
Transforming Dreaded Conversations into Dynamic Collaboration at Work

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Chapter 1

What is a Dreaded Conversation?

In the early 1980s, I was young, innocent, and timid. One afternoon in a hallway at work, I ran into my boss near the water fountain. He was middle aged, experienced, and dull.

He started talking about a basketball game that weekend between our college alma maters, an old and intense Georgia rivalry. “Would you like to place a bet on the game?,” he asked. “Okay,” I responded half-heartedly wondering how to exit the conversation.

“The winner gets a kiss,” he replied as he winked and walked away.

Despite being pretty stunned and totally grossed out, I quickly surmised that either way the game went, I lost.

The rest of the day, I worried about what to do. Eventually, I decided to tell two friends from work. One of them wasn’t surprised. She’d heard stories from other young women who’d had similar experiences with this man. A few of them had reported him to the Human Resources department, but never received any support. I knew that HR’s response was not only unethical; it was illegal. But, I decided not to take them on, too. Instead, I planned to have a very short and very dreaded conversation with him on Monday.

Up to this point in my work history, I had no experience with being assertive in a dreaded conversation. I’d had opportunities, but had never risen to the challenge. Like the time I told a principal in my first job that I’d probably take on an extra class if asked. I didn’t think she would ask. When she asked, I changed my mind and said no. She was angry. But I sat through the whole dreaded conversation with my head down, shaking it “no” every few minutes and waiting for her to excuse me.

I had a standing meeting every week with my boss to discuss my department. At the end of that next meeting, with hands sweating, heart pounding, and stomach in knots, I summoned up my best neutral facial expression and said, “There’s one more thing. Remember what you said to me at the water fountain last week about the game?”

His eyes lit up, expecting to get the pay off, “Yes, I do.”

I took a deep breath and delivered my response in one exhale, “I don’t ever want you to say anything like that to me again. All right?”

His response was short and monotone. “Okay.”

He never did say anything like that to me again. Unfortunately, I suspect it didn’t stop him from harassing other women.

This book is about the lessons I learned from that experience and from many more dreaded conversations in my work life since then. I learned to be assertive: courageous, calm, concise and direct. I managed my anxiety and physical discomfort without letting it obstruct my goal. I made a request without either pleading with or threatening him. I was prepared to handle a hostile response, for example, if he made a joke or minimized his behavior in an attempt to make me back down. And, I communicated my boundaries and my intention to protect them in future conversations. My story is an example of a dreaded conversation that I hope you never experience. I hope that this story along with the stories of other leaders I have coached will inspire you to ask for and get what you want in your work life.

Difficult Conversations versus Difficult People

In this book, I’ll share numerous tools and techniques for developing the personal qualities and professional skills that will help you transform dreaded conversations into dynamic

collaboration. The purpose of the book is to help you have difficult conversations with *reasonable people*. This book won't help you have impossible conversations with irrational people. Despite his creepy behavior, my boss was reasonable. He listened to me, and met my request. But, if you're dealing with unreasonable or irrational people who do things like hang up the phone while you're talking with them, walk out of meetings when they don't get their way, or make fun of appropriate requests, this book probably won't be much help except for the section on managing your discomfort in Chapter 8. Instead, read some books about dealing with difficult people. There are two different versions of the same title, *Dealing with Difficult People*. One is by Rick Brinkman and Rick Kirschner, the other is by Christina Osborne.

But, if you're a leader who dreads giving corrective feedback to your employees, avoids setting boundaries with your peers, or fears telling your boss that she's working you too hard, this book is for you.

What is a Dreaded Conversation?

A dreaded conversation is any conversation at work that a leader dreads having. Table 1.1 lists the people who leaders dread talking with and some of the topics that they dread talking about. Leaders hate not knowing how to get what they want in these conversations. And, they're frustrated because they don't know how to create a work environment where anybody can have challenging conversations without all the dread.

Table 1.1 Leaders Dread Talking with People about these Topics

- ❑ Employees: Absenteeism, poor performance, bad attitude
- ❑ Team: Low productivity, unmet goals, unresolved conflict
- ❑ Peers: Ignoring policies or procedures, shared employees, ineffective meetings, conflicting work/personality styles
- ❑ Boss/Board: Limited resources, unrealistic expectations and timelines
- ❑ Customers: Outrageous requests, unwillingness to be satisfied
- ❑ Suppliers: Unmet contractual agreements, poor quality product/service

Where Does the Dread Come From?

Dread comes from two sources. First, you feel dread (anxiety, sweaty palms, upset stomach, sleeplessness, etc.) about an impending conversation because you're afraid that you're going to hurt the other person's feelings. You're a kind person, and you don't like to deliver bad news to employees, co-workers or customers. So, you fear for the other person.

The second source of dread is a fear for your own safety. You've imagined that your boss is going to fire you when you tell her that you're cutting back from 60 hours a week to 50. So, you fear for yourself.

In either case, fear for the other or fear for

"I have a new philosophy. I'm only going to dread one day at a time."

*--Charlie Brown in 'Peanuts'
by Charles Schulz*

yourself, you lack the qualities and skills needed to resolve differences in an effective, humane way. You feel stuck because you're afraid to initiate the conversation, but you're miserable because you haven't had it. Your stuckness causes delay, and the delay increases your dread. At dread's peak, leaders feel like fakes. "Why did they hire me to be a manager? I don't know how to handle conflict! They should have hired someone else." That's when a leader wishes she could just go back to being a lawyer, doctor, or scientist, because being a leader feels impossible.

Your stuckness and self-loathing is what prompted me to write the book. I'm saddened by the number of leaders who hate themselves because they don't know how to handle conflict. It's not your fault! You were never taught how to manage conflict. So, before you give up, read the rest of this book. It'll give you one hundred simple, specific techniques to overcome your dread so that successful, collaborative conversations will be the norm.

Chapter 2

Who Benefits from Transforming Dreaded Conversations?

Even if you're the only person in your organization who learns how to transform dreaded conversations into dynamic collaboration, many people will benefit from your effort. You'll probably benefit the most in your role as a leader (Table 2.1). But, your staff/direct reports, colleagues, boss, Board of Directors, and customers will also profit from your behavioral shifts.

Table 2.1 Who Benefits from Transforming Dread into Collaboration

Individual/Group	Benefits
Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Increased confidence <input type="checkbox"/> Less dread <input type="checkbox"/> More flow
Staff/Direct reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> More productivity <input type="checkbox"/> Less stress <input type="checkbox"/> Clear expectations <input type="checkbox"/> Improved teamwork
Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Less friction <input type="checkbox"/> Enhanced collaboration
Boss/Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> More understanding <input type="checkbox"/> More free time
Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Higher quality <input type="checkbox"/> Greater trust
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Increased efficiency <input type="checkbox"/> Greater sustainability

Once a **leader** completes the four planning proficiencies covered in Chapter 7, they'll feel increased confidence about approaching any dreaded situation. My clients have told me repeatedly that simply planning for a conversation reduces their anxiety and improves their performance.

In addition to more confidence, you'll shift from a feeling of friction to a feeling of flow in your work and professional relationships. In other words, when conflict arises, you won't have that same sense of dread as before: the sweaty palms, racing heart, or knot in the stomach. You'll address the situation and individuals quickly and easily.

This sense of flow leads to greater productivity. When nothing is stopping you or irritating you, you get more work done. Many of my clients notice that they're working fewer hours, because they're accomplishing more in less time and feeling less stress.

You're not the only one who benefits from letting go of the dread. Your **staff** gets a payback from your new direct and supportive communication style. They'll experience less stress because they'll know what's expected of them, and they'll feel safe to express concerns directly to you.

These dynamics will improve teamwork among your direct reports, because you'll no longer tolerate poor performance or bad attitudes. I hope your entire team will want to learn the

Transformational Elements, too, so that they can enjoy the same personal benefits that you experience.

Because many dreaded conversations are with **colleagues** who are peer leaders, they'll benefit by observing your new skills. Your colleagues will experience less friction in their work with you, because you'll know how to effectively resolve conflict. I'm not saying that you'll be best friends with everyone, but you'll learn how to communicate openly for enhanced collaboration. For example, you'll be able to resolve disagreements about shared resources or how to standardize policies and procedures across your teams.

Whether you report to a **boss or a Board of Directors**, they will benefit as well from your improved communication style. Your boss will quickly understand that you've learned to set productive and protective boundaries. She'll know that you'll immediately address her or the entire Board as soon as those boundaries are jeopardized. (See Chapter 8 for techniques on setting productive boundaries.) The greatest benefit for your boss is that she'll have much more free time to get her work done, because she'll be spending less time managing you.

Customers profit from your ability to handle dreaded conversations. They'll receive a higher quality product or service from you and your team. As a result, they'll develop a greater trust in your organization because of your commitment to resolving conflicts.

How does the **organization** benefit from you transforming dread into collaboration? With less dread, delay and friction, organizational efficiency will grow. As productivity increases, the organization will experience greater sustainability.

Cleaning Up Residual Conflicts

All of these benefits make it sound like transforming dreaded conversations will result in workplace heaven. I'm not saying these techniques and tools will totally eradicate conflict. On the contrary, you might initially notice even more conflict in your organization as a result of you and others using my recommendations. As individuals and groups develop more effective communication skills, they often begin to surface more conflicts, deeper conflicts, and residual conflicts. There may be a significant period of discomfort; it might be a week, a month, or a year.

But, it's important for everyone involved to feel confident that they're moving through the process and making progress. Unresolved conflict creates pockets of repressed energy and creativity. Conflict needs to be surfaced; it's an opportunity for innovation. When we can openly talk about our disagreements and conflicts, it gives us the opportunity to surface new ways of being productive in the organization.

This is a scary zone to go through. But, organizations, individuals, and teams will see that it's worth taking this risk.

In the next chapter, I describe three traditional ways to approach conflict, why they don't work, and how to develop a communication style that transforms dread into dynamic collaboration.

"Tradition is what you resort to when you don't have the time or the money to do it right."

--Kurt Herbert Adler

Chapter 3

How Leaders Usually Handle Dreaded Conversations

Leaders handle dreaded conversations in a variety of ways based on their situational style. A situational style is a mode of being that's determined by both the leader's personality and the specific situation: who you're talking with, what you're talking about, and where you're having the conversation.

The Ruler

There are four situational styles of handling dreaded conversations. The first style is the **Ruler**, or fighting style, that surfaces in about 10 to 20 percent of all dreaded situations. **Rulers** overuse power, refuse to listen, and force their views on others. This style surfaces because a **Ruler** doesn't have the skill set or qualities that lets her step away from the situation temporarily to see if she could be part of the problem.

When a leader is in **Ruler** style, she refuses to listen to the other person. Sometimes, she's so upset or afraid that she's not even conscious that there is another person or perspective. Ruling is a self-righteous approach to communication that's highly demotivating. When a **Ruler** fights her way through conflict, others learn to be intimidated, give in, and relinquish their responsibility. This blocks creativity. Ruling is an extremely ineffective style for handling dreaded conversations.



The Coward

The second situational style is the **Coward**. In about 10 to 20 percent of dreaded situations, leaders react like **Cowards**. While **Rulers** fight, **Cowards** flee. Unlike the **Ruler**, a **Coward** is usually conscious of the conflict and the other person's perspective, sometimes even overly aware. This hyper-awareness leads to fear as the **Coward** imagines the worst possible outcome, awful-izing what will happen in the conversation. As a result, she avoids all interaction.



During a management training session, a woman asked me how to get adequate resources from her boss to do her job. I asked whether she had talked with him about it in the past. She said, "He won't speak to me face-to-face. He leaves sticky notes for me. So, that's how I have to respond to him." Early in the morning and after work, he would leave notes all over her desk and computer. This is a cowardly approach to managing.

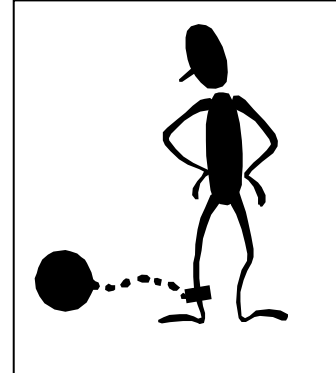
When a **Coward** is involved in conflict, he avoids the situation at all costs. He'll write a note or send an email rather than confront the person. He might ask someone else to handle the situation. For example, he'll dispatch an assistant or co-worker as a diplomatic envoy. This strategy of bringing in a third person is called *triangulation*. (If your boss or anyone else at work tries to enlist your help like this, say, "No thank you. I have all the confidence in the world in your ability to handle this situation effectively.")

Avoidance strategies are the reason why people who work for **Cowards** are often frustrated, unmotivated, and lack creativity. The **Coward's** employees tend to under-perform

because they aren't held accountable, and they aren't challenged. **Cowards** tend to have low-performing teams because their management style isn't engaging or authentic. It turns people off.

The Opossum

The third situational style is the **Opossum**. In about 40 to 70 percent of dreaded situations, leaders act like an **Opossum**. Instead of fighting or fleeing, they're stuck in the middle. They freeze. Some interesting facts about the real opossum:



- ❑ It doesn't have a territory, but is always on the move, going to wherever the food is.
- ❑ It puts up a terrific bluff if cornered and can give the appearance of being really good at defending itself. But it's **not** good at defending itself!
- ❑ If attacked and unable to fight or run from danger, it collapses and appears to be dead! *

Sound familiar? When faced with a predator in the workplace, **Opossum-style** leaders are too weak to fight and too slow to run and hide. Since, they don't have an adequate skill set to handle the situation, they play dead.



* Check out the National Opossum Society at <http://www.opossum.org/>.

Opossums feel like they've already tried everything. They might have tried *annihilating* the situation as a **Ruler**. Then, they *avoided* the situation as a **Coward**. What's left? As an **Opossum**, they're choosing to *accept* the situation. **Opossums** use this strategy because they rationalize, "I only have to see that guy once a month at a meeting. It's not that bad," or "That's just how she is. She's not going to change because of something I say or do." Perhaps it's true, that the person isn't around much or doesn't have that much impact.

But, if it's one of your employees, your boss or your Board, you're going to have regular contact with them, and they have a great deal of impact on your work life. And, for most of us, whatever happens at work often ends up going home with us. Countless leaders complain to me about the costs of unresolved conflict including sleeplessness, upset stomachs, and headaches to name a few.

Somewhere Between a Ruler and a Coward

The major challenge for leaders is to find a zone between **Ruler** and **Coward** that isn't an **Opossum**. Unfortunately, there's no role model in organizations for this zone. Mostly, you see **Rulers** run around annihilating people and projects. It's scary because there's no law enforcement in the workplace. Maybe there should be a police station in every organization that you could call and say, "There's a **Ruler** wreaking havoc in the conference room! Please send help!"

Since there's no *work police*, it's up to everyone to protect their own turf, and most people don't know how to do that. Instead of sticking around to protect our turf from bullies, most of us run as fast as we can. Some of you have learned that running is useless. That's why

you just freeze. But, freezing like an **Opossum** has its costs, too. You get upset with yourself wondering, “Why can’t I just say it? Why am I allowing this person to be so rude? Why am I letting this person make unreasonable demands? What’s wrong with me? Am I a wimp?”

The worst part of freezing is that leaders begin to feel like a fake. Your internal dialogue sounds like: “They should only hire **Rulers** for this job because they’re the ones who get things done. I can’t get anything done. I can’t motivate my employees, I can’t tell them what I expect, and I can’t manage my boss/Board.” Doubting your management abilities is painful.

When you either *accept* your frustrations about people without acting or you expend physical and emotional energy *avoiding* them, you simply create more problems and stress for your team, your organization and yourself.

