

# **Having Hard Conversations**

## **Agenda**

**Welcomes, Introductions, Overview of Session**

**Start Your Own Case Study**

**Why We Hesitate Having Hard Conversations**

**Questions to Ask Yourself Before Deciding to Have the  
Conversation**

**Other Ideas To Think About Before You Speak  
Professional Language and Outcome Mapping**

**Scripts and Seizing the Moment**

**Reflection and Feedback**

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## About the Presenter

Jennifer Abrams is an international educational and communications consultant for public and independent schools, hospitals, universities and non-profits. Jennifer trains and coaches teachers, administrators, nurses, hospital personnel, and others on new employee support, supervision, being generationally savvy, having hard conversations and effective collaboration skills.

In Palo Alto USD (Palo Alto, CA), Jennifer led professional development sessions on topics from equity and elements of effective instruction to teacher leadership and peer coaching and provided new teacher and administrator trainings at both the elementary and secondary level. From 2000-2011, Jennifer was lead coach for the Palo Alto-Mountain View-Los Altos-Saratoga-Los Gatos Consortium's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program.

In her educational consulting work, Jennifer has presented at annual conferences such as Learning Forward, ASCD, NASSP, NAESP, AMLE, ISACS and the New Teacher Center Annual Symposium, as well as at the Teachers' and Principals' Centers for International School Leadership. Jennifer's communications consulting in the health care sector includes training and coaching work at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and Stanford Hospital and Clinics.

Jennifer's publications include *Having Hard Conversations*, *The Multigenerational Workplace: Communicating, Collaborating & Creating Community* and *Hard Conversations Unpacked – the Whos, the Whens and the What Ifs*. Other publications include "Planning Productive Talk," her article for ASCD's *Educational Leadership* (October 2011), her chapter, "Habits of Mind for the School Savvy Leader" in Art Costa's and Bena Kallick's book, *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*, and her contribution to the book, *Mentors in the Making: Developing New Leaders for New Teachers* published by Teachers College Press. Jennifer writes a monthly newsletter/blog, *Voice Lessons*, available for reading at and subscribing to on her website, [www.jenniferabrams.com](http://www.jenniferabrams.com).

Jennifer has been recognized as one of "21 Women All K-12 Educators Need to Know" by *Education Week's* 'Finding Common Ground' blog, and the International Academy of Educational Entrepreneurship's 2015 Entrepreneur of the Year. She has been a featured interviewee on the topic of professionalism for ASCD's video series, *Master Class*, hosted by National Public Radio's Claudio Sanchez, and in the lead article, "Finding Your Voice in Facilitating Productive Conversations" for Learning Forward's *The Leading Teacher*, Summer 2013 newsletter; as a generational expert for "Tune in to What the New Generation of Teachers Can Do," published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, (May 2011), and by the Ontario Ministry of Education for their *Leadership Matters: Supporting Open-to-Learning Conversations* video series.

Jennifer considers herself a "voice coach," helping others learn how to best use their voices - be it collaborating on a team, presenting in front of an audience, coaching a colleague, supervising an employee and in her new role as an advisor for Reach Capital, an early stage educational technology fund. Jennifer holds a Master's degree in Education from Stanford University and a Bachelor's degree in English from Tufts University. She lives in Palo Alto, California. Jennifer can be reached at [jennifer@jenniferabrams.com](mailto:jennifer@jenniferabrams.com), [www.jenniferabrams.com](http://www.jenniferabrams.com), and on Twitter @jenniferabrams.

