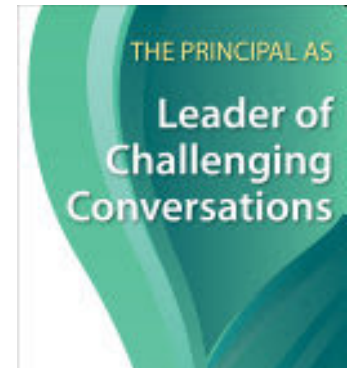# *The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations*
by Ontario Principals' Council

Chapter 7:
How Do You Respond to Challenging Conversations?

In the previous chapter we explored how anger, both ours and others', can affect a challenging conversation. Earlier, we considered how our individual orientation toward conflict affects our response to challenging conversations . Knowing how he tends to respond to conflict and developing insights into how others may approach a challenging conversation can assist the school leader significantly when he is faced with a challenging conversation. In this chapter we will continue our exploration of how who we are as individuals can affect our response to challenges . Since many challenging conversations also contain an element of conflict, it is useful to base the material in this chapter on insights gained from the literature on conflict management. In that literature a distinction is made between conversational styles and conversational strategies.

Conversational style is a term used to describe ways of responding to a conversation that are an integral part of the personality of an individual. It is evolutionary in nature-as the school . leader becomes more experienced and evolves as a person she can develop a variety of responses to a variety of conversational contexts. Typically one approaches a challenging conversation as a matUre adult differently than she might have as a callow youth. That said, a school leader has a preferred style that she accesses most easily when faced with a conversational ambush and she has not had an opportunity to assess the situation properly and find the critical path. This preferred style constitutes a reaction, rather than a response, to a conflict and may or may not be useful. This helps to explain how an otherwise skilled and capable school leader sometimes finds herself saying things that get her into trouble and she regrets immediately. Sometimes a school leader is her own worst enemy. If the school leader has a sense of how she tends to react when faced with challenging conversations, she can curb her worst impulses and quickly access the positive and effective attitudes and skills when they are needed most.

Conversational strategy refers to intellectual decisions that a school leader can make when approaching a challenge and potential conflict. After assessing the situation, the school leader chooses to approach a conversation in a particular way. For example, in an earlier case study we noted that Principal Bernard spent some necessary time reviewing a student's file and recalling past experiences with the Benns and their typical reaction to situations that are upsetting for them. She was well prepared to negotiate quietly with the Benns and to avert their anger and frustration. Conversely, Principal Frances had no chance to prepare for meeting teacher Stewart and in that ambush did not lead with his best response. While it is convenient to separate style and strategy for discussion's sake, in reality, who you are, the experiences you've had, and the responses you have developed-your preferred style of interaction-will also inform the choices that you can make when faced with a challenge.

In a collaborative school culture the school leader will ideally have a sophisticated array of responses to draw on and apply to situations as they arise. The leader will assess a situation and will match a response to it so that the conversation can move forward with efficiency and sensitivity. The skillful school leader knows and demonstrates that each situation demands an appropriate response . Safety and security issues, for example, often demand a forthright, direct, and decisive style of operation. Considering a new timetable structure calls for a more democratic, consensus-oriented style of operation.

The wise school leader also pays attention to how others in the school community tend to respond to challenging moments and can match his responses to meet their needs more incisively. It is obvious that although it is not always easy to do, engaging a confrontational faculty member or irate parent in a collaborative fashion is likely to be more successful than meeting confrontation with confrontation (Kosmoski & Pollack, 2005).

Let's consider the following scenario:

> *Recently Principal Arthur received a written report from the faculty that is critical of many aspects of the school's current administration, the organization of the school program, and the school's priorities. While some of the faculty concerns may be valid, Principal Arthur believes that there are a great number of concerns assigned to the school leadership team that are unfair, unrealistic, and simply offensive.*
>
> *Principal Arthur is at first angry, and within the privacy of his office he is blunt with his assistant principals about his thoughts about both the substance of the faculty's concerns and their approach to presenting a report. Why, for instance, didn't they just request a meeting and discuss their concerns in an open fashion? Instead they had these private meetings and then submitted their report. Outside of the office. though, Principal Arthur knows that a timely and sensitive response is required and that it is crucial for the further development of the school that this response be appropriate both in content and delivery.*

Principal Arthur's response to the report and his subsequent actions will depend a great deal on his personal orientation toward challenging conversations and his preferred styles of engagement. Then he must support his good intentions and goals with the skills and processes that will move this situation forward. What choices could Principal Arthur make?