The Transformer

The purpose of this book is to encourage you to use a fourth approach that transforms dreaded conversations into dynamic collaboration. Rather than *annihilate*, *avoid* or *accept*, you’ll learn a collaborative approach to *address* the situation and person by adopting a situational style called the **Transformer** (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 The Situational Styles

Situational Style	Action	Outcome
Ruler	Fight	Annihilate
Coward	Flee	Avoid
Opossum	Freeze	Accept
Transformer	Flow	Address

The **Transformer** successfully *addresses* content and process difficulties in work relationships. The **Transformer** *addresses* conflict in a neutral, grounded and effective way. Even small shifts toward this communication style allow for and lead to shifts in others. When the **Transformer** communicates, **Rulers** learn that they can’t get away with bullying behavior anymore. When the **Transformer** communicates, **Cowards** feel safe and learn how to *address* situations more assertively.

You might feel a bit anxious right now wondering how you’re going to make such dramatic changes in your communication style. First, remember that it’s normal to feel afraid to try anything new. Rest assured that I’m not going to ask you to do anything that’s harmful, embarrassing, or disempowering. On the contrary, the techniques you’ll learn are simple, subtle changes in the way you think, feel and act in relationship to conflict. Leaders who have used these techniques say they feel more effective and less stressed as a result of incorporating these simple behaviors into their management style. I won’t kid you. It’s not always going to be easy. It takes practice. You’ll make some mistakes. At times, you might feel confused, discouraged, and even drawn back into an old, ineffective style. But, the pay-off in reduced stress and increased effectiveness for you, your team and organization will far outweigh your initial anxiety. If you want to create an effective communication culture in your workplace where people can resolve disagreements in a humane way, then read on about the Transformational Elements, and the **Transformer** who uses them.

Chapter 4 Three Transformational Elements

Are you ready to take a few risks to unfreeze from the play-dead **opossum** pose? Are you ready to become a **Transformer**?

In order to make this shift, leaders should begin developing three transformational elements (Figure 4.1): **Qualities**, **Proficiencies**, and **Environments**.

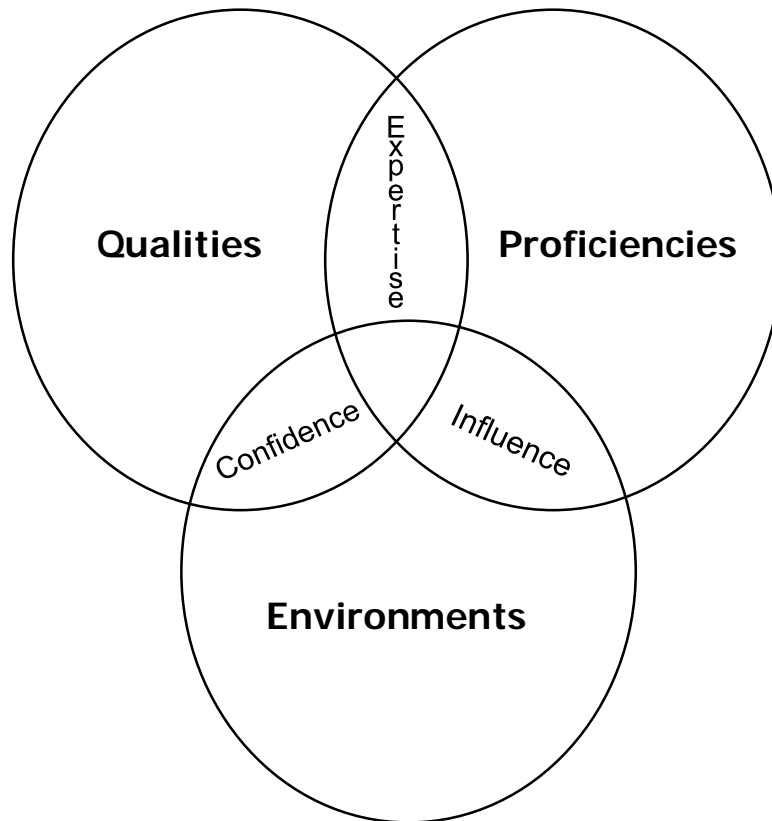


Figure 4.1 The Three Transformational Elements

1. Qualities are the personal traits that leaders must possess in order to transform dreaded conversations. The Qualities assure that you will have difficult conversations in a respectful, motivational, and effective way. The Qualities are about **Who** you are in the conversation. You'll learn more about the six qualities in Chapter 5.

2. Proficiencies are the twelve specific skills that a leader uses to:

- a) Plan,
- b) Implement, and
- c) Learn from a dreaded conversation.

The Proficiencies are about **What** you do in the conversation. You'll learn those in Chapters 6-9.

3. Environments are the containers in which leaders promote the use of the Qualities and Proficiencies. Containers come in a variety of sizes including small (pairs and trios), medium (teams and departments), and large (organizations). Why try to do it all on your own? Rather than be the sole **Transformer** in your workplace, encourage as many individuals and groups as possible to learn and practice the Qualities and Proficiencies. As more people become **Transformers**, your organization's culture will undergo a dramatic shift. The fighting, fleeing, and freezing will drop away, and there will just be flow. The ultimate goal of this book is to help everyone in your organization shift from *annihilate*, *avoid* or *accept* to *address*. Environments are about **Where** the conversation takes place. Chapter 10 explains how to develop strong collaborative environments throughout your organization.

Outcomes of Overlapping Elements

Figure 4.1 shows what happens when the three elements overlap and interrelate. As you and others in your organization apply the Transformational Elements, you'll experience three distinct outcomes: increased expertise, confidence, and influence.

Where Qualities and Proficiencies overlap, your *expertise* expands. Expertise grows from an awareness of and ability to change Who you are being and What you are doing in a conversation. Expertise also comes from the experience of participating in dreaded conversations on a regular basis. The more you *address* difficult situations, the less you will delay and dread conflict.

Qualities and Environments overlap to give you *confidence*, the second outcome. When you're consciously and consistently being the best you can be in a variety of workplace Environments, you'll feel confident as a leader and a communicator. All of the old doubt drops away. This new sense of confidence encourages you to *address* higher levels of dread. The confidence lets you take appropriate risks that you wouldn't have considered taking before.

The third outcome is *influence*. Where Proficiencies and Environments overlap, you'll develop the power to create change not just in yourself and your team, but in your organization, too. The more you transform dread into collaboration in a variety of Environments, you will become a role model for others in your organization. Don't be surprised if people start asking about your behavior ("How'd you do that? How did you stay so relaxed when he was yelling at everyone, and then get him to calm down?"). Or, they might ask about your employee's improved performance ("Why is Bob acting so different lately. He's so motivated, and he's stopped complaining. What did you say to him?"). Your colleagues might ask you to coach them on how to transform their dread, or you might be asked to mediate difficult situations between parties. Be ready to take on a new, more influential role in your organization.

In summary, the Transformational Elements intersect to produce three powerful outcomes: expertise, confidence, and influence. Think of them as the long-term benefits of this process. Let's get started by learning the six qualities that transform dread.

Chapter 5 Six Qualities for Transforming Dreaded Conversations

The first Transformational Element is *Qualities*. Qualities are **Who** you are being as you plan, implement, and learn from a dreaded conversation. It's really common to be nervous before, during and after a difficult conversation. If you remember nothing else in those uncomfortable moments, simply remember who you are

The reason that many of us feel uncomfortable about conflict and usually freeze into **Opossum** mode is *because* of the personal qualities that inspire us to be kind and compassionate to others. If you didn't care about how you impacted other people, you would be in **Ruler** or **Coward** mode. Please honor the qualities that make you freeze in difficult situations, because they're part of what's good about being human. The purpose of this chapter is to bring awareness to the qualities that make us freeze and to learn how to modify those qualities slightly to bring about more effective conflict resolution.

Before you read any further, please complete Assessment 5.1. Think of a recent dreaded conversation that you've had. Mark an "X" on each of the six continuums that indicates who you were being in that conversation. There's no scoring for the assessment. The idea is to increase your awareness rather than get a grade.

For example, during that dreaded conversation, were you being courageous? If not, were you over- or under-doing courage? If you were under-doing it and felt somewhat uncertain, mark an "X" somewhere on the left side of the continuum. If you were over-doing courage and being reckless, place an "X" on the right side on the first continuum.

Assessment 5.1 Six Qualities

Under-doing it	Just right	Over-doing it
Uncertain...../...../...../...../...../.....	Courageous	Reckless
Unconscious...../...../...../...../...../.....	Attentive	Anxious
Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
Fickle	Firm	Rigid
Closed	Open	Subservient
Vague...../...../...../...../...../.....	Precise	Picky

Now that you've completed the assessment, notice that the qualities in the middle, or "just right" column, are displayed when you're in **Transformer**-mode. When you under-do a quality, you move toward the **Coward** style in the left-hand column. When you over-do a quality in the right-hand column, you act more like a **Ruler**. Let's look at each just-right quality and how it helps us transform dread into collaboration.

Courageous

The bottom line is that to even have a dreaded conversation, you need courage. Bravery allows us to

"I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot...and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that's precisely why I succeed."

--Michael Jordan

first identify that a problem exists, and then to be able to say to our self, “I don’t want to avoid or even accept this situation any longer. I’m ready to *address* it.” One of the main reasons you dread certain conversations is because you lack a willingness to withstand the difficulty or danger (sometimes real but usually imagined) that lies ahead. When you take the first step to schedule the conversation, that single act communicates to yourself and to the other person, “I have the courage to communicate with you regardless of the outcome.”

When you lack courage, you’re uncertain. The uncertainty freezes you in the limbo of dread and delay. You put off or avoid a situation that you imagine is intractable.

Once you have the courage to *address* a conflict, you might overestimate how much guts you need to navigate it. When you over-do courage, you come across as reckless. Success at one dreaded conversation can lead to a sense of bravado or inflated ego. Please temper your bravery with humility, so that you don’t do something foolhardy that you’ll regret.

Attentive

Courage gets you into the conversation. Once you’re in, be attentive. In a dreaded conversation, it’s important to be aware of (1) what’s going on for you internally and (2) what you’re perceiving is going on for the other person. With attentiveness, you’re alert to the big picture without over-analyzing or judging what’s going on in each passing moment. It’s also important to be aware of whether you are meeting your content and process goals, which I’ll cover in Chapter 7.

If you under do-attentiveness, you go unconscious. You might forget where you are or whom you’re talking with. This unconscious state distracts you from being present in the conversation.

On the other end of the spectrum, you can over-do attentiveness. When this happens, you might get anxious because you’re micro-analyzing everything that’s going on in the conversation. In your internal dialogue, this might sound like, “Oh, no, she just moved her eyes to the left. Does she think I’m a jerk?” or “Hey, his right arm is twitching. Is he getting really angry at me?” This type of over-analyzing isn’t helpful.

“I’ve been trying for some time to develop a lifestyle that doesn’t require my presence.”

--Garry Trudeau

Instead, have a relaxed, open awareness of the major things that are happening such as people appear generally relaxed or tense or the pace seems too slow or too fast. I coach leaders to develop a fluid sense of their changing experience during a conversation. The activity below might give you a sense of being more present and allowing with your body sensations. In Chapter 8, you’ll learn other ways to become more aware and accepting of how thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are constantly changing inside you.

Awareness Activity

Take a few minutes to read this description before practicing it.

If they aren’t there already, put your feet on the floor. Close your eyes. For a minute, feel your feet as they rest on the floor. Then, move your awareness to feel your seat in contact with the chair. For a minute, feel your body weight sink into the chair. Next, move your awareness to your hands. Let them be heavy as they rest in your lap or on your legs. Then, for a few minutes, allow your awareness to move naturally among feeling those three areas: your

feet, seat and hands.

What did you experience? Some people report feeling more alert or relaxed. Some people feel tenser. If you feel more tension, rest your awareness in one of those three areas, and notice how that one location in the body feels.

You can practice this awareness activity any time during the day. Try doing it by yourself, and then when you're talking with people. This will help you be more attentive and relaxed when you're in the middle of a dreaded conversation.

Assertive

The third quality that transforms a dreaded conversation is assertiveness. Being assertive means communicating what you want in a direct, neutral manner. When you're assertive, you believe that you deserve to be heard, not louder than the other person, but equal to him. Rather than either using your power inappropriately or acquiescing to the other person's agenda, sharing influence is a healthy way to have a dreaded conversation.

When you over-do assertiveness, you're aggressive, militant, or obtrusive. You exert too much energy that's not needed or helpful. A leader once told me that when she delegates a task, her employee responds with a blank stare or a deer-in-the-headlights look. So, the leader thought that the volume of her voice was too low. Her thinking was, "I just need to be more aggressive! I need to talk louder, and push my agenda." Please notice that being pushy or aggressive doesn't sell ideas. It's not a good way to market expectations or to hold people accountable. Being clever and confident is more helpful in order to find out, "What is the key that unlocks the blank stare? How can I get inside his thinking and motivate him in a natural way?"

When you under-do assertiveness, you're passive. You allow the other person to have more power or influence than you do. If you cower and shrink away from the other person, you actually invite that person to dominate the conversation.

It's a Leader's Job to Be Assertive

As a leader in a hospital health promotion program in the early 80s, I wasn't assertive enough. One of my employees was very smart, smarter than me. Even though she was a technical expert, I mistakenly hired her to sell our products and services to local businesses. When she started in the position, I told her that I wanted to role play some sales conversations with her before she went into the field. She looked at me and said, "I don't want to do that." The first few times that she protested, I responded with, "Let's do it anyway;" and, she begrudgingly did the role-plays.

After a couple of times, she refused to even talk with me before a sales meeting. I responded to her protests in a passive way. I caved in. I rationalized that she didn't need or want my help. I lacked confidence in my role as manager and in my commitment to organizational goals. She never became a successful sales person. She took my management position when I left the organization.

There's no concrete "just-right" zone for each quality in you; it'll vary in every conversation. Recognize that a certain level of assertiveness works well with one person, then you might need to go a little to the left and under-do that with another person or situation. With a third person, you might go a bit to the right and be somewhat forceful. I'm not suggesting that you be mean or put anyone down; I'm asking you to be highly confident of where you're coming from like I did with the boss who sexually harassed me.

Firm

Once you've stated your message in an assertive way, the fourth quality helps you to maintain your stance by being firm. When they're first beginning to have dreaded conversations, leaders often report back to me, "Well, I went in and said exactly what I expected. And, it felt great. Then, she said she wasn't going to do that, and I backed down." When you meet resistance, it's natural to give in to the other person's protests. You want to be liked, you don't want to come across as brash, and sometimes you're not even sure about your ideas. This is because you lack steadfastness and stability. You're like a tree that lacks a solid root system and can easily be pushed over by the wind.

I'm not expecting you to be completely self-assured all the time. Our work cultures are inherently uncertain and changing. It's natural to have doubt and to delay decisions. But, when you're fickle all the time, your employees, customers or boss will feel insecure and unsafe. You say one thing, but change to another. You give in to strong personalities or avoid disagreements. Instead of being fickle, plant some solid roots, and hold your ground. There's no ideal place to always stand, but work towards firmness, a sense of "I know a good way to go, and I want you to give it a try."

Be sensitive to over-doing firmness because that leads to rigidity. At the first sign of resistance from another person, you might tense up, and become cold and indifferent. When this happens, notice that you're losing a sense of flexibility. Experiment with being firm, without leaping to "My way or the highway."

Be Firm with Your Boss

Even more difficult than communicating with your employees, balancing the two qualities of being assertive and firm is very challenging with your boss because of perceived and real power differences in the workplace. Most workers have a deeply embedded fear that if they speak up and be direct with their boss, they'll be fired. I'm sad about this pervasive fear in American work culture, because it's creating two significant problems. First, this fear is the primary cause of appalling levels of overwork and stress. Many bosses and organizations today are asking way too much of their employees, and employees won't say "No." Second, as a result of the overwork and stress, individuals and organizations are less productive, less spontaneous, and less effective.