## **Tensions That Surface AND/OR Competing Commitments**

**Want to be Pleasing**

**Safety**

**Comfort**

**No Sense of Urgency**

**Perfectionism**

**Distrust – Of Self and Other**

**Too Big a Shift in Role Expectations**

**Priorities/Survival**

**Identity**

**Fatigue**

**Personality**

**Intent**

## **What Wins Out & What We Have To Deal With When We DON'T Speak Up – The Tolls of Ambivalence**

### **Pain and Guilt – Anxiety and Loneliness**

- ***“If you want to see someone in real pain watch someone who knows who he is and defaults on it on a regular basis.” (Pat Murray)***
- ***By our own silence we are condoning behavior we don't agree with.***
- ***We may feel lonely – not with the system, not with the ‘renegades’ – we may feel like we don't fit.***
- ***“We feel fraudulent, even invisible, because we are not in the world as we really are.” (Parker Palmer)***
- ***We may feel like we're not fulfilling our obligations.***

### **The Other Person Has Control and Power**

- ***The other person runs the show and runs us.***

### **We Don't Live By Our Principles**

- ***Bottom line values are being compromised.***
- ***“When you walk by incompetence, you lose your moral authority to lead.” Bud Scarr***
- ***We may feel like a hypocrite – not walking our talk.***
- ***“It is one thing to learn a method. It is another thing to commit to a philosophy.” Asa Hilliard***

### **Negative Impact on ALL Students**

- ***What actually happens to the students?***
- ***What do they live with? What do they see?***

**Two of the most significant barriers to the realization of human potential – resignation and dependency – are also often invisible to the casual observer. By recognizing and naming them, we begin the process of shifting from resignation to possibility and from dependency to a sense of personal power.  
Dennis Sparks – Leading for Results**

**Questions to Ask Yourself Before  
Having the Hard Conversation  
With Thanks to Debra Meyerson's Tempered Radicals**

**Timing**

Is this a good time to take a risk and pose a challenge?

Do I have to say anything or will it fix itself on its own?

What is the intensity of this need? Does it need to be handled now or can it wait?

Am I in the right frame of mind to say something or will I become too emotional?

Is this the time for my colleague to hear this? Can he/she hear this now? Or is his/her stress level so high it wouldn't be heard?

Do I have enough information and accurate information about this situation?

Do I prioritize this conversation before another one?

**Stakes**

How high are the stakes for the different parties involved? Is this a fight worth picking?

If I speak up, who or what else will this affect? What is the ripple effect?

Are the negative effects greater than the potential gains if I choose to speak out?

How important is it for the students or staff that I bring this up?

Is what is going on in the classroom unsafe or damaging to students or staff?

Is this something that the "higher ups" need to know about? Is this a contractual situation?  
What rights do I have? What rights does he/she have?

How vulnerable am I willing to get?

Is this imperative to talk about or just somewhat important?

What would happen if I didn't have the conversation?

## **Questions to Ask Yourself Before Having the Hard Conversation With Thanks to Debra Meyerson's Tempered Radicals**

### **Likelihood of Success**

How promising are the hoped for results?

Have I thought through enough what the real problem is so I have it well articulated myself?  
Has it come up before? Is it a pattern?

If I bring this issue up do I have an action plan thought out? Can I support my colleague through the changes I would like to see made? Do I have a game plan in mind?

If I say something is it going to move the person's professional work forward?

### **Options**

Are there better alternative responses to those that would pose a less significant risk?

Are there responses that will enable me to take a stand without overly jeopardizing my credibility?

Has the person been given the opportunity to self-discover this issue and is it on his/her plate?  
Have I tried to bring it up before and what was the response? Is there a way I could help them see it is a concern without going into "hard conversation" mode?

Can this issue be brought up via email or another medium? Which medium would be most effective? Or does it truly need to be said face-to-face?

How do I feel about offering this criticism? Does it give me pleasure or pain? If I am feeling pleasure, is there someone else to speak to the teacher because I will "act out" my attitude and it will be seen?

What am I trying to accomplish and if I speak up will it move me toward or away from that goal?

What are some other ways of thinking about this? Has this always been the case or have there been times when something different has happened?

**Questions to Ask Yourself Before  
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**Consequences for Failure**

What are the worst possible outcomes of the different choices? How bad are they, and how likely are they to occur?

No matter the outcome is this something I have to say because I have to say it?

Am I willing to experience the discomfort that might come as a result of bringing up this topic?

**Personal Association- Personal Perspective**

Will this be seen as only “my issue”? Am I outside the interaction and yet commenting on it with “heat”?