CONFLICT STYLE: Who are you?
Take a few moments to turn to complete the Negotiation Style Inventory.

The value of this inventory is less that it permits the participant to identify her or others' particular conversational style than that it provides useful language for discussing the broad concept of conversational style. The inventory is adapted (Keams & Harris, 1996) from research conducted by Kenneth Thomas (1976) in *The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology.* Thomas 's work focused on the nature of conflict in the workplace and how interpersonal conflict affected success at work. In his model , a conversation or conflict can be viewed as a dynamic between two key elements:

1. getting what you want and

2. maintaining relationships .

In theory, no one conversational mode is better than the other; the conversational context will determine which style is best for the circumstances encountered. Hence when safety and security issues are paramount , a competing style might be best-clear , decisive action is required in a short space of time. Relationship s often take a back seat under such circumstances. Situations wherein consensus is preferred demand a more collaborative approach from the school leader. Consensus-oriented conversations also tend to take more time, demand a more sophisticated range of interpersonal skills from all involved, and require a significant commitment from everyone. Ideally, the highly evolved and skilled leader will interpret the context accurately, will have access to a range of styles, and will apply the appropriate strategy while using exemplary interpersonal and process skills.

This inventory describes an individual's tendency to respond to challenging conversations in five core modes. Let's consider those modes in view of Principal Arthur 's situation:

1. Avoiding
Avoiders withdraw into their shells to avoid conflicts. They give up their personal goals and relationships. They tend to stay away from the issues that create conflict and away from the person s with whom they tend to have challenging conversations. Avoiding by definition requires little skill and no conversation. This style can be attractive and even useful at times. We have already presented the basic idea that not all conversations have to happen immediately, if at all. However, this is not an option for Principal Arthur in this context.

2. Competing/Confronting
Competitors try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept their viewpoint in a conversation or their solution to a conflict. Their goals are highly important to them, and their relationships are less important. They seek to achieve their goals at all costs. Competitors assume that conflicts are resolved by one person winning and the other losing. This style requires energy and determination from the school leader. It does not necessarily depend on highly sophisticated skills and typically involves little serious dialogue. It is a one-way conversation.

Principal Arthur could call a meeting and clearly denounce both the substance and the tactics of the faculty report. He could assert his leadership and priorities for the school and present consequences for those who do not comply. In doing so he runs a serious risk of alienating mimy faculty members and irreparably undermining his status as a leader in this school. He may get compliance from faculty, but never allegiance and loyalty.

3. Accommodating

To accommodators the relationship is most important. Their own goals are less important and under some circumstances can be overlooked in the interest of maintaining positive relationships. They believe that conversations should not be conducted at the expense of positive relationships. Unlike avoiders, accommodators acknowledge a challenge but choose to focus on relationships rather than their personal goals. While this makes sense at times, perhaps when the goal is not that important or maintaining relationships is the goal, there are other times when school leaders who tend toward accommodation seem more motivated by a desire to be accepted and liked by others than in moving the organization forward. This conversational mode requires modest conversational skills and capitalizes on the good intentions and social currency of the school leader.

Principal Arthur has the option to actively listen to the concerns of the faculty and take a conciliatory approach to the circumstances. This would go a long way in preserving relationships between the administration and faculty but holds no guarantee of effectively addressing the substantive issues raised. Feeling good may not be good enough in this case.

4. Compromising

Compromisers are moderately concerned with their own goals and their relationships. They seek a compromise; they give up some of their goals and persuade others to do likewise. They seek solutions that allow both parties something and address the common good while preserving the relationship. This approach requires skill and commitment on the part of all parties involved in the conversation.