Instead of cowering to your boss, what if, starting tomorrow, you felt safe enough to be honest and direct with your supervisor. It might sound like this: "I've been thinking it over, and I want you to know that I'm feeling overworked and unproductive. I'm able to continue doing this much work. I'm willing to work 40 to 42 hours a week. And, I've met my limit in terms of the number of projects I can oversee until you let me hire another full-time person." This isn't aggressive or rigid. It's assertive and firm. Not only would this kind of communication reduce stress and increase productivity, it would also eliminate unemployment because hundreds of thousands of people would be hired to adequately cover the unrealistic workloads that hundreds of thousands of Americans put up with. I know that this sounds unrealistic to many of you, but think about it.

Without this kind of direct communication, bosses and organizations will continue to heap unlimited projects on people. Overloading employees is like pushing a car to go 150 miles an hour when it's only built to go 100 miles per hour. The car might be able to speed in the short term, but the wear and tear on its machinery produces permanent damage. This is what's

happening in organizations today. Folks are being pushed over their limit. *You've* got to learn to say, "No," because no one is saying it for you.

I'm not suggesting that leaders ask their employees, "How much would you like to work today?" And, I'm not saying that you shouldn't ask your employees to extend out of their comfort zones. I'm saying that you should set realistic, stretch expectations rather than overwork people in the name of competition and greed.

When I was a manager, I wanted to know two things about my employees: what they were able to do and what they were willing to do (Table 5.1). People are able to do a certain amount and quality of work based on their physical, mental, and emotional skills and capacities. Willingness is the other factor that impacts work performance. Once you get a read on these two factors, you can help an employee succeed in her current position as well as possibly grow in her career.

For example, if an employee is both willing and able, but still not performing, she is lacking either the proper resources or a supportive environment. If an employee is highly motivated, but not performing, she needs training. Employees who have adequate skills and a bad attitude need a leader who knows how to motivate them. When you have an employee who is both unwilling and unable to do a job, please transfer that person to a more suitable job. If you can't find a good fit, the employee should be let go. She will thank you for that in the end. I hope Table 5.1 is helpful in terms of knowing how and when to be assertive and firm with employees. Write me at P.O. Box 35429, ABQ, NM 87176 if you have questions about it.

Table 5.1 Performance Problem Analysis

	Willing	Unwilling
Able	CHECK RESOURCES/ ENVIRONMENT (Willing and Able)	DEVELOP MOTIVATION (Able but Unwilling)
Unable	ADD TRAINING (Willing but Unable)	TRANSFER/ DISCHARGE (Unwilling and Unable)

Open

The fifth quality might sound contradictory to the other qualities. On the one hand, I want you to courageously initiate the conversation, to communicate your goal assertively, and to protect your goal. On the other hand, I want you to realize that the other person has a valid and probably different point of view. The complexity of dreaded conversations becomes more apparent with the fifth quality, openness. With this quality, be willing to listen to the other person's perspective and to hold the possibility, "I might not be one hundred percent right," or "Maybe there's something I'm not seeing." Remember, none of us are omniscient.

Leaders often begin a dreaded conversation with a lot of fear that makes it difficult to be open. The fear is usually based on past experiences that are being dragged into the present

moment. Perhaps you had an unpleasant experience with this person before, and you lost trust in the professional relationship. She let you down, or you made a mistake. Bringing the past into this new conversation might feel appropriate, but it usually isn't helpful. If you're noticing that the history with this person keeps coming up in your mind, you might also notice strong feelings like anger or fear. In this case, it might be helpful to surface your discomfort:

"I'm feeling really tense, because I have a need to be recognized for what I did on that project last month."

This is an opportunity for the other person to make things right and to acknowledge you. She may or may not. If she does, that's great. Please invest all of your energy and good will in hearing, accepting, and letting go of her apology. Or, it might be your turn to apologize. Do it with sincerity, and make sure your non-verbal communication (eye contact, facial expression, etc.) is in line with your words.

As with the other qualities, don't over-do it. If you over-do openness, you focus entirely on the other person's perspective. You risk becoming subservient to their ideas and influence. You lose yourself. With openness, maintain some contact with your ego so that you don't become docile. Don't let them push you around. If someone starts pushing you around, make a statement and request like,

"I'm feeling uncomfortable because I have a need to be heard. Would you be willing to summarize the points that I've made so far?"

Remember, a dreaded conversation isn't about one person winning and the other person losing. It's about finding a collaborative resolution, for two reasons: (1) so that the organization wins and (2) so that each person can walk out of the room with greater trust and a sense of "I got enough. Maybe I didn't get a hundred percent, but I got enough." I think 80% is a good amount to go for, or maybe even 75%. How could two people each get 75% of the solution? When we compromise, we cut the orange in half, and we each get 50%. When we collaborate, we come up with a unique solution like planting orange trees so that we each get more than 50% of what we want.

Precise

The last transformational quality is to be precise. Asking your employees to be kinder or faster are imprecise requests. Under-doing precision by being vague isn't helpful because people don't know how you specifically want their behavior to change. Instead of "You're not committed to your job," try "I would like you to arrive at work by 8 a.m. at least four days next week." Tell people the specific time frames, numbers, and behaviors that you expect.

<i>Instead of this language:</i>	<i>Try this language:</i>
"Please be nicer to everyone."	"I would like you to make eye contact with and smile at each customer."

When you overdo precision, you get picky and expect people to be superhuman, which none of us are. People make mistakes. Even you. Given all the factors in life that impact your energy level, concentration, memory, motivation, and physical ability, if people can perform at

80%, they're doing well. This means that leaders have to give people a little leeway. You need to allow people to be 20% off, and that means a little bit off in quality, a little bit off in quantity. You have to allow people to be human. Unfortunately, I see the exact opposite happening in organizations today. Leaders and organizations are making incredibly unrealistic demands of people.

I know what you're thinking: I wouldn't want a pilot or a surgeon to be 20% off. I wouldn't either. But, I've survived my share of bumpy landings. And, a friend of mine has a surgical scar that isn't pretty, but it keeps his innards intact. In reality, performance at a 100% level is rare. People are imperfect, including us.

I once read about a woman who was planning a special catered event. She ordered specifically designed aprons for the wait staff to wear that evening. When the aprons arrived from the supplier, the ties were the wrong shade of red. They were supposed to perfectly match the red in the decorations. With very little time left before the event, she instructed her assistants to rip off the ties and replace them with perfectly matched fabric. I understand that the shade of red was important to her, but to what degree did it really impact anybody at the event? Did it make a difference if the apron ties were bright red, brick red, or burnt red? Did the ties help anybody enjoy their evening, digest their food, or donate more money? I doubt it.

Maybe you read that story and think, "Well, she's a superstar. People who care about details are the ones who excel." If you value being a superstar, and don't mind being ostracized by most of the people in your organization, then go for it. But, I don't think obsessing about perfection is a quality to strive for. I don't think it's realistic. That kind of picky approach to perfection is alienating, and it reduces the humanity of organizational cultures.

Reflect on the degree of precision in all of your communication. Is an 80% performance level by your employees and yourself enough?

A Plan for Developing the Transformational Qualities

The six qualities that are extremely helpful in dreaded conversations are: courageous, assertive, attentive, firm, open, and precise. A big question remains: Can you develop these qualities, or are they innate?

I believe that people are born with or conditioned early in life to either have or not have these qualities. But, I also believe that as adults you can develop these qualities. I'm not saying it'll be easy. I've found that the leaders who are most successful at developing the qualities are those with a feedback partner, like a coach, mentor, or friend, who gives them honest input about **Who** they are as communicators.

You don't need to get all six of the qualities just right in every conversation. But, keep in mind that the qualities are the foundation for transforming dread into collaboration; they're more important than the other two elements, proficiencies and environments. If you have a strong intention to develop these transformational qualities, that foundation will propel you into practicing the proficiencies and promoting a collaborative organizational culture.

To get started, pick the quality that you're already best at. Look back at Assessment 5.1 and reflect on, "Which quality comes to me naturally?" Then, be aware of that quality in your next dreaded conversation. In your debrief about the conversation, pinpoint specifically how you experienced the quality. For example, an attentive leader might notice that internally, "I was attentive to her comments and nonverbal cues," and externally "I paraphrased back to her what I heard her say." Repeat this process in each dreaded conversation with one or two other qualities that you're good at.

Next, select a quality that you're over-doing. It's usually easier to do less of something that irritates others than it is to do more of something you're afraid of. Before your next dreaded conversation, reflect on your overdone quality, and write down some specific thoughts, feelings and behaviors that surface when you communicate. Use Worksheet 5.1 to plan what you want to think, feel, and do in future communication (See the Appendix for a blank worksheet).

For example, perhaps you tend to be closed during communication and want to focus on developing the quality of openness. List some closed thoughts that you have had in the past, and then list more open thoughts you could have in the future. Perhaps, "I want to hear her ideas." You could try generating the feeling of relaxation or ease within yourself. Often, you close up around people because you don't feel confident of your own ideas. When you feel totally confident with your ideas and thoughts, you're usually more open to hearing other peoples' ideas.

Worksheet 5.1 Developing the Transformational Quality of Openness

	In the past, I would...	In the future, I want to...
Think	"Her ideas are ridiculous."	"I want to hear her ideas."
Feel	Bored	Curious
Do	Interrupt	Ask questions and listen

There are numerous behaviors that you could display for openness including making good eye contact, asking questions, or paraphrasing people's ideas. You can even practice being open to disagreement by commenting, "I hear what you're saying. It's different than my view. We have different perspectives." You could take it a step further and express your fear, "I'm somewhat concerned about our differences. I'm noticing that I'm having trouble being open to your idea." Being honest allows the other person to have a look into your thinking process and to respond, "What in particular are you not open to?" This allows some give and take between the two of you before moving to a decision: "I'm concerned it might cost too much money or take too much time."

For many leaders, this level of openness is scary or counter-intuitive. It feels like you're giving away all of your power, so that you won't be able to win. Dynamic collaboration isn't about one person winning and the other person losing. It's about the organization, the team, and the process being the winner rather than an individual. Collaboration moves us beyond what you believe you need as individuals. Dynamic collaboration lets us focus on what's best for the organization, team, project, and customer.

Beyond the Qualities: Asking for Feedback

You're never going to be 100% on all of the qualities, but being vulnerable about your intention to grow can catapult you to success. If you notice you're slipping in a conversation, say so: "You know what? I'm sorry. I noticed that I wasn't listening as much as I wanted to." Or, "I noticed I was vague when I was setting expectations for you. Would you be willing to give me some feedback when I'm not being precise enough, or tell me if I'm being too picky and I'm micromanaging you?"

"It is not worth an intelligent man's time to be in the majority. By definition, there are already enough people to do that."

--G. H. Hardy

I know some of you are reading this and rolling your eyes. “There’s no way I would ask my employees to give me feedback on whether I’m being vague or picky.” It’s fine if you feel that way. Please recognize, though, that if you aren’t open to feedback, you’re not going to develop as a leader. It’s okay if you don’t want that kind of feedback from your employees. But, please ask for it from someone. You can only see so much from your limited, internal perspective. A colleague, boss or coach can act like a mirror, and show you what you can’t see.

Have you ever gotten home from a party, and when you look in the mirror to brush your teeth, you realize that you have a piece of spinach between your front teeth? At that point, you feel embarrassed and upset. “Wait a minute! Why didn’t somebody tell me?”

The same thing happens at work. We do silly things that make us look ridiculous, but nobody feels comfortable telling us, “Hey, you’re talking too much” or “I’ve heard that story before; would you be willing to get to the point?” or “I notice you haven’t spoken up in the last three team meetings; I’d like to hear your input.” This kind of honest feedback helps us to develop. The reason you need a partner to help you develop the transformational qualities is because when you look in the mirror at work, you can’t see the spinach. It’s invisible. A coach or colleague will tell you, because that’s exactly what you’re asking that person to do.

“One hundred percent of the shots you don’t take, don’t go in.”

–Wayne Gretzky

Getting Your Needs Met

Years ago, I used to enjoy watching Oprah Winfrey’s television show. At some point, though, I noticed that she was starting to irritate me. After awhile, I became cynical about Oprah, and stopped watching her show. I didn’t know why I was making fun of her.

After some reflection, I realized that I was jealous of Oprah. I wanted to be Oprah! I thought I was as smart and funny as Oprah. I thought I’d be a better interviewer. Why did she get to be so famous and rich? Why did she get to meet all those fascinating people and have lots of houses?

Once I realized that I was jealous of her, I could ask myself, “Why don’t I do something so that I can be as successful as Oprah?” After reflecting on my satisfaction with my 80% life, I realized that I didn’t want a TV show or more than one house. Then, I could let go of not wanting her to have it. Now, I’m happy for Oprah and her success. (By the way, I did decide that I wanted my own *radio* show. You can check it out at www.peacetalksradio.com).



For a fascinating and challenging book about envy and perfection, check out *The Origin of Illness* by Norbeto Keppe.

It’s a silly story of why it’s so important for leaders to continually engage in self-development, in knowing who they are and their primary values and needs. A thinking partner, coach, or mentor is extremely helpful with self-development, because they are continually looking ahead of where a leader is at. They’re noticing, perceiving, and guessing two or three steps ahead of the leader. Because leaders get so absorbed in handling day-to-day issues and crises, it’s very important for them to continually work on growth and self-fulfillment through:

- Professional development in work and career,

- ❑ Identifying and meeting needs,
- ❑ Balancing work and personal life including recreation, hobbies and fun, and
- ❑ Volunteering in the community.

When leaders are healthy and balanced, they don't have to get their personal needs met through their work or through the people who work for them.

Leaders who develop the transformational qualities tend to be people who already have their own personal needs met. If a leader is feeling loved, appropriately challenged and excited by life, then that manager isn't going to feel threatened by somebody else who is successful or who has a better idea. That leader isn't going to feel weak and powerless when somebody moves more quickly than she does. Instead, she'll feel inspired and motivated by other's success.

Qualities are the foundation for transforming dread into collaboration. In the next chapter, I'll share the three stages of transformational skills.

Chapter 6

Twelve Proficiencies that Transform A Dreaded Conversation

After you've increased your awareness and expression of the transformational qualities, you're ready to develop the proficiencies that transform a dreaded conversation into dynamic collaboration. There are three stages in a dreaded conversation. Each stage has four proficiencies, or advanced skills, for a total of twelve proficiencies.

In **Stage 1**, you plan the dreaded conversation. Rather than going into the discussion cold, Chapter 7 walks you through how to strategize ways to handle the entire conversation.

Once you have a plan, you're ready to implement the conversation in **Stage 2**. In Chapter 8, I share over 50 specific tips and techniques for staying calm, on goal, and collaborative during the conversation.

When you've finished the conversation, move to **Stage 3** by debriefing what worked and what didn't work. As I explain in Chapter 9, you can do this by yourself, but it's much more powerful to talk through it with someone else. At the most evolved level of organizational transformation, individuals will debrief dreaded conversations with their conversation partner. In other words, immediately following the conversation, the two people engaged in the dreaded conversation will talk through what worked and didn't work for them. This is one of my dreams for transforming organizational dread into collaboration: complete communication transparency.

Let's look at the **Stage 1** proficiencies for planning a dreaded conversation.

Chapter 7

Stage 1: Planning a Dreaded Conversation

I helped a colleague of mine plan for a dreaded conversation with one of her contractors. She was happy with how this person worked technically with clients, but she was very frustrated with his negative attitude toward some projects. The negativity surfaced with her staff, other contractors, and sometimes even with the clients. Her goal for the conversation was to request that he work with a more limited type of project that he enjoyed, so that he wouldn't feel and act so negatively.

