 4 Discuss what support she needs.
- Step 5. Closure: make sure the deputy is clear regarding the plan and next steps.

Tip #2. Examine your contribution

When there are problems in relationships, we're usually clear what the problem is:

It's the other person(s)! They don't get it!

They're being stubborn... shortsighted... too much ego... etc.

Maybe they are. But what's your contribution to the situation? You've likely heard the expression, *"It takes two to tango."* Your assessment of the problem focuses completely on what they have or haven't done. It may be hard to believe, but they have their own story about the situation, in which usually they're the hero or innocent bystander and *you're* the problem.

While you sometimes may need to confront someone's unskillful behavior, you should also be willing to look at your contribution to the situation.

Reflect on these questions:

- What might I have contributed to what's not working?
What other choices did I have along the way?
- What might this situation look like from the other person's perspective?
- Have I been *triggered* in this situation/relationship? How so?

Triggering is when feelings from our past have been re-stimulated by events in the present. For example:

My Board Chair reminds me of a long chain of other older men with whom I felt disrespected and diminished. When I try to talk with him, I get angry really quickly, but underneath I feel powerless and defensive.

For more on triggers, see: *Managing Your Triggers Toolkit*

Tip #3. Practice

When athletes know a big game is coming up, they practice. When musicians have a major concert coming up, they practice. When you have a crucial Courageous Conversation, you...? PRACTICE!!!

You can't try to completely control an authentic dialogue, and you need to leave space for the unexpected. But typically, in a Courageous Conversation, there is some critical message you need to communicate – something that is challenging for you to deliver.

For example:

- *Your leadership of the campaign team is not where it needs to be. It's going to need to significantly improve if you are to stay in this position.*
- *We are not willing to continue with our current level of financial contribution unless there is more benefit returning to our organization.*
- *The frequency and manner in which you as Board Chair have been interacting with senior staff is creating challenges.*

In our Rockwood Leadership trainings, we have found that if we can deliver these challenging but critical messages from a place of authentic power – relaxed, confident, connected to our purpose – the rest of the conversation is easy. Research shows that 93% of human communication is not the content of our words, but the body language, tone of voice, and energy of our communications. We encourage leaders to practice these critical messages again and again until their delivery is clear and powerful.

Tip #4. Set up the conversation for success

The conditions under which conversations are held have a lot to do with the outcomes.

- Face-to-face is always far, *far* preferable to telephone for courageous conversations. (Definitely, do *not* use email as a substitute for dialogue.)
- Hold Courageous Conversations in a place free from distraction and conducive to good focus (i.e. no incoming calls or interruptions).
- Timing is important. Make sure all parties have clear attention.
- Make sure the amount of time set aside is adequate to meet the intended **Outcomes**.
- When dealing with *complex* conversations, resolution may require a series of meetings. If so, make sure your **Outcomes** for the first meeting are appropriate and achievable.

Use the following worksheet to help you prepare well for Courageous Conversations.

PREP FOR COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION WORKSHEET

Purpose of conversation

Intended Outcomes (be specific)

Process (what steps will I initiate to achieve these outcomes?)

What is my contribution to the situation?

Am I triggered by this situation? If so, what does it evoke in me?

What is the central, critical communication that I may want to practice?
(For purposes of practice, keep it to a few lines.)

Where and when will I propose having this conversation?
What are optimal conditions to support success?