Principal Arthur could seek a compromise as he works with the faculty to address some of their concerns. Relationships would be better preserved , and progress might be made on some substantive issues. It is important as well that Principal Arthur, by promoting compromise , will also lay the base for the further conversations that are required. He will have shown himself and his intentions to be reasonable, transparent, and trustworthy. The key question here is, Is this enough?

5. Collaborating

Collaborators highly value their goals and their relationships. They view challenges as problems that can be solved by allowing both sides to achieve their personal goals as much as is possible. Collaborators see conversations as opportunities to improve relationships by easing tension and deepening understanding. They are not satisfied until a solution is found that addresses both parties ' goals and resolves any negative feelings that may have developed.

If Principal Arthur pursued this approach he would not only preserve relationships but enrich them as well. He would also stand a better chance of effectively addressing substantive issues in a way that ensures that he and the faculty feel that their needs are truly well met. There would also be an opportunity to appreciate that both Principal Arthur and the faculty have mutual needs to be met. The key difference between collaborating and compromising is one of degree-effective collaboration takes more time, exemplary interpersonal skills, and a firm commitment to the process by everyone involved. However, the results are usually far richer than those that are derived from compromise. The key question is, Is collaboration worth the investment of time and energy in this context?

CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES-CHOICES THAT YOU CAN MAKE

One way that styles can be distinguished from strategies is to view conversational/conflict resolution styles as coming from the heart, while strategy choices come from the head. The choice of strategy, though, is influenced and limited by the ranges of styles that the school leader can easily access. For example, school leaders who tend toward compromise as a style in many circumstances can find it hard to be directive and assertive even when circumstances require such an approach. Similarly, competing school leaders often have difficulty in letting go and accommodating others even when the circumstances suggest that would be the best way to approach a situation. For our purpose, the school leader has three basic strategies available for responding to a challenging conversation:

Avoidance

The school leader could simply choose to avoid a conversation. In Chapter 1, we considered a range of reasons why he might do this. To be clear there are also circumstances where this can be an acceptable strategy. For example, when emotions are obviously running high, it may be best to not introduce a contentious issue and look

for a better opportunity later. But there are other times when avoidance is chosen because the school leader does not want to elicit a challenging response from the other party or the school leader, perhaps mistakenly, does not think that a topic is worthy of conversation. School leaders who have a tendency toward an avoiding style are most likely to make this choice. A pattern of avoidance of challenging conversations can make for a pleasant, but not particularly effective, school organization. An emphasis on making nice rarely moves an organization forward.

Problem Solving

School leaders who tend toward compromising and collaborating are most comfortable with this choice. They listen well, facilitate the conversation of others, and demonstrate genuine interest and commitment to ensuring that the organization moves forward with the participation and cooperation of all stakeholders . They are comfortable with conversations that center on substantive issues and the feelings that underlie ideas. The school leader who chooses a problem-solving approach is usually comfortable with controversy and tends to see the energy inherent in controversy and contention as a positive force. School leaders who approach challenging conversations in a problem solving mode are often also comfortable with ambiguity because they appreciate that problem-solving conversations are negotiations or mediations that take time, skill, and commitment. They presume that there are two equal parties in a conversation and that the school leader does not control everything that can occur. It is important to them that others are empowered to participate in the full life of the school.

Confrontation

There are times when the school leader must confront conversations without much regard for ongoing relationships. Safety and security issues immediately come to mind, but school leaders are also responsible for ensuring that the "moral purpose" of education is fulfilled (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). When a situation arises in which this moral purpose may be compromised, then the school leader must provide direction clearly and unequivocally. For example, the school leader is responsible for ensuring that his school's program is compliant with all state requirements and that student achievement improves each year. When situations develop that challenge the school's ability to meet its obligations, then the school leader must act. However, there are other times when a confronting strategy can be counterproductive. Confrontational leaders tend to listen poorly and dominate conversations. Long term, they squelch participation of others and inhibit the involvement of others in the life of the school.