I was coaching her on a Friday afternoon and at the end of the session, I asked when she wanted to have the conversation. "There's no rush. It can wait for a couple of months, because there aren't any new projects coming up in the near future." I pressed her a bit, but she said she'd rather wait to address the contractor.

On the following Monday, out of the blue, she received an email from the contractor. The email was unusually pleasant and appreciative. He said that after a lot of thought, he decided to change his role with her organization by limiting his involvement to the very type of project that *she had wanted to limit him to do*. The power of a good plan! She didn't even have to have the conversation.

This is the strongest example of how planning for a dreaded conversation reduces, or in this case, completely removes the dread. Once leaders learn and use the planning proficiencies, dread plummets, and conversation success soars. Planning for a conversation takes, on average, only 15 to 30 minutes. To assure that your conversation goes well, please invest time in doing the following proficiencies:

1. Schedule the conversation immediately to reduce delay and dread.
2. Write down your goals for the conversation.
3. Identify the unproductive communication patterns that you and the other person do unconsciously.
4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation.

Proficiency 1. Schedule the conversation immediately.

Dread is a function of delay (Figure 7.1). And, delay is increasingly costly. The longer you postpone a difficult conversation, the more your dread increases. As dread increases, you put it off longer. Delaying the conversation increases the frequency, intensity and duration of **Dread Attacks**. These attacks include signs that you're out of balance such as sweating, awful-izing, anxiety, anger, self-righteousness, obsessive thinking, etc.

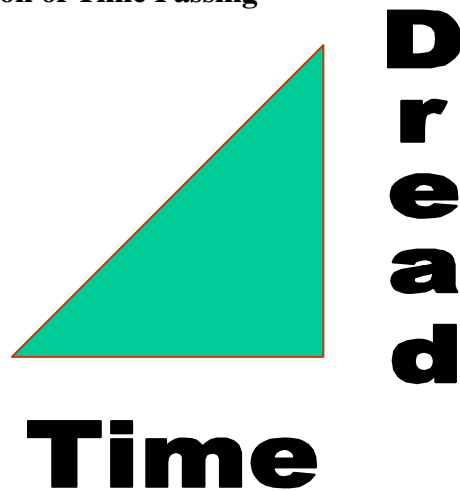
To end this unpleasant, unproductive cycle, acknowledge your dread. Then, have the courage to schedule a conversation with the other person as soon as possible. As soon as you notice any level of dread, even mild discomfort, call or email the person and request a meeting right away. When you schedule it, make sure to give yourself at least 30 minutes to complete the planning in **Stage 1**.

To schedule the conversation, you can send an email, leave a voice message, or make a face-to-face request. A request for a conversation sounds like this,

"Would you be willing to talk with me about the new product development team?"

Key words here are “Would you be willing” as opposed to blaming with, “You made me mad, and I have to talk to you about it” or commanding with, “Be in my office in an hour.”

Figure 7.1 Dread is a Function of Time Passing



There's definitely some risk involved in this approach, because making a request allows the other person to say “no.” If he says no, simply respond with, “I’m curious about your reasons for turning me down.” If he offers a rambling or angry response, do a gentle interruption with, “Excuse me. I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m really interested in your reasons. Could we schedule more time to sit down and talk about them?” This buys you time to finish your planning, plus it gives you the opening to your dreaded conversation.

When you say you're curious about their reasons, if you get a silent stare, try,

“I’m feeling awkward because you haven’t responded to my question. What’s a better time for me to ask you about this?”

The key is to have a series of questions that you’re ready to ask that continue to move the other person toward scheduling a time to talk with you. Don’t give in. You’re only at the first proficiency! Remember the transformational qualities: be courageous, attentive, assertive, firm, open, and precise.

Sometimes when you request a meeting, the person will be embarrassed and want to downplay the conflict. He might respond, “There’s no problem. Let’s just forget about it.” You may be tempted to grab onto this offer to *avoid* the conflict. But, this approach just delays and freezes the problem more. In most cases, people aren’t really over the conflict; they just feel their own dread about having the conversation, so they try to excuse it. It’s important at this point to overcome your natural tendency to forgive and forget the conflict. Instead, courageously move into the situation by becoming compassionately curious. When he offers to forget the conflict, here are some possible replies:

**“Things won are done; joy’s
soul lies in the doing.”**
-- William Shakespeare

“I’m glad to hear that you’re feeling better about this issue. Could we meet anyway to talk through how it was resolved for you?”

- “That’s great that you’re not upset anymore. I’m still feeling some confusion about what happened. Would you be willing to talk through that with me?”
- “I’m feeling better about it, too. But, I’m concerned about how your team is feeling. Could you get together to talk about that?”

Don’t by-pass a golden opportunity to *talk about* conflict resolution. These kinds of conversations are easier to have because you’re discussing the resolution of the conflict rather than having the argument itself. Conflict resolution de-briefs are a tremendous opportunity to make deposits in what Stephen Covey calls your Emotional Bank Account with the other person. In his brilliant book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey explains that acts of kindness, honesty and follow through build up a reserve of trust in the Emotional Bank Account between two people. When one of us does make a mistake, the existing trust level or emotional reserve compensates for it. And, we can make a withdrawal without going below a zero balance.

Of course, as you get into the conversation *about* the conflict, you might discover that the person doesn’t really feel resolution. He just said that things were okay in order to avoid the dreaded conversation. If that happens, you’ll already be prepared to talk about the difficult issue since you’ll have a completed plan using the following proficiencies 2 - 4.

Proficiency 2. Write down your goals for the conversation.

Leaders often tell me, “I can’t take written notes into the meeting, can I? He’d see that I have notes, and he’d think that I was insecure or think that I had it out for him.”

Be courageous. Set a new standard of planning for difficult conversations. First, write a very specific outline of your plan. Then, summarize it in a few words or short phrases on a piece of paper that you would feel comfortable taking into the meeting. Remember, it’s not unusual to take a pad of paper into a meeting to take notes.

To plan your goals, make two columns on a sheet of paper with the headings, “Content” and “Process.” Content goals are about the **What** of the conversation. Write down a few potential decisions, actions, or agreements that you want to have by the end of the conversation. Process goals are about the **Who** and **How** of the conversation. Who do you want to be? Which transformational qualities do you want to display? And, how do you want this conversation to impact your professional relationship with this person? Table 7.1 shows some sample goals for a variety of different dreaded conversations.

Table 7.1 Sample Goals

Content Goals	Process Goals
Agree on a date for the training	We begin to develop trust
Decide whether you can afford a new FTE	I ask questions rather than command
Give a verbal warning on performance issue	I stay calm

When you’ve finished brainstorming potential goals, select one from each column. Limit yourself to one content and one process goal. More goals than that would be confusing and

would dilute your energy during the conversation. It's okay if you need to schedule follow-up conversations later to address additional goals.

Proficiency 3. Identify the unproductive communication patterns that you and the other person do unconsciously.

It's extremely important to be aware of how you interact with and impact people at work. You have a different communication relationship with each person you work with, even people who you barely know or speak with. I think of these communication relationships like different channels on a radio dial. Think of a person you work with where the communication is very clear and easy. You might be able to say just a few words or phrases to this person, and he will understand you perfectly. There's no static on the line. Your communication relationship with this person is like a radio channel that comes in crystal clear. Perhaps it's somebody you've worked with for a long time, or somebody with whom you have shared interests, or maybe you have similar personality styles. There's something about the way that you two communicate with each other that's very productive. There's a lot of ease, so there's no static on the line.

On the other end of the dial, there's a great deal of static, clicking and noise. It's very unpleasant. Think of one or two people at work with whom you have this kind of communication relationship with. No matter how consciously you try to interact with them or how clearly, calmly, and neutrally you deliver your message, communication breaks down.

This type of communication relationship is very frustrating. Sometimes you can explain it, "That's because of the project we worked on together where he felt like I let him down." Or, "I was upset because he was appointed matrix team leader when I felt that I should have gotten the assignment." Often, there's old experiences or feelings that leave static on the line.

Sometimes, though, the static is inexplicable. For some unknown reason(s), you simply can't communicate with certain people. Have you ever met someone and had the feeling, "I'm never going to connect with this person." Or, you might try to be really clear about what you're saying, and they just look at you like you're speaking Martian. Conversely, haven't you had the experience of meeting somebody, and you suddenly feel like you've known him your whole life. This is part of the mystery of being human.

When there's a lot of static in a communication relationship, pay attention to Proficiency 3. If you get along well with a person, there's usually less dread about talking with him. Of course, there's usually dread if you manage a friend and have to give him bad news or fire him. But, a high amount of static in a relationship requires that you do your homework even more diligently in Proficiency 3.

He Started It

In this proficiency, identify the unproductive communication patterns in your relationship. These are very often unconscious. If you want to read an excellent book about how to identify and break these patterns, I highly recommend *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* by Mary Beth O'Neil. She's a very skilled organizational consultant and coach who has a deep understanding of how people develop reactive patterns that block communication.

As you become aware of your behavior, you'll begin to notice that you display some of your patterns with everybody. Other patterns appear only in specific individual relationships. There are two ways that patterns develop.

In the first type, the other person does a behavior that you react to. Mary Beth O'Neil calls this "the dance." For example, when an employee arrives late for work, the leader gets

angry. That’s the dance. Every time he shows up five or ten minutes late for work or a meeting, the leader yells at him, marches around, sighs heavily, and might even say something judgmental like, “You’re lazy!” These behaviors are the part that the leader plays in the pattern. When the leader acts that way, it concretizes the pattern, and that makes it difficult for the employee unable to act in a different way. Leaders often want to blame their employees when the employee can’t stop doing a negative behavior. But, in this case, I hope you can see that the *leader’s reaction* to the employee’s negative behavior is actually part of the problem.

As O’Neill explains, when leaders are in these communication patterns, they go into a trance. Because they do the behaviors unconsciously, they don’t even know what they’re doing much less the impact that they’re having on others. Breaking a pattern is challenging, because it’s hard to see.

The first step is to be aware of the pattern; the second step is to do something different to break the pattern. For example, the next time he comes in late, the leader can do something different and calmly say, “I’m frustrated because you’re 30 minutes late. I needed to get started on this project at 9 a.m., so that I could take the results to the District Meeting today. I request that you get here a bit early tomorrow.” Delivering a neutral, calm message that describes the behavior, it’s impact, and your feeling changes the pattern. Table 7.2 has more examples of unproductive patterns and how to break them.

Table 7.2 Examples of How to Break Unproductive Communication Patterns

When the employee...	The leader...	To break the pattern next time, the leader will...
<p>Complains about a task: “I can’t finish this code in such a short period of time.”</p> <p>Makes a derisive comment about someone: “There she goes again. The space cadet.”</p> <p>Surfaces a conflict: “What’s going on here? You and I can’t have totally different viewpoints when we meet with a customer.”</p>	<p>Educates him about how important and fun it will be: “This’ll all be cleared up once you get through this project; don’t worry about it.”</p> <p>Ignores it.</p> <p>Changes the subject: “It wasn’t that bad. When can you get me your budget for the project?”</p>	<p>Listen to the complaint, then empathize: “Yes, I understand how you feel; I’m a little frustrated with the deadline, too.”</p> <p>State a feeling and make a firm request: “I feel uncomfortable when you call her spacey. If this is about her performance, I request that you address the issue directly. If you’re just making fun of someone who is different, I request that you refrain from teasing people on your team.”</p> <p>Explore the concern: “Tell me more about what’s bothering you?”</p>

Proficiency 3 isn't about finding the *right way* to break the pattern; it's about having the courage to just try something different and notice if it gets better results.

Breaking the Pattern of Inappropriate Humor

I'd like to comment on unproductive patterns around humor. This is a huge energy drain in most organizations. I'm not anti-humor. I like to have fun at work, and I exercise a pretty dry wit with my clients. But, many organizations have turned humor into a weapon. What I've noticed in training and coaching thousands of leaders over the years is that people use humor to attack each other. Then, when you try to surface it or call the person on it, they use the humor as an excuse. "Oh, I was just being funny! Don't you have a sense of humor? Can't you take a joke?" But they're not really being funny, telling a joke, or having fun; they're attacking people.

For example, when someone's late for a meeting, you might hear a sarcastic comment like, "Gee, now that all the *important people* have decided to show up, I guess we can start the meeting." After cynical, passive-aggressive comments like that, many people will laugh. But, I'd like people to know that it's an ineffective way to communicate how they really feel and to get what they want, which is people showing up on time for meetings.

When we use inappropriate humor as a weapon, it sets up a culture where people are inauthentic with each other and can't say how they truly feel. I've heard people make jokes about someone's appearance, the car they drive, personal objects on their desk, everything. But, the jokes that really hurt, and are extremely unproductive, are jokes about people's performance.

Please be aware of how your organization may use humor to deride people about personal or professional issues. Personal issues really shouldn't be addressed with humor. I know people like to have fun at work, but let's not use people as the object of your jokes. If this is an issue in your workplace, break the pattern. When someone makes an inappropriate comment, don't laugh or look the other way, try one of these responses:

- ❑ "I'm uncomfortable with that comment."
- ❑ "Would you be willing to keep comments like that to yourself?"
- ❑ "As a team, how can we resolve the issue of people coming late to meetings?"

I Started It

In addition to identifying patterns that the other person initiates, I also want you to identify what you do that leads to an unproductive response. These patterns are harder to see, because you initiate them. Some examples include:

- ❑ I ask a question; she gives me a blank stare.
- ❑ I state an expectation to an employee; he rolls his eyes.
- ❑ I give constructive feedback; she starts to cry.

A crying employee is pretty easy to spot, but many of the patterned responses are much more subtle. As a result, when the behavior occurs in a conversation that you're already dreading, you tend to miss it or ignore it. There might be a moment when you realize, "Oh, I hate it when they do that!" As a result of this unpleasant thought, you might feel nervous or upset, and that discomfort might make you fall back into your unproductive patterns. In Chapter 8, you'll learn how to slow down the conversation a bit and how to overcome the discomfort so that you can

break the pattern. I realize that I've asked you not to be overly attentive to cues. But, in the case of a pattern you want to break, it's better to be more alert for verbal and nonverbal cues.

The examples that I've given so far are patterned behaviors that people *do*; patterns can also be things that people *don't do*. For example, sometimes leaders forget to acknowledge employees, fail to listen to employees, or forget to ask questions. For example, when an employee comes to a leader with a problem like, "I forget, in this particular situation, should I do X first or Y first?," the tendency as leaders is to tell them the answer. This is a very unproductive pattern for two reasons. One, the employee is learning that every time he has a question, he can come to you, and you'll give him the answer. Two, he's not learning to seek out the answer himself. A simple way to break this pattern is when he asks you a question, you ask a question back. "How could you find the answer to that?" Or, "What do you think is a good solution?"

Once you've identified these unproductive communication patterns, the next critical step is for you to make a strong commitment to change. This is where the quality of firmness comes in, but you want to be really firm *with yourself*. Be confident that you're going to change the pattern in the next dreaded conversation.

What's interesting about changing this unproductive pattern is that it leads to a contagion affect. In other words, when you change one behavior, everything after that is up for grabs. Your new behavior may or may not lead to some change in the other person's behavior. This leads us to Proficiency 4.

"I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it."

-- Pablo Picasso

Proficiency 4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation.

In Proficiency 4, plan for a variety of responses to your new behavior. Imagine this scenario. You've identified a pattern that when a particular employee complains, you educate them on how great things are. You've decided that in the next dreaded conversation, instead of educating them and pushing them to not complain, you're going to listen and empathize.