Can I say what I want to say and still project acceptance of this person?

Do I have a positive, trusting relationship with this person so I can bring up this concern and have it heard?

Is the person doing something that is really bugging me because it is a pet peeve of mine/a style difference or is this something that needs to change because it is affecting students/staff/the school?

Do I model the correct behavior I am looking for so after I say something I will know I am already walking my talk?

By my silence does this person think I agree with his/her perspective/behavior? Is that ok?

Is there a cultural lens I am wearing that I need to acknowledge and deal with?

How do my beliefs guide me to think this way, and how might other beliefs alter my thinking?

If I trusted this person's intentions would I interpret his/her responses differently?

Why do I hold on so strongly to this view?

**Questions to Ask Yourself Before  
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**Do-ability**

Does a response feel do-able? Is there a response that is not overwhelming; that I can help implement even more effectively and would be as helpful?

Is there specific and reliable evidence I can share? How would I present that in a way that can be heard?

If I do bring up the concern is there enough time to really deal with it or will it just cause problems?

Have I thought through why the person might be behaving in this way?  
What external or internal factors are affecting the person? Motivations?

Why would a reasonable, rational and decent person be doing what he or she is doing?  
Can I see the actions through the lens of positive intentions?

Is the behavior I am proposing to as a substitute do-able/teach-able for this individual?

**What are my Top 5 Questions that I might need to ask myself?**

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

**Outcome Mapping**  
**Adaptive Schools - Garmston and Wellman**

What is the problem?

What do you want to see instead?

What does it look like/sound like?

Why might the person not be doing the behaviors?

What supports might you offer?

What supports do you need?

## **HHC Scripting “Scaffold”**

**Opening statement that shows positive intent.**

**Issue framed in professional language.**

**Specific example(s) that illustrates the behavior.**

**Clarification of the impact of behavior on others.**

**A request for action.**

**Invitation to dialogue.**

# Quick Scripts for Having Hard Conversations

From Crucial Conversations by Kerry Patterson

## **“State My Path Statement”**

**“This is what I have noticed.....  
I am beginning to think.....  
What is your take on it?”**

**Example:** “I noticed you said, “What do you want?” in a gruff way when the student came to see you at your desk. If I was that student I might feel a bit intimidated about coming to ask you a question if I got that response. Did you sense that she was a bit shy in responding to you? What’s your take on what happened?”

From “Management Shorts” by Andrea Corney ([www.acorn-od.com](http://www.acorn-od.com))

## **“I Message Feedback Statements - Take One”**

**“When you do X (behavior), I think/feel Y (reaction).  
It would be helpful to me if you could do Z (behavior) instead. Would that work for you? What do you need?”**

**Example:** “When you come to our meeting late, I get the sense that the meeting isn’t important to you and that you disrespect me in some way. It would be helpful for me if you would show up on time and that way I wouldn’t feel defensive from the get-go. Is that something you could do?”

From “Management Shorts” by Andrea Corney ([www.acorn-od.com](http://www.acorn-od.com))

## **“I Message Feedback Statements – Take Two”**

**“Here is the problem as I see it. What is going on from your perspective?  
What am I doing that gets in the way? And what can we both do to fix this problem?”**

**Example:** “When you roll your eyes and respond to my comments in the brainstorm with “Yeah, but...” I have to admit I feel really feel angry and pretty much shut down. I have no idea if you know you are doing this or if you know how it is impacting me. I would really like to be able to participate in this meeting without feeling bad about it. Can you see this from my perspective? Am I missing something because I would like it if both of us could participate fully in this meeting.”

## “Seizing the Moment”

Exploring ways to speak up rather than tune out when presented with negatively generalized statements made by students or colleagues. Give yourself a voice and the power to affect change by addressing uncomfortable, untrue, generalizing, or negative comments when they're made.