Each of these approaches has some merit depending on the circumstances. With experience and practice the school leader learns how to assess a situation and apply his skills within the most suitable strategy. Knowing the appropriate strategy increases the school leader's competence and confidence in his ability to effect a positive end in a challenging conversation.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT STRATEGY CHOICE

There are several key factors that affect the school leader's choice of strategy when responding to a challenging conversation:

- Time and timing. It is important for the school leader to choose a strategy that she has time to complete. For example, long collaborative conversations require extensive time commitments. As mentioned in earlier chapters, it is also important to choose a time to talk that supports achieving your goals. Hurried conversations or conversation foisted on others at bad moments are usually not successful conversations.
- Place. An effective conversation needs to be held in a place that supports its goals. Sometimes that means a conversation is held in private, but there are other times when an open, public forum works best. While Principal Arthur may have some conversations with faculty members in private, he will likely need at some point to bring the conversation into a more public forum and address the entire faculty.
- Personal preferences and skill level. Individuals will vary in both how they prefer to operate and how their skills will allow them to operate. For example, controlling school leaders can find it hard to work in more collaborative modes. Their discomfort can compromise a conversation and ultimately affect the overall collaborative nature and degree of relational trust in a school (Stephenson, 2009).
- Commitment. Conversations of any sort cannot be forced on others. If the commitment to have a conversation isn't there, choose a different strategy. Sometimes someone doesn't want to talk, period; at other times she doesn't want to talk about specific topics. Principal Arthur, as he sorts through faculty concerns, will likely find some concerns that most people really don't care that much about. He will establish priorities and provide time and energy to the high-priority concerns; other concerns may get a much more cursory approach.
- Required outcomes. Notwithstanding the previous comments, sometimes an issue is so important that it is worth a serious commitment and all the time that is required to achieve the stated goals. The conversation should go ahead in these circumstances even if not everyone feels as committed as others. Part of the work of the school leader will be to help everyone to appreciate the need for such conversations. A classic example of this occurs in

mediation. It is not unusual for one of the parties to want to expedite the process by making a quick apology for an offence and then conclude the mediation. The wise mediator knows that the apology can be helpful but is not necessarily indicative of a full exploration of the situation and how it came to be. A resolution based on a simple apology will likely not address underlying problems. A more satisfying resolution comes from a thorough exploration of the situation and the part played by the parties involved. It is only then that longer-lasting resolutions can be achieved.

With the role of mediator in mind, in the final chapter, we will explore the role of the school leader as a facilitator of challenging conversations between others.

CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY
- Individuals develop conversational/conflict styles as they gain experience both in life and in their positions
- Ideally the school leader is comfortable in a variety of conversational styles and is skillful in matching an appropriate response with his desired outcomes.
- School leaders have choices of strategies-avoidance, problem solving, confrontation-they might use to work through a challenging conversation.
- Strategy choice is affected by time and timing, place, personal preferences and skills, commitment levels, and required outcomes.
- Strategies are chosen to best meet the interests and needs of the parties within an emotionally safe and rational process.
- Strategies are chosen based on a balance between maintaining relationships and achieving specific goals.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS
1. Think about some recent challenging conversations that you have had. What strategies worked best for you?
2. Describe the most comfortable conversational style that you tend to lead with when involved in a challenging conversation.
3. Describe what it is like to work in a style that is hard for you or in a strategy that is not a preferred approach.
4. List the factors that affect the approach you might choose when engaging in a challenging conversation. Which ones affect you the most?
5. Recall a time when you chose an approach to a challenging conversation that was not effective. What would you do differently next time?

CASE STUDY PRACTICE
We have considered the situation confronting Principal Arthur. Now it's your turn. Read the following case study and develop a response to the following questions:

1. Which issues or concerns would you choose to address?

2. Which steps would you take in managing this conversation? Outline your goals and the actions you would take to meet those goals.

In the Resources section of the book some suggestions for addressing this scenario will be provided.