For example, when the person begins to complain you keep your mouth shut, take a few deep breaths, and listen. Maybe you nod your head in agreement once in a while. Then, when he stops talking, you pause for a few seconds, because you don't want to interrupt, and you empathize with, "Yes, I'm hearing how frustrated you are." Or, "Hmm, that's a bummer." Or, "Yeah, I hate that, too."

What are some possible responses to your new behavior? One outcome is that nothing changes. He doesn't notice, either consciously or unconsciously, that you're different. He just keeps complaining at the same level. So, there's no change.

Option two is he has a positive response. He hears you authentically empathize, and he smiles a little bit. You notice his body language relaxes as he nods in agreement with your empathizing. It might even get better than this. He might respond to you with, "Yeah, but you know what? I'm thinking that it was good that you were pressured into this time line, because it made me realize that I can produce at a higher level than I thought was possible." Wouldn't that be wonderful?

The first possible response is neutral, no change. The second possibility is positive change. The third possible outcome from you breaking the pattern is a negative response. As you change your behavior and empathize, he might be offended and respond with, "Are you making fun of me?" Some people don't like empathy. They're not used to it, so it feels

uncomfortable or phony to them. Some people might even get angrier, storm out of your office and slam the door as they're screaming, "Oh, you don't even care."

Proficiency 4 asks you to be ready for anything. Write out all the possible responses that the other person could have to your new behavior. A conversation is just a contagion of responses and reactions. People are responding internally and externally. Internally, most people tend to have a lot of emotions, thoughts, and body sensations that they usually try to hide. It's okay if you don't want to show every single thought and feeling that's coming up. But, consider sharing any responses that are increasing in intensity, frequency or duration. If the intensity gets stronger (becoming more and more angry), if the frequency increases (that thought keeps coming back up in your mind), or if the duration is prolonged (feeling anxious for 10 or 20 minutes without any change), you might want to reveal your thoughts or feelings with language like,

"Sorry for changing the subject, but, I've been feeling kind of tense since you started this conversation. How are you feeling?"

Some people don't want to play their hand. They want a poker face. That's fine if you want to operate that way. But, I think that poker faces are getting us nowhere in organizations today. Authentic communication is about revealing how your internal experience is impacted by external behavior. If you have the guts to do it first, the other person might try it, too. Then, you could begin to truly communicate.

Use the bottom of Worksheet 7.1 to write out all of the other person's potential responses, from positive to negative. How could he behave? Then write out what you're going to do in response to his behavior. At this point in the conversation, you're creating new patterns. For example, let's look at the scenario of you being empathetic with the employee who was complaining, and he has a positive response to your empathy. It might be a low level positive response, like nodding his head and saying, "Yes" as you empathize. Or, it might be a medium level positive response: "Gee, you really understand what I'm talking about!" Or, it might be a high-level response: "Ahh, this is such a relief! You understand what I'm talking about! And you know what? I'm going to get back to work now, because I'm so grateful that you're really listening to me!"

How would you respond to each of his different responses? It's important that you feel very grounded regardless of his response, that you are open to his response, and that you are firm with the goal that you want to reach in the conversation. It's relatively easy to plan how to respond to his positive reactions. The potential negative reactions are more challenging to prepare for.

Worksheet 7.1 Planning for a Dreaded Conversation

Name the issue: _____

Name the person(s) I want to talk with: _____

1. Schedule the conversation

Date and time: _____

2. Write down your goals for the conversation.

Content goal: _____

Process goal: _____

3. Identify the unproductive communication patterns.

(a). When s/he _____,

I usually _____.

To break the pattern in this conversation, I'll _____

_____.

(b). When I _____,

s/he usually _____.

To break the pattern in this conversation, I'll _____

_____.

4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation.

When I break a pattern, s/he might respond to me in a way that is....	Her/his specific behavioral response might be to...	In that case, I will respond to her/him by...
Positive		
Neutral		
Negative		

For example, an employee might feel that your attempted empathy is making fun of him or just trying to get him to shut up. The person might have a very strong negative reaction like yelling, threatening or slamming the door as he walks out. It's important to have a predetermined response to each one of those potential behaviors. Much of the dread you feel before a conversation is because you don't know what he's going to do, and you've imagined the absolute, worst-case scenario. You've imagined that your employees are going to scream at you, that your boss is going to fire you, or someone's going to turn you in to an ethics board. You've awful-ized the outcome. Part of your awful-izing is that you don't have confidence in your skill set, so you imagine unthinkable things happening and how you'll feel helpless and out of control.

With the transformational qualities and proficiencies, you'll no longer feel helpless. Keep in mind, it's not about doing the *right* thing, it's about having confidence in your plan and your skills. Your plan lets you feel, "I'm going to be okay. And, if the worst possible thing happens, I know what I'll do." What's important about Proficiency 4 is that you're identifying the worst-case scenario, and you're ready for it. That's exciting, powerful, and transformative.

Violence in the Workplace

With the worse case scenario in mind, remember that it's rare for people to react in a violent way. But, violence does occur in the work place; you do need to be aware of it. If you feel at all unsafe in having a particular dreaded conversation, have a third party in the room with you. If that feels overdone, then leave the door open or have the conversation in an area that is semipublic, where other people would be around or close by.

I wonder to what degree people postpone dreaded conversations because they fear for their physical safety. If this is the case, then I recommend that you discuss your concerns with your boss, the human resources department, an employee assistance program, or some other resource. In most cases, dreaded conversations don't lead to violence. Instead, violence comes from emotional disorders, mental imbalances, or extremely difficult situations in people's lives that are often related to substance abuse and addiction.

That's why it's imperative for leaders to know a little bit about their employees' lives. You don't have to interrogate people, but have a general sense of what's going on in their personal life and have the courage to discuss any concerns. If you smell alcohol on a person's breath, it's your responsibility to discuss it with the employee. If your organization doesn't have clear policies and procedures regarding substance abuse or threatening/violent behavior, I suggest that your organization invest in developing a very specific manual, so that you know how to address these kinds of serious issues.



Contact the Society for Human Resource Management at <http://www.shrm.org/> for information on employee manuals. Contact the Employee Assistance Professionals Association at www.eap-association.com for information on Employee Assistance Programs.

Proficiencies 1-4

In summary, Proficiencies 1-4 help leaders prepare for dreaded conversations. First, notice the dread: muscular tension, stomach upset, generalized anxiety or discomfort. Notice thoughts like, "I'm delaying this conversation." Notice that there's friction between you and the

other person. Then, make the effort to schedule the conversation as quickly as possible or in an appropriate time frame.

Once it's scheduled, take whatever time is needed to plan for the conversation. Planning might only take five minutes, or it might be a half hour to finish the other three proficiencies. It's important that you have both a clear content and a process goal.

Then, identify the unproductive communication patterns you have with the individual. Ask a colleague for feedback on your patterns. My dream is that organizations will become so transparent around dreaded conversations that it'll be okay to ask anyone for feedback on your communication patterns.

The fourth proficiency is to plan for what could happen when you do break a pattern. Maybe nothing changes, maybe it's super positive and successful, or maybe it's negative.

I hope you feel well prepared for your dreaded conversation at this point, because in the next stage you will have the conversation. There's often a lot of anxiety walking into a difficult conversation. You'll learn how to deal with that anxiety in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Stage 2: Implementing a Dreaded Conversation

Once you have a plan for the conversation, implementing it is much easier. There are four proficiencies for implementing a dreaded conversation:

5. Manage your mental, emotional, physical and behavioral discomfort during the conversation.
6. Use a formula to deliver your message.
7. Be receptive.
8. Break the unproductive communication patterns with this person by communicating your standards and boundaries.

Proficiency 5. Manage your mental, emotional, physical and behavioral discomfort during the conversation.

Proficiency 5 is critical for developing confidence and being successful in the conversation. The more conversations you have, the more confident you will feel to manage what I call the four discomforts. Developing the ability to manage the discomforts will grow. It's like jumping into a swimming pool or lake. It's not as bad as you thought and can be quite refreshing.

The four discomforts that feed on each other in a dreaded conversation are:

- ❑ Mental discomfort,
- ❑ Emotional discomfort,
- ❑ Physical discomfort, and
- ❑ Behavioral discomfort.

Know Thyself

When you're in the middle of a dreaded conversation, the internal thought "I don't know what to say next" (mental) leads to fear (emotional) which leads to a knot in your stomach or sweating (physical) which leads to your old ways of acting (behavioral). This is only the beginning of an endless cycle of discomfort and dread, i.e. a **Dread Attack**.

During the conversation, be aware of the four discomforts and the connections among them. Be aware without either suppressing them or acting on them. Physicist David Bohm calls this "suspending." Hold the discomfort and let it unfold within you while you continue the conversation. When leaders first learn the Proficiencies, they start out with the best intentions. They thoroughly plan for the conversation. Then, I hear back from them, "I made a request and got so nervous that when she was resistant, I backed down and didn't get what I want." It's important to know your own discomforts so well that you can predict when they'll start, how intense they'll be and how long they'll last. You need to get to the point of mastering your discomfort where you can even laugh at your anxiety and aches while they're happening. Don't ever let your discomfort run the show!



David Bohm's book *On Dialogue* explains the skill of suspending. And, if you're unable to suspend without suppressing, he requests that you at least observe the process of suppression without suppressing the suppression!

Mental Discomfort

Use Worksheet 8.1 to analyze and strategize around your four discomforts (There's a blank copy in the Appendix). The antidote for a discomfort is similar to the ailment. For example, if you're experiencing mental discomfort in unpleasant thoughts like, "I shouldn't be doing this. I'm going to make matters worse," respond to that thought with a counter thought such as, "Right now, I'm choosing to try something different." The words, "I'm choosing" are a powerful antidote to self-judgment. Notice that I don't recommend a negating thought like, "I shouldn't think like that," or "That's a stupid thought. I'm a wimp for thinking that way." Those kinds of thoughts only create more discomfort. Other coaches might recommend surrounding your unpleasant thought with white light or some other negating process that will hopefully make it magically disappear. I don't recommend this approach, because the thought will still be there, underneath the light.



If you're challenged by unpleasant or judgmental thoughts as all of us are, check out Richard Carlson's *Taming Your Gremlin*.

Emotional Discomfort

There are four basic human emotions:

- Mad,
- Sad,
- Glad, and
- Afraid.

It's interesting that three of these universal feelings are highly unpleasant, so you can count on them to surface during dreaded conversations! Try using these steps to *suspend*, not *suppress*, emotional discomforts such as anxiety, anger, or grief:

1. Begin by **naming the feeling** silently to yourself. Sometimes just being aware that it exists can help you feel more relaxed.
2. Next, **feel the emotion in your body**. Where does it hang out? Does it pervade your body or can you feel it in one particular area like your chest, stomach or hands? Don't try to make the feeling go away. Totally relax around the sensations, allow them to be there and to even become stronger or larger. Don't worry; it might feel like it, but you *will not* die from anxiety.

3. Remember that **emotions are temporary**, even strong ones. It could pass away at any moment. Or, at least you know it'll be gone at some point after the conversation ends! It could be hours, days, weeks or months, but it will end.

4. **Allow the feeling to be there**, but don't let it take control of your behavior. Hold the emotion like you would hold a crying baby. Let it cry, but don't let it upset you.

5. Finally, **generate feelings of compassion for yourself**. Give yourself a pep talk: "I know this is scary. I'm really brave to *address* this situation. I'm a great leader!"

The Crying Game: I have met many leaders who often either feel like crying or do cry during difficult conversations. One leader cries because he empathizes so strongly with his employees, that he feels their pain. I wish that the dominant American culture allowed people to cry more easily without fear of retribution, but it doesn't. Our society lets us laugh any time we want, even if it's inappropriate. But, crying is considered a weakness particularly if it's done by a person in authority. If you were talking with someone at work about a tragic situation, for example a trauma or death, it would be normal if you began to cry.

But, if your goal is to hold an employee accountable for a task, it's best not to cry. You want to appear confident and show your conviction about reaching organizational goals. If you're afraid that you may cry during a difficult conversation, plan ahead to protect yourself. For example, position yourself so that you are a bit further away from the other person than usual. Write out and rehearse exactly what you want to say and how you will respond to what the other person may say. Know the "I'm about to cry" cues in your body (Is it a warm face, fast breathing, or something else?) so that you can adjust before you do begin to cry. Be prepared to handle your physical discomfort (see below). If you feel like you're going to cry, it's okay to stop the conversation with a laser statement, "I'd like to think about this some more before we continue the conversation. I'll call you to reschedule." Calmly exit the room, and go to a private space where you can cry if you need to. Don't judge or blame yourself, because you're simply having a normal feeling. The more experience you have with dreaded conversations, the more confident you will be, and the less you will cry.

Physical Discomfort

When you're in the middle of a Dread Attack, you're usually most aware of the physical discomfort you're experiencing. Almost every system in the body seems to respond to the stress. Physical discomfort includes but isn't limited to:

- Headache
- Tight neck or shoulders
- Clenched jaw

- ❑ Grinding teeth
- ❑ Excessive sweating
- ❑ Palpitations
- ❑ Chest pain
- ❑ Upset stomach
- ❑ Shortness of breath
- ❑ Nervous tics
- ❑ Back pain
- ❑ Dizziness
- ❑ Dry mouth
- ❑ Feeling hot or flushed

Sometimes it's helpful to reframe these physical reactions as excitement. "I'm not really nervous. I'm just excited to be telling my boss that I'm no longer going to work 60 hours a week." Sometimes the reframe works, sometimes it doesn't.

If reframing physical discomfort doesn't work, rely on physical antidotes. My favorites are what I call the three Bs:

1. Breathe: Take a few deep, slow breaths. Or, try holding your breath for a few seconds. Depending on which phase you were at when you held it, this will create an automatic response to either take a deep breath in or to exhale fully. Either one is very relaxing.

2. Base: Feel your feet on the floor. Feel your body sink and relax into the chair. Get grounded. Feel unmovable and unshakeable.

3. Bell: The Bell Hand is a simple movement that can help calm your nervous system. With either hand, gently bring all of your fingertips together to touch your thumb. Then, slowly release your fingers so that your hand pulses open and returns again to join your fingers. The hand only opens enough to create the shape of a bell, and then the fingers come together again. This movement sends a kind of neural "all's well" signal to the brain. Hold your hand under the table or let it hang by your chair, so that no one sees the movement.

Behavioral Discomfort

Mental, emotional and physical discomforts are very powerful. They can feel like a tsunami wave pushing you back into your old unconscious patterns. The natural tendency is to give in to the discomfort and to revert to your old behaviors. If you notice that you're losing confidence in your ability to act in a new way, be strong! Act anyway. Here's a sample worksheet that shows how one leader analyzed and strategized his discomforts.

Worksheet 8.1 Analyze and Strategize for the Four Discomforts

Discomfort	Example of How Discomfort Surfaces in Me	How I Can Overcome Discomfort
Mental	“My boss must think I’m a jerk for disagreeing with him like this.”	“I’m choosing to express my needs.”
Emotional	Fear and anxiety	Feel compassion for myself
Physical	Rapid breathing	Slow, conscious breathing
Behavioral	Talk loudly or interrupt others	Gently press my index finger and thumb together while the other person is talking. When she stops talking, pause, release my fingers, and speak calmly. Fingers together, mouth closed. Fingers open, I can speak.

Proficiency 6. Use a formula to deliver your message.

Using a formula to deliver your message is better than winging it, because without a formula you won’t know what to say next in the conversation. One formula that I really like is called “DEFR.” DEFR is a four-step assertive communication formula that stands for:

- ❑ **Describe** the behavior,
- ❑ Explain the **effect**,
- ❑ State your **feeling**, and
- ❑ Make a **request**.