### Sentence Starters:

- “Tell me more about what makes you say that.”
- “I’m not willing to agree with that generalization.”
- “Do you think that’s true generally? Do you have a specific student or example in mind?”
- “Some of the words you just used make me uncomfortable.”
- “I don’t agree with what you just said. Could you please share more about what you mean?”
- “That makes me feel uncomfortable. Can we talk about it?”
- “That seems unfair to me. Do you really feel that way?”
- “Could you explain that to me please?”
- “Tell me more about what makes you say that.”
- “I have a different opinion, but I’m willing to listen and share.”
- “Here’s an example of how I feel differently.”

# **The Whats, Wheres and Whens**

**Location**

**Timing**

**Body Language - Voice, Hands, Eyes**

**Trigger Words**

**Recommend, Suggest, Expect**

**Notes – 3<sup>rd</sup> point concept**

**Phrases – (with supervisors, ask for permission)**

**Preparing Yourself Emotionally**

**Crying or Yelling**

**The Greater Yes**

## Having Hard Conversations – Other Resources

**If you can't articulate where the colleague is stuck and you need some help with pinning the issue down and helping to move him/her along:**

“A New Way of Thinking: Beginning Teacher Coaching Through Garmston's and Costa's States of Mind” - Jennifer Abrams  
([www.cognitivecoaching.com](http://www.cognitivecoaching.com) – CC Literature/Readings)

Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. – Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston, Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 2002

**If you can articulate the problem and you need some help to think about the solution more deeply:**

The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups – Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman, Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1999  
([www.adaptiveschools.com](http://www.adaptiveschools.com))

“Getting Unstuck: Using an Outcome Map for Effective Problem Solving” – Jennifer Abrams  
([www.updc.org](http://www.updc.org) - UPDC Library, Utah Special Educator, November, 2003)

Critical Friends Groups – Chapter 9 – Powerful Designs for Professional Learning – Lois Brown Easton, editor – National Staff Development Council, 2004

**If you need help with scripting protocols:**

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When The Stakes Are High – Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, Mc Graw Hill, 2002  
(State My Path Chapter)

Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations and Bad Behavior - Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, Mc Graw Hill, 2005

Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work & in Life, One Conversation at a Time – Susan Scott, Viking Press, 2002 ([www.fierceinc.com](http://www.fierceinc.com))  
(Confrontation Model)

“Communicating Concerns Directly” – a protocol in the New Teacher Center's training, Improving Student Achievement Through Teacher Observation and Coaching  
([www.newteachercenter.org](http://www.newteachercenter.org))

## Having Hard Conversations – Other Resources

### **If you need help designing an action plan once you have had the conversation:**

The Skillful Leader: Confronting Mediocre Teaching – Alexander Platt, et al, Ready About Press, 2000, ([www.ready-about.com](http://www.ready-about.com))

### **Other resources for language, protocols, support:**

Assessment Strategies for Self-Directed Learning – Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick, Corwin Press, 2004

The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, Parker J. Palmer, Jossey-Bass, 1998

Data Driven Dialogue: A Facilitator's Guide to Collaborative Inquiry - Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman, Miravia LLC, 2003 ([www.miravia.com](http://www.miravia.com))

The Dance of Connection: How to Talk to Someone When You're Mad, Hurt, Scared, Frustrated, Insulted, Betrayed or Desperate – Harriet Lerner, Harper Collins, 2001

How The Way We Talk Can Change The Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation – Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, Jossey-Bass, 2001

How to Make Supervision and Evaluation Really Work – Jon Saphier, Research for Better Teaching, Inc., 1993

Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships – Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman, Miravia LLC, 2001 ([www.miravia.com](http://www.miravia.com))

On Apology – Aaron Lazare, Oxford University Press, 2004

Tempered Radicals: How Everyday Leaders Inspire Change at Work – Debra E. Meyerson, Harvard Business School Press, 2003

Success with the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense – Suzette H. Elgin, Prentice Hall, 1989

Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well – Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, William Morrow, 1996

**Our conversations invent us. Through our speech and our silence, we become smaller or larger selves. Through our speech and our silence, we diminish or enhance the other person, and we narrow or expand the possibilities between us. How we use our voice determines the quality of our relationships, who we are in the world, and what the world can be and might become. Clearly, a lot is at stake here.**

**Harriet Lerner, The Dance of Connection**