The Learning Resources Center
Principal Morris has started a new assignment at an elementary school within a very diverse community. She quickly observes that the resources and decor in the school Learning Resources Center are not reflective of the cultures and ethnicities of the students currently enrolled in the school. While reviewing the teacher-librarian's curriculum, Principal Morris notes that he has made no mention of developing resources that reflect the diversity of the school community. Principal Morris has had several conversations with the teacher librarian about the importance of the Learning Resources Center's being a core area in the school for promoting and providing material that supports equity and inclusive education in the school. However, the teacher-librarian has been at the school for fifteen years, and he feels that he knows the students and the community best. He has already told Principal Morris that she is the only principal who has ever mentioned this "equity thing." Principal Morris values the experience that the teacher-librarian brings to the job and wants him to continue in the role. Principal Morris

also knows that she must have a very important conversation with this teacher about his program and the direction of the Learning Resources Center.

YOUR PERSONAL CASE STUDY-FINAL REFLECTION

Using the template from the Resources section of this book, consider how the material presented in this chapter affects your personal case study.

Negotiation Styles Visual
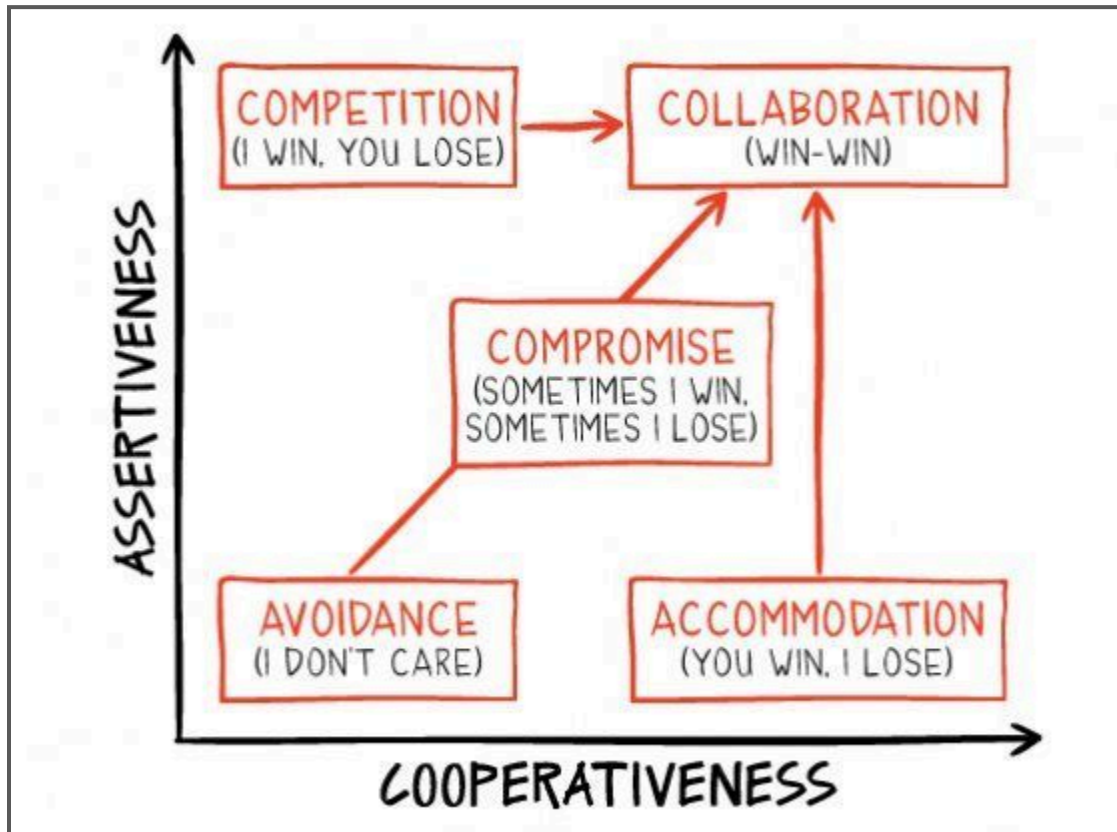
See also
- O&F Negotiation Style Inventory
- O&F 18 Reasons for Avoiding Hard Conversations