As you begin to use DEFR regularly, you’ll notice that you might only have to do one or two of the steps in order to receive a positive response from the other person. But, sometimes a situation requires all four steps. I’ll briefly describe each step, then give you some suggestions for delivering them.

1. Describe the other person’s behavior that you’re dissatisfied with. Deliver one succinct sentence that describes the person’s unacceptable behavior in twelve words or less. (In coaching, we call that laser messaging because the speaker gets to the point.) The description isn’t judgmental or generic. It’s a very precise report of a measurable behavior. For example, “You’ve been ten minutes late to work every day for two weeks.” An ineffective, judgmental description would be, “You’re not committed to your job.” Descriptions like that don’t make sense to your employee, because he feels very committed to his job. He doesn’t understand that you’re processing his arriving ten minutes late as being noncommittal, because in his universe that’s not at all what’s going on. Perhaps he’s been having problems with childcare or one of his elderly parents is ill. You don’t really know why people are late to work. So, please avoid taking

data like “ten minutes late for two weeks” and processing that into “person is not committed to his job.” It’s more helpful for people when you simply describe the behavior that you’re disappointed with.

2. Explain the effect that the behavior is having on you and others. State the effect in one sentence of twelve words or less, “I can’t open the customer service desk, so customers are dissatisfied.” With this step, hopefully, he will begin to understand that your message isn’t just about him being late; there’s also an effect. This step helps employees see that they’re not alone in their own little universe; they are part of a team that relies on them.

3. State your feeling about the situation. In one sentence of twelve words or less, tell him how you feel. “I feel really frustrated,” “I feel upset,” or “I’m angry.” Use *one* of these, not all three. They are different flavors of the universal emotion, “Mad.”

4. Make a specific request. The specific request should be how you want him to behave in the future. The request should be a SMART goal: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-oriented. For example, “I want you to be seated at the receptionist desk no later than 8AM every day for the next five work days.”

Make a request that covers a relatively short timeframe. Please avoid requests like, “I want you to be at work on time every day for the next year.” That’s too difficult to track, much less achieve. Make a request of your employee that breaks the goal down into something realistic; for some of your employees, that covers the next day or the next week.

Pause Between Each Step

Now that you know the four steps, here are some delivery tips. You might not have to use all four steps. Deliver the steps one at a time, and look for possible exit ramps or opportunities to leave the model and move into a collaborative, problem-solving mode. I’ll point out the exit ramps after each step.

When you use the DEFR formula, pause after each of the steps. Let’s look at how that works for each step.

After you describe the person’s behavior in step one, “You’ve been ten minutes late to work every day for two weeks,” pause and wait for the person’s response. Be silent. Try counting to five or even ten seconds. With that much silence, your employee may become uncomfortable, and he may talk to fill in the space. If he responds to your description, listen to what he has to say. He may offer some kind of explanation like, “Well, it’s because I’m having car problems. I’ve been trying to catch the bus, but it’s always late.” This is the first possible exit ramp from the DEFR formula to negotiating a resolution. As you exit DEFR, you could offer help (“How can I help?”) or ask a question (“How could you solve this problem?”).

Employees tend to be either comfortable with silence or they are terrified by it. So, despite your reflective pause, he might not offer an explanation. You might get a blank stare. At that point, it’s up to you to decide if you want to ask a question such as, “Would you be willing to talk about your tardiness?”

Avoid “Why?” Questions

I recommend you avoid using the word “why.” Why would I ask that? Because in coaching, “Why?” is the universal avoid question. Who used to always ask, “Why did you do that?” Your parents did, and that was their job. But “Why?” is more about interrogation, and less about inquiry. You’re not there to put somebody on the witness stand. You’re there to find out what’s going on, so you can help him. You’re there to be collaborative, even in this dreaded

conversation. And, believe me, when you start to describe an employee's unacceptable behavior, his dread level's going to skyrocket.

Sometimes his response is going to answer all of your questions and concerns. You might even have this flash of compassion: "Oh, my gosh, I had no idea you were going through a divorce, and you have to take your child to school every day."

This is the point in a dreaded conversation where you're going to have to make it up as you go. You're going to have to decide how honest you feel the employee is being. Is he really telling the truth, or is he making an excuse? I recommend that leaders work with employees around personal difficulties like this. Give them a chance to recover and help them out to whatever degree you can, at least a few times. But, be very clear: "I'm willing to help you this time around with this issue. And, I need to see from your behavior that you are committed to your job even through these difficulties."

Sometimes the first step, *Describe*, will surface the problem, and you'll move directly from there into resolution. In that case, you can happily skip the other three steps.

Speak Less and Whine No More

Sometimes, however, a description doesn't surface the problem. Sometimes you get no response, or you get a response that's not convincing or authentic. In that case, calmly move to step two: explain the *effect*. "When you're late, we can't open the customer service desk." "When you're late, I have to pull somebody else off the floor." "When you're late and we're really, really busy in the morning, it impacts everybody's productivity and morale."

Silence, pause, wait.

If there's no response to the silence, what's a good question at this point? You could ask, "How do you feel about the impact that your behavior is having on the team?" I hope your employee says that he's concerned about it. But, if he's not upset, I would respond, "I'm concerned that you're not concerned." Laser it. One sentence, twelve words or less.

Speak in single sentences. Not paragraphs, not chapters, not volumes. The more you talk, the more avenues or escape routes you give to your employees, boss, or customer. Don't give them a bunch of escape routes; just give them one specific behavior to respond to. Give one specific effect. Don't go on and on, and don't whine at them. Because when you whine, you're teaching them, "Whining is how we communicate around here. As soon as I finish whining, then you're going to whine back at me." That's all they learn. Instead, what I want them to learn is that you're precise, firm, open, attentive, assertive, and courageous.

Sometimes when you get to the second step, he might respond with "Gee, I'm sorry that it's affecting the team. Yes, I know people are angry with me. I'm feeling ostracized by the team." Let him talk about the impact that the effect is having on him. When he behaves in a negative way and affects his team, the team is going to respond with some kind of noticeable impact. Give your employee the chance to say, "Yes, I feel left out," "I feel like people are dumping their work on me," or "I feel like people are ignoring me."

This point in the conversation is another possible exit ramp from the DEFR formula. When the employee is showing contrition, it's time to move towards collaboration.

Talking about Feelings Shifts a Conversation

However, if you're still getting a blank stare or possibly a sneer, then I suggest that you move on to step three, which is to state your feeling: "I'm feeling frustrated" or "I'm feeling angry;" followed by a pause.

I know that some of you aren't interested in expressing your feelings at work. That's fine. But, I've found in years of teaching leaders to be appropriately assertive that sharing one honest feeling can create a significant shift in a conversation. It can take the wind out of a bully's sail when he realizes, "Oh my gosh, you're going to talk about feelings?!" It's not necessary to go to a really deep level of feeling. The feeling doesn't have to be super charged. It could be, "I feel uncomfortable" or "I feel confused." Those tend to be less charged words that are easier to get out. Of course, feel free to use pure, unadulterated feelings like angry, upset, afraid, or sad. Being vulnerable and having the courage to tell a person how you feel totally changes the dynamics of the relationship.

It won't work for every bully or **Ruler**, but it will work for enough of them that they will begin to see, "Hey, things are different around here. I can't tell jokes that are cruel or inappropriate. I can't call people names anymore. I can't use putdowns. I can't continue to load work on people without giving them the resources to get it done. I can't make unreasonable demands. I can't keep avoiding answering their questions, emails or phone calls."

Remember to use "I" rather than "you" at the beginning of a feeling statement. Avoid statements like, "You're making me angry." People can't make us feel anything. You are the owner of your feelings. Role model how to talk about your feelings and how to own your feelings rather than blaming your experience on other people. That employee doesn't really make you mad, that employee is just doing his thing, living his life, and you're responding to him because you want him to act in a different way.

Sometimes when you use "you" language – "you're making me angry" – it's coming from feeling your own loss of control. People cannot make us angry. They can behave in a certain way, and if you feel like you don't have the skills to set boundaries and expectations for them, then you feel out of control, a bit crazy, and incompetent as a leader. As you begin setting stronger boundaries and holding employees accountable, you won't get angry anymore. Instead, you'll find new employees who want to do those jobs well.

When you state your feeling, the person may respond with an apology, "I'm really sorry I acted this way." It might not happen, but it might. This would be an exit ramp to move to collaboration. If there's no response to your silence, you have the option to ask a question. "What's your response to that?" or "How do you feel about how I feel?"

Make a Specific Request

At this point in the formula, you're usually getting some movement towards collaboration. If not, go to the fourth step, which is holding the person accountable by making a specific request. "I want you to be at the receptionist desk no later than 8AM every day for the next week." Some managers don't like the word "request." They think the formula should be DEFE: Describe, Effect, Feeling, Expectation. Feel free to change it. I like to couch it as a request, "Would you be willing...?," because it lets the employee make a choice. If the employee isn't willing to meet the expectations, then it's your job to make it clear that he's not a good fit for the job.

After you state your request, pause. If he doesn't offer a response, ask an open-ended question. Avoid close-ended questions like, "Are you willing to do that?" Of course, he's going to say, "Yes." "Do you have any questions?" Of course, he'll say, "No." Open-ended questions begin with

- Who,

- ❑ What,
- ❑ When,
- ❑ Where, or
- ❑ How.

Try, “What are you going to do about this?” or “How do you plan to make this happen?”

Setting Clear Expectations

Mary Beth O’Neil says that leaders make the mistake of doing all the talking. When you set an expectation or make a request, let your employee talk about that task. She suggests that you ask questions in three categories to make sure the employee (1) *understands* the expectation, (2) is emotionally *committed* to the expectation, and (3) is ready to take *initiative* on your request.

In the first category, *Understands*, avoid a closed question like, “Do you understand what I’m saying?” Of course, he’s going to say, “Yes.” An open-ended question would be: “What have you heard that I want you to do?” That question gives the employee the opportunity to reflect back to you, “I heard you say that you want me to be at work on time.” Then, you can respond, “I don’t want to be picky, but I’d like you to be more precise. Could you say exactly what I’m requesting of you?” That’s the opportunity for the employee to say, “Oh, yeah, you want me at work at 8 o’clock, for the next week.”

“That’s right.”

In the second category, *Committed*, ask a question to clarify that the employee is emotionally dedicated to the request. “How do you feel about doing this?” “What’s exciting about this?” “What’s frustrating about this expectation?”

Some of you may be rolling your eyes, thinking that this conversation shouldn’t be about how the employee feels, but about getting the work done. Guess what? I feel concerned about that reaction! We’re all having feelings every moment of every day, and our feelings run our behavior. So, if an employee is frustrated, angry, upset, rageful, or confused, do you think he can be productive? No way.

Often, employees just need an outlet for their feelings like, “I’m really afraid of working at the receptionist desk. I’m not good at customer service. I haven’t gotten enough training.” Please listen. You want to know their feelings, so that you can help them resolve the concerns and be more productive.

The third category of questions confirms that the employee has a plan to take *initiative*. “What are you going to do differently to assure that you’re here no later than 8AM?” Make sure you have asked about the expectation/request on all three levels: the employee understands, commits, and is ready to initiate action.

Employees are Responsible for Tracking Their Progress

In this last step of making a request, it’s the employee’s responsibility to report back to you on his performance. Leaders get frustrated about trying to keep track of all the expectations they have of various people. One leader told me, “I’ve got a to-do list for every one of my employees.”

Throw away those to-do lists. Your only to-do list should be activities that you need to accomplish as a leader. It’s okay to make a note that you will be receiving an update from an employee on a certain date. But, once you make a request and go through these three reflective

steps with the employee, the employee owns the expectation. It's not yours. You should clear that RAM space by emphasizing to the employee, "Reporting back to me is part of the expectation. How are you going to report back to me on your progress?"

If the employee doesn't perform or if the employee does not report back, it's important to have a follow-up conversation about this right away. If expectations continue to be missed, at some point it's appropriate to take the next step of a verbal warning or to initiate a disciplinary action. It sounds mean. But, when you have employees who aren't meeting your minimum expectations, don't let it slide. I know you don't want to come across as harsh. But, harsh is very different from firm, assertive, or precise. This is a whole new way of being that many people and organizations haven't seen, because all they've seen are the extremes. They've seen people fight and push, or they've seen people run and flee. What you need to do is create a new model of leadership, which includes all the transformational qualities: being courageous, attentive, assertive, firm, open, and precise. Show people that you can be calm, firm, open and direct. It'll take a while for people in your organization to adapt to this healthier communication style.



If you like the DEFR formula and want to read about a similar but even more effective and proven approach, check out Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Create Your Life, Your Relationships, and Your World in Harmony with Your Values*.

Proficiency 7. Be Receptive.

In your dreaded conversations, balance out delivering messages through Proficiency 6 and receiving messages through Proficiency 7. QUELLS is the acronym for the six receptivity skills:

- ❑ Question,
- ❑ Understand,
- ❑ Empathize,
- ❑ Let them vent,
- ❑ Listen, and
- ❑ Silence.

QUELLS lets you subdue or suspend the desire to force your agenda on the other person during the dreaded conversation.

Question

The first skill is to Question. It's important throughout the dreaded conversation to be firm about delivering your message while also being open to asking questions. There's a natural curiosity that helps you navigate through a dreaded conversation. Use Who, What, When, Where, and How questions like:

- ❑ Who could help you improve your skill in that area?
- ❑ What would you like to see change in this particular situation?
- ❑ When should we communicate about this again?
- ❑ Where could we get the resources to help you with this project?
- ❑ How would you like to see things work differently in your team?

Understand and Empathize

The second and third skills, Understand and Empathize, work together. It's helpful during a dreaded conversation to paraphrase two things back to the person you're speaking with. Skills 2 and 3 are the paraphrasing steps, where you show you understand and you empathize with his message. To show that you understand, paraphrase or reflect back the facts that the person is presenting to you. For example,

- ❑ "It sounds like you want a new work flow process."
- ❑ "I'm getting the sense that you have other expectations of your team members."
- ❑ "I think I'm hearing that you want me to work longer hours on this project."

When you empathize, you show that you're sensing the person's feelings. Reflect back to the speaker:

- ❑ "You're upset about this process."
- ❑ "You're disappointed in this project."
- ❑ "You're angry at your co-worker."

It's easiest to combine Understand (facts) and Empathize (feelings): "I think you're upset (feeling) because you want more information about who is going to be moved to another department (fact)." When you reflect back the facts and feelings in a situation, people usually feel heard and that may lead them to want to talk more about the issue. This takes you into skill 4, let them vent.

Let Them Vent

Allowing people to vent their feelings unlocks the relationships among their thoughts, feelings, body sensations and behaviors. If you can listen to a person talk about his feelings, thoughts, and concerns, that helps him disengage from how it's driving his behavior in unproductive ways. I'm not saying it's going to make him totally happy. But, haven't you ever had the experience where you're really upset about something, and holding it in is counterproductive? If you have a chance later in the day or the week to vent to a friend or colleague, there's something very cathartic about that. You feel like you're being heard. It allows you to express that negative energy rather than repress unpleasant thoughts and feelings. This can be productive, because it allows you to move on from the current situation to a new level of action.

It's easier to let other people vent when you can stay grounded through the three Bs mentioned earlier: *breathe, base, and bell hand*. Make sure that you're very calm throughout the conversation by checking physiological feedback loops. Notice if you're feeling tension in your face, jaw, shoulders, chest, stomach, hands, arms, legs, or feet. Sometimes the toes can curl up, and the feet can get very tense. Throughout the conversation, take deep breaths. Feel the body sink into the floor if you're standing, or into the chair if you're sitting. Use the bell hand, very slowly moving all the fingers out just enough to form a bell, and then coming back to touch the thumb. This will help you feel more open to allowing the other person to vent.

Some employees are uncomfortable venting. They might not want to express their feelings. Encourage people to share their feelings, particularly if you're not getting a sense of the emotions, and you're having trouble empathizing. Cycle back to the Questioning skill, and ask:

“How are you feeling about this? I'm thinking that you're upset, but I'm not sure if that's it. Am I off the mark?”

Guidelines for Venting: Time, Language, and Volume

Some people, given the opportunity to express their feelings, will slowly begin to share what's going on with them. Other people will jump at the chance to vent. In fact, you may need to help them set some boundaries around time and language. In terms of the time limit, sometimes it's helpful to say, “I'd really like to hear your concerns about this, and I'd like to let you vent a bit. What's a reasonable timeframe?” Most people can get it all out in two or three minutes; five minutes is a good maximum time limit. Make an agreement that you're going to look at a watch together, and then just let the person go for it.

Another guideline to set with people around venting is how they're going to talk about people and situations. From my perspective, it's inappropriate to use profanity. Many leaders disagree with me on this. They don't mind hearing people swear as long as it's not targeted towards them or other individuals. In other words, if employees want to yell and scream about a software program, some leaders don't mind that. Be clear about your own standards.

This brings up the issue of volume. When someone is given the opportunity to vent, she might want to raise her voice. Or, she might want to use her body to express unpleasant emotions by pounding on a desk, flailing her arms or stomping her feet. Some people like to throw things. All of these examples are out of bounds to me. However, some leaders are okay with these kinds of behaviors. You might feel totally comfortable and safe allowing your employees to vent in this way. I don't recommend it, because I feel it teaches people that when they get angry, the only outlet they have is to yell, scream, or use their body. I feel it would be much more effective to have an agreement with your employees, boss and customers that the best way to vent is to use words that describe feelings. Many of us haven't learned a vocabulary to express our feelings; we have very little emotional fluency. When this is the case, try giving the other person simple categories of feelings such as mad, sad, glad, or afraid. Those are the four basic emotions that people in most cultures experience. When you want to vent, it's usually not because you're glad. It's usually because you're angry, depressed, or worried.

The bottom line is that most unpleasant feelings come from a sense of fear. In other words, when people are either very angry or very sad, that usually stems from being afraid of something. Take time to explore this theory to see if it's true for you. When you're letting a person vent, it's best to just let her vent rather than try to analyze her feelings as rooted in fear. For example, I *wouldn't* recommend stopping someone to say, “Gee, your anger looks like it's really based in a fear of losing your job.” Or, “Your sadness seems to be coming from apprehension about upsetting that customer and losing this account.” It's usually inappropriate to stop people in order to modify the stream of feelings that they're expressing. In summary, it's good to set venting boundaries around the length of time, profanity, volume, and use of the body.

Listen

Particularly when people are venting but also throughout the conversation, use QUELLS skill number five, Listen. Listening is difficult for most of us. It's one thing to keep my mouth

shut when someone is talking; that in itself is relatively difficult. But, even more challenging than keeping my mouth quiet is to quiet my mind, so that I'm truly receiving what the person is saying. If you're at that first level of just keeping your mouth shut, go for that. Notice your tendency to want to interrupt. Notice your tendency to give solutions or to correct the other person. Notice your tendency to talk too much, so that there's not much air space available for the other person.

At the second level of listening, be with the words and ideas that the other person is delivering. This skill comes from your own confidence. When you're confident in yourself as a leader, you don't have to have employees agree with every word you say. Be confident enough to listen to people who disagree with you, who have different ideas, or who have a different perspective than yours.

Judging the Speaker

At this second level of listening, you're being with what the speaker is saying, and there's less judgment. There will always be some judgment, because our minds are trained to think "yes," "no," or "maybe" about pretty much everything. But, see if you can stay in that "maybe" zone. Even stay away from the "yes" zone, because it's a judgment, too. Notice that when your mind is saying, "Yes, I agree," that there's always a point at which the mind drops into a "no." Try to stay in that "maybe" zone, a neutral attitude where you're open to receiving ideas rather than applauding them or discarding them.

You may only be able to keep this level of openness for seconds at a time. That's okay. One tip for doing this is to intensely focus on the sound of each word. Listen for the beginning and the end of each word. It sounds like a lot of work, but this technique will train your mind to let go of its own thoughts and judgments.

Becoming more aware and accepting of judgments can also be helpful. When I'm listening at the second level, I engage part of my mind in observing and noting when I judge. I say very quietly in the back of my mind (not out loud), "Judging," whenever I notice myself thinking that what the other person is saying is either good or bad. It might amaze you to notice how much of your listening time is spent in judging. Don't get depressed about it. It's normal to judge. Just use this awareness to become more focused on and open to the ideas you are hearing.

"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape."

-- Dr. Michael McGriffv

You can also listen for what a person isn't saying. This can be very helpful with regards to QUELLS skill one, asking questions. If a person has talked all around a problem, look at what she hasn't said, and ask questions about what's possible. That could sound like:

"I'm hearing your frustration about this work process. What ideas do you have for improving it?"

This lets her talk not just about her pain, but also about the possibilities for improvement. I recommend that leaders have a stated understanding with employees that whenever someone brings a problem or frustration to you, that she also offers a suggestion or a recommendation. Employees actually like this agreement, because it means that the leader really does want to hear their ideas. It communicates, "I expect you to be creative and intelligent." It also eliminates the possibility of people coming to your office only to complain. Instead of employees coming to

you to whine, whine, and whine some more, the new pattern will be whine + suggestion = solution. That's much better for everyone!

The Desire to Interrupt

The sixth receptivity skill is to be strategically silent. In Proficiency 6, I explained the importance of learning to pause and to be comfortable with silence. The world could use a whole lot more silence. In my work, I've observed that in most organizations, interruption, rather than silence, is a way of life. If you're an interrupter, explore the contagion of thoughts, feelings and body sensations (the discomforts) that drive you to interrupt a speaker. See if you can just sit and notice the thought, "I've got something that I really want to say!" Then, experience the emotions of anxiety or excitement that accompany your thought. Next, tune into the body sensations associated with your tension, "My hands are clenched and my chest is tight, because I want to say this before anybody else does."

This contagion of thoughts, feelings and body sensations drives your behavior to interrupt people. It happens so quickly and so unconsciously that you interrupt people without even knowing what the impetus is. Becoming aware of these mental, emotional and physical discomforts allows you to suspend them while you hold back from interrupting others. Most people don't like to be interrupted. The strategic silence is about letting there be a period of quiet after the person stops talking.

"No one has a finer command of language than the person who keeps his mouth shut."

-- Sam Rayburn

In our fast-paced culture, particularly our speedy work culture, there's not a lot of role modeling of silence. Silence isn't valued very much because it seems to be a waste of time. With Proficiency 6, I asked you to pause after each of the four pieces of the DEFR formula. Even when you're not using the DEFR formula, use silence throughout your dreaded conversations. Count for five seconds, or even up to ten seconds, as you wait for the other person to digest and reflect on what you've said. Many of us have an unproductive pattern of filling in the silence. This removes the opportunity and the responsibility from the other person to respond. Simply notice how uncomfortable you get when you ask a question and you get a blank stare, or when you make a strong request and the person doesn't respond. Perhaps she looks away, or looks down, or perhaps she gives you a puzzled look. Allow her to be uncomfortable. Allow yourself to notice if you're uncomfortable, and just suspend or hold that discomfort. Be with it, and allow the silence.

Don't Over-do Silence

I've spent a lot of time in my life in silence. As a meditator, I'm very attracted to silence. As a result, I can overdo silence in professional settings and turn a conversation into the *Silence Olympics*. Overdoing silence like this can be confusing, alarming, or even threatening to people. I recommend that you use silence like a spice. If you were making oatmeal cookies, you wouldn't put in a cup of cinnamon. You'd put in a teaspoon or a tablespoon at most. Practice sprinkling small amounts of silence throughout the conversation, rather than telling yourself, "No matter what this person says, if they don't answer the way I want them to, I'm just going to be silent. I'm not going to say a word. I can go five, ten, fifteen minutes in silence." This approach to silence wouldn't be effective or nurturing in a dreaded conversation.

Your goal is to transform the dread that not only *you* feel, but that the other person feels as well. Silence is one way to transform the dread by allowing the person to reflect on the

situation at a deeper level. If you have helped create a safe environment, where an employee feels like it's okay to take a risk, be honest and share a concern, then the silence may communicate that openness. However, if the silence is overdone, it may turn into a prison cell and make the person feel like, "I'm being punished. This person hates me. I'm in trouble." Experiment with silence and notice that each person with whom you have a communication relationship has a different experience with silence. Some people find it refreshing, but most people feel at least a little uncomfortable with it.

It's okay to tell people that you use silence as a way to allow others to reflect on what you've said or asked. You can role model that, too. When a person says something to you, you can respond, "I want to take a moment before I respond to that." Or, you can look down or gaze away from their eye contact, and say, "Let me think about that." Or, preface your comment with, "That's an interesting comment. Let me reflect on that." Take a few seconds to reflect on the comment, then respond. This shows others how to use silence as part of an inquiry process that slows down the conversation. I'm convinced that one of the reasons it's difficult to break unproductive communication patterns is because of the rapid pace of our conversations. If you slow down slightly as you speak, say, "Let me think about how that fits," and pause -- this allows the whole conversation to shift to a slower pace and, I believe, to a deeper level.

Proficiency 8. Break the unproductive communication patterns with this person by communicating your standards and boundaries.

Proficiency 8 reminds you to return to your original plan for the dreaded conversation. In Stage 1, Planning for the Dreaded Conversation, you identify the unproductive communication patterns including the part you play and the part the other person plays. In Proficiency 8, you become not only very conscious of the unproductive communication patterns as they occur in the conversation, you also begin to understand how you initially set up these unhealthy patterns. As soon as you meet a person, you begin to establish patterns; some of the patterns are healthy, but many patterns aren't in your best interest. The way you set up these unconscious patterns relates to a great extent to your standards and boundaries.

Standards and boundaries are interrelated (Figure 8.1). Standards are the behaviors that you expect of yourself. Standards include how you treat yourself and other people. Some examples of standards include:

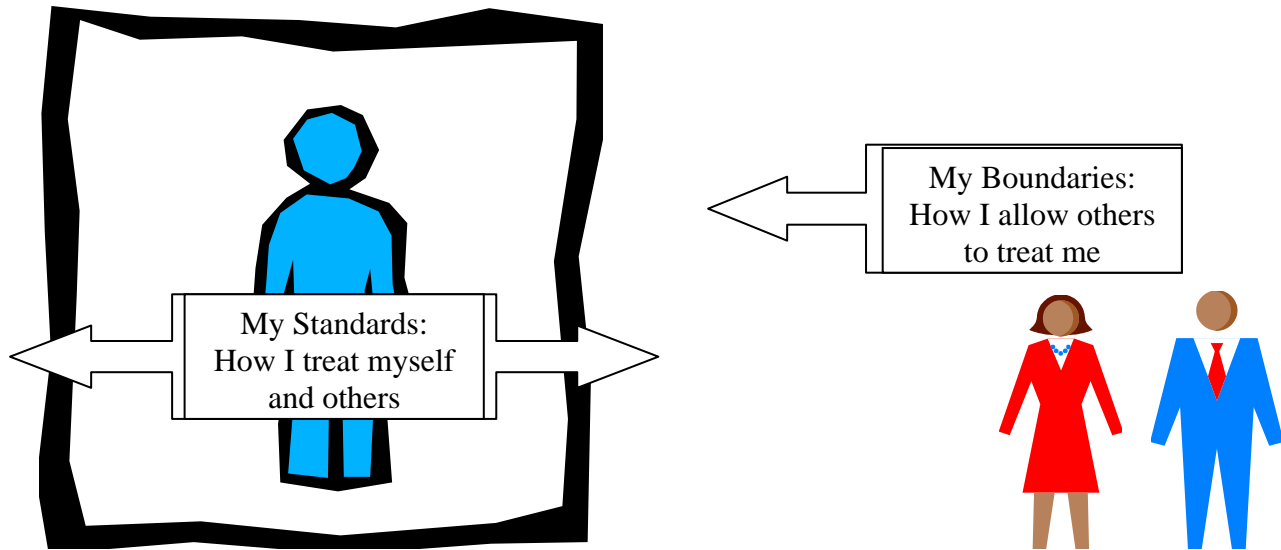
- ❑ I allow people to finish speaking before I make a comment.
- ❑ I offer constructive feedback based on how an employee behaves rather than judging them as a certain kind of person (lazy, unmotivated, uptight).
- ❑ I listen and ask questions before I make decisions.

Where standards are about how you treat people, boundaries are what you expect of others or how you want others to treat you. Look at the first example above. If a person allows others to finish speaking before she makes a comment, do you think she would also expect other people to let her finish speaking? It might not always be true, but it's often the case, that how you treat other people is how you want to be treated. So, your list of boundaries could mirror your standards like this:

- ❑ I expect other people to allow me to finish speaking before they make a comment.

- ❑ I expect people to offer constructive feedback to me based on how I behave, rather than judging me as a certain kind of person (lazy, unmotivated, uptight).
- ❑ I expect people to listen and ask me questions before they make decisions that impact me.

Figure 8.1 Standards and Boundaries



Standards and Boundaries Impact Stress Levels

Standards and boundaries are closely related. A person who has high standards and high boundaries will have low stress in the workplace. In other words, if you have certain expectations of yourself that you also expect, communicate, and hold others accountable for, then there will be little friction in your interpersonal interactions at work. Having healthy boundaries means that you train people to treat you the way you want to be treated. When that happens, you have low stress.

Conversely, people who have very high standards but low boundaries tend to have high stress levels. An example of high standards and low boundaries: “I allow people to finish speaking before I make a comment. But, when other people interrupt me, I don’t stop them. Instead, I get angry inside and resent that person for being rude.” When I share this example with people, some respond to me, “I can’t tell my boss how to treat me. My boss acts any way she wants to.”

I disagree with this victim mentality. I believe that one of the most significant causes of stress in the workplace and in our lives is allowing people to treat us in ways that feel inappropriate to us. Please notice that I said, “inappropriate to us,” because everyone’s boundaries are different. A good example of this is humor. Some people allow others to tell any type of joke in the workplace, even if it’s off-color or racist, because they think the jokes are funny. Others allow rude jokes because they don’t know how to set boundaries, so they laugh nervously even if the joke is offensive. Other people, once they realize that the joke is offensive, racially biased or discriminatory, will stop the person in a calm, neutral way and say, “Excuse me. I’m uncomfortable with racial jokes.”

Have One Set of Boundaries

It's important throughout a dreaded conversation to be aware of your standards and to be aware of where you've been lax in setting boundaries. What's interesting, and a bit exhausting about this, is that people tend to set boundaries differently with each person at work, because they have a different communication relationship with each person. The different relationships are influenced to a great extent by power. When one person has a significant amount of power over another person, like a difference in status or job title, the person with more power usually has bigger boundaries, and the person with less power, has smaller or nonexistent boundaries. The boss or person with more status can go right through the other person's boundaries. There's no barrier that says, "You can't cross here. I won't allow you to treat me like that," because the person with less status is intimidated by power. The healthiest people have one set of boundaries that applies to everyone.

I've heard some amazing stories over the last 18 years of how people have virtually no boundaries in the workplace. One of the more alarming stories was by a friend who was working late one day. She decided to go for a run after work. She'd brought her running gear to work, so she closed her office door and started changing her clothes. While she was in the middle of taking off her clothes, her office door opened and a man whom she worked with walked right into her office; he was looking for some paperwork on her desk. She screamed, and slammed the door shut.

I frequently hear variations on this "a closed door means nothing in our workplace" story. Some people in positions of power still feel that they have a right to cross that physical boundary.

When I tell her story in management trainings, many people respond indignantly with, "Why didn't she *lock* her door?" I think these folks are missing the point. We shouldn't have to lock the door on our boundaries. We shouldn't have to post barbed wire around our desk. We shouldn't have to hire a bodyguard to protect us at work. Our self-protection is done verbally and non-verbally. As we get to know a person, we educate them. This isn't rude or demanding. We're simply teaching people how we like to be treated. It's not about acting like the king or queen. All employees, not just managers or leaders, should have healthy boundaries and communicate them openly to others.

Conflicting Boundaries

Sometimes your individual boundaries will conflict with your leader's or team's boundaries. For example, a leader has the right to say, "We'll have a team meeting every Tuesday from 2:00PM to 3:00PM." An employee could respond with, "That doesn't mesh with my individual boundaries. I need quiet time so that I can finish up my reports on Tuesday afternoons. I won't be attending the team meeting." That's not a valid use of individual boundaries.

An example of a valid conflict around individual and team boundaries would be if a leader or a team decided, "We're going to have a team meeting, and everybody's going to confront one another with something they're doing wrong. We're each going to label different people as the laziest person on the team, the slowest person on the team, the grumpiest person on the team." Some of your team members might enjoy this kind of process. I personally wouldn't. But, I've known team members who would enthusiastically embrace that assignment. However, I could see how one or more individuals on that team might find this inappropriate, because it would break their boundary to be non-judgmental. This is an opportunity for an individual to say to a team leader,

“I feel uncomfortable with this request because I have a need to give constructive feedback on people’s behaviors, not on personality styles or qualities.”

In dreaded conversations, you’re working consciously to identify the unproductive pattern(s) from Proficiency 3 and to break the pattern(s). As you break the pattern, you get clearer about your standards and boundaries, and you realize that a lot of your work stress comes from old patterns of letting people set boundaries for you. In Worksheet 8.1, do an inventory of your standards and boundaries. Write 10 different standards or ways that you treat yourself and other people in the first column. In the second column, rate yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 for how consistently you hold yourself accountable to each standard for everyone at work.

Worksheet 8.2 Identifying Standards and Boundaries

My Standards	How consistently do I treat others and myself this way? (0 = never 10 = always)	My Boundaries	How consistently do I require that others treat me this way? (0 = never 10 = always)
Sample 1. I let people finish speaking before I comment.	6	I expect others to let me finish speaking before they comment.	7
Sample 2. I remember a person’s name if I met them within the last year.	5	I don’t get upset if someone forgets my name.	7
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8 9. 10. 			

In the third column, write the boundary associated with that standard. Sometimes you have the same expectation of others that you have of yourself (Sample 1), and sometimes you have a smaller expectation of others (Sample 2). Do you ever expect more of others than you do of yourself? I guess it’s possible, but I can’t think of an example. If you think of one, send it to me at P.O. Box 35429, ABQ, NM 87176. In the fourth column, rate yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 for how consistently you hold everyone at work accountable for your boundary. If you’re high

on holding your employees accountable to your boundary but never expect your boss to do it, give yourself a score in the middle range like a 5 or 6.

In a dreaded conversation, you might not be able to hold a person accountable to every single one of your boundaries. I'm not asking you to turn into the Boundary Police. What I'm asking you to do is be conscious of the unproductive communication pattern that you identified in Proficiency 3, and to the strongest extent possible, break the pattern in a firm and appropriate way without being overly aggressive or without being meek, mild, or apologetic. And, begin to notice how these patterns relate to your standards and unmet boundaries.

This chapter offers a wealth of tips and techniques for transforming dread into collaboration. When you are implementing a dreaded conversation, please remember to:

5. Manage your mental, emotional, physical and behavioral discomfort during the conversation.
6. Use a formula to deliver your message.
7. Be receptive.
8. Break the unproductive communication patterns with this person by communicating your standards and boundaries.

In the next chapter, you'll learn how to debrief after a dreaded conversation.

Chapter 9

Stage 3: Learning from a Dreaded Conversation

In this chapter, you'll learn the final four proficiencies that I recommend you do after a dreaded conversation. These proficiencies will help you:

9. Celebrate that you had the conversation regardless of the outcome.
10. Debrief the conversation with an ally (coach, colleague, friend).
11. Develop reminder systems that support the conversation's outcomes.
12. Hold yourself and other participants accountable to the conversation agreements.

Proficiency 9. Celebrate that you had the conversation regardless of the outcome.

It's really important to treat yourself to a reward. Once the conversation is over, people often have the attitude of, "Wow! That was so much easier than I thought. I really don't deserve to celebrate this, because it wasn't that big of a deal." If this thought comes up, I want you to reflect back on how you felt *before* you began planning the conversation. Remember the dread, delay, and awful-izing. Remember the unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations of delaying this conversation. Most importantly, remember the courage that it took for you to even contact the person and request a conversation with her. Remember the challenges of identifying your own unproductive communication pattern. Maybe you had to ask someone for input on your gaps and weaknesses. And, then remember the courage it took to not cancel the meeting, and to not act out during the meeting.

I want you to celebrate all of your energy, good intentions, effort, and enthusiasm! I want you to celebrate the faith that you had in yourself, in the other person, and in this process! That faith allowed you to develop the qualities and proficiencies that helped you transform the dread into dynamic collaboration.

In Worksheet 9.1, list things and activities that would allow you to truly celebrate a successful dreaded conversation. You might want to identify rewards for low, medium, and high levels of risk. I don't really care how successful you felt you were. I'm more interested in having you celebrate the fact that you had the conversation. A low level of risk might be telling a co-worker who likes to visit with you during work that you want to limit your socializing to 10 minutes a day. If you do this, you can buy yourself an ice cream sundae, or take a break and walk around the building.

A medium level of risk might be giving an employee a verbal warning on poor performance. If you have this conversation, buy yourself a new book, or go for a hike some place special that you've been curious about.

A high level of risk could be telling your boss that you're cutting back from 50 to 40 hours of work per week. You could celebrate this conversation by going out for a really nice dinner with an important person in your life, or you might take a day off from work (that would drop your work hours for the week!).

Please do something that recognizes the risk you took and the effort you put into the conversation. Even if the conversation made things worse, I want you to celebrate that you had the courage to make that mess happen. Remember, messes are temporary. Sometimes they're

"And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

-- Anais Nin

even productive, because messes give you a great reason to be humble, start over, and request a follow-up conversation. I'm not saying that you're always the reason for the mess. But, don't we all participate in making things a little more confusing, dramatic, or unproductive?

9.1 Celebrating a Dreaded Conversation

Level of risk	A thing I could get for myself	An activity I could do by myself or with friend/family
Low		
Medium		
High		

Proficiency 10. Debrief the conversation with an ally (coach, colleague, friend).

You can combine this proficiency with the celebration in Proficiency 9. You could go out for an ice cream cone with your friend, or ask a colleague to have lunch with you to celebrate. If you need to remind your ally that this debrief conversation is confidential, feel free to do that. Talk through everything that you did and said in the dreaded conversation, and what the results were. It's also helpful to transfer your written plan (Worksheet 7.1) to Worksheet 9.2 so that you can see how much you accomplished. This page shows a completed worksheet from a sample conversation. There's a blank worksheet in the Appendix for you to copy and use.

Some of you don't like worksheets or writing. But, think of this process as writing your dreaded conversation history. You can keep your worksheets in a file folder, and refer to them the next time you have to schedule a dreaded conversation. Refer to past notes and worksheets to identify:

- what you did well,
- what you want to improve on, and
- information that you shared with the other person about how to have dreaded conversations.

Identify areas of specific success. For example, "I usually get really sweaty palms. I noticed that doing the bell hand helped me relax, and I wasn't so sweaty." Identify a change, and celebrate it! "I noticed that I only interrupted him three times instead of 12 times." Don't expect perfection. Recognize and celebrate incremental success in breaking your old patterns.

Worksheet 9.2 Comparing Your Original Plan to Your Actual Accomplishments

This sample conversation was with an employee who had been missing at least one day a week due to illness for three months. The employee had used up his allotted sick leave. In past conversations, the leader had been very compassionate, but unsuccessful at communicating her concern about the pattern of missed work days.

Proficiency	Original Plan	Actual Accomplishments
<p>1. Deadline for having the conversation</p> <p>2. Content goal</p> <p>2. Process goal</p> <p>3. Break unproductive communication patterns</p> <p>4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation.</p>	<p>June 1st</p> <p>To request that he collect more information and strategies on managing his symptoms.</p> <p>To be firm by setting a specific deadline for improved attendance.</p> <p>When he blames his poor performance on his health status, I usually agree and say he should slow down.</p> <p>To break the pattern, I'll use the DEFR formula to explain the effect that his absenteeism is having on the team and to request that he seek additional support from his doctor.</p> <p>If he has a positive response, I'll be very supportive and ask how I can help. If he has a neutral response, I'll comment that he isn't responding. If he has a negative response, I'll suggest that he and I talk about this later with my boss.</p>	<p>He postponed the conversation because he was out sick. I had it on June 4th.</p> <p>I very briefly reminded him that I had been supportive for three months, and that now I needed to see him extend more effort to manage his symptoms and have regular attendance.</p> <p>I asked that there be improved attendance within a month. When he said that he couldn't see his doctor that soon, I gave in and agreed to a two-month deadline. I feel badly that I caved in, but I felt uncomfortable (heart racing and stomach turning) about pressuring him.</p> <p>I paused after the description and effect, but got a blank stare. When I stated that I was upset about the absences, he got nervous and asked if I was going to fire him. My voice cracked a bit, but I repeated the effect and feeling and asked if I could make a request. When he said "yes," I requested that he contact his doctor for more help. He made several excuses, and I got nervous. I felt like the conversation was a waste of time.</p> <p>At the low point when I was about to give up, I remembered to ask open-ended questions like, "What's frustrating for you about missing so much work?" He said that he was depressed about it and missed the chance to support his team. Then I asked, "Where could you find help for your situation?" He agreed that his doctor was a good choice.</p>

It's helpful to talk through Worksheet 9.2 with an ally because he'll be able to use QUELLS with you. Please give him a list of those six receptivity skills (question, understand, empathize, let vent, listen, and silence). He'll ask you questions:

- ❑ What did you do well?
- ❑ What did you say?
- ❑ What did he say?
- ❑ How did you handle that?
- ❑ What did you do next?

Your ally will be able to reflect or paraphrase the facts (understanding) of the situation and your feelings (empathize). "You felt collaborative when you were able to identify a common goal." "I can tell that you felt really frustrated when he didn't respond to your idea."

The debrief is also an opportunity to let you vent. It's okay to vent if things didn't go exactly as you wanted in the dreaded conversation. Perhaps, you're embarrassed after the conversation, or you might feel humiliated. Or, there might be milder feelings, like a little bit of disappointment or some fear. "Is he really going to contact the doctor or not?" Your ally is going to listen to you in a deep way including being silent. As you debrief, it's like replaying the conversation out loud. There were things that you didn't catch as it was happening. The debrief lets you watch the conversation as a rerun. A silent ally gives you the opportunity to see that rerun with more clarity and perhaps less judgment of yourself and the other person. Feedback from your ally will help you plan for your next dreaded conversation.

Proficiency 11. Develop reminder systems that support the conversation's outcomes.

I hope that you made agreements with the other person during the conversation about the new expectations that you established together. Perhaps you agreed to check in with each other once a week or once a month to see how the issue is progressing. Or, one of you might have agreed to institute a new procedure, to write a report, or to get some training. The agreement could be about your professional relationship, which is more difficult to track. For example, "We agree that we're going to develop more trust." That's a good agreement, but it would be better stated in behavioral terms. For example, "I will show an increasing level of trust in you by checking your quota reports once a week instead of once a day."

Along these lines, please don't set an expectation that either of you will "improve" how you feel, because that isn't measurable. Some leaders ask their employees to be happier at work. This is impossible to measure. Instead, develop goals or expectations in very specific and measurable terms. Remember that in Proficiency 6, when you use the DEFR formula, the fourth step, "R," stands for make a specific Request. Make those requests using the SMART formula, so that the statement is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-Oriented. Instead of asking an employee to be happier, request that she greet at least 80% of all customers with an authentic smile and "How can I help you?"

It's pretty common for dreaded conversations to go so well that you're riding a high of, "Wow! That was so easy. It turned out so well. He was actually thanking me for having the conversation. And, he said that he learned some skills from me and wants to see a list of the proficiencies, and read Suzanne's book." When you get caught up in the enthusiasm of success, you might forget what you agreed to and even slack off on your agreement. For this reason, as

soon as the conversation is finished, use your reminder system (paper calendar, computer program, or palm pilot) to enter regular reminders to check on agreements.

Proficiency 12. Hold yourself and other participants accountable to the conversation agreements.

Imagine that it's two months later. You check your calendar for the day and realize, "Oh, it's time for my boss and I to check in with each other" or, "I'm supposed to hear from my employee today about that quarterly report." If this was your agreement, remember that it's not your responsibility as the leader to check on your employee. Employee to-do lists belong to the employee, not to the leader. In my opinion, the employee reporting back to his leader is as important as completing the task. Notice if you have a tendency to cut the employee a break by thinking, "Well, at least he did it. It's okay that he forgot to tell me." I disagree. If part of the agreement was for him to report back to you, then that's part of his task.

If you don't receive a report from the employee, you might want to send *one*, short reminder: "Yesterday was your deadline for XYZ. Please update." When you hear back from the employee after this reminder – hopefully you will – then there should be a reminder that the reminders will end. "By the way, just alerting you, this will be your last reminder to update me on the XYZ status. Part of the successful completion of this task is for you to report back to me." Leaders might get frustrated about this reporting aspect with, "How can I hold him accountable to reporting back to me?" The simple answer is that keeping you updated should be part of his job description. It's also part of the expectation of the original conversation.

If he doesn't follow through, it's up to you to communicate to him that this is an expectation he will be held accountable for, and it could lead to a disciplinary action. Of course, that's somewhere down the road. I'm not saying that if after the first time you delegate a task and he forgets to send you an update that you're going to give him a verbal warning. But, if it becomes part of a pattern, then it is your responsibility as his leader to hold him accountable.

Holding Your Boss Accountable

The same thing is true with your boss. Leaders often say to me, "I can't hold my boss accountable." If your boss agreed to follow up on something, it's your boss's responsibility. If your boss forgets, use Proficiency 6, the DEFR model. Communicate a Description, Effect, Feeling and Request with appropriate pauses between each statement: "When you didn't update me on your agreement, I notice that I'm spending time backtracking and following up for you, which is costing me more time in my workday. I feel frustrated about this. And, I request that we renegotiate this agreement, because maybe you're not committed to or available for following up in this manner." You see how that's different than, "You're a lazy boss" or, "You're not trustworthy." You're not going to judge people.

You're simply going to refer to the original agreement that you had. Your boss might respond, "You know what? It just slipped off my radar. It's really not that important to me anymore. Yes, let's renegotiate."

Setting boundaries with your boss is challenging. Part of the reason it's so difficult to do is because you waited too long to begin the process. Boundaries with your boss should be clear from day one of your job, better yet, in your interview. Are you afraid that you're going to lose your job? Let go of that fear and start taking better care of yourself by setting boundaries. I believe most bosses – not all bosses, because

"Enlightenment means taking full responsibility for your life."

--William Blake

some bosses are **Ruler** types who really don't care about you – but most of the thousands of leaders whom I've met over the years are relatively compassionate people who have a goal. The goal is to get a job done through other people. If your boss made an agreement with you, more than likely she wants to follow through on that. And, if she is doing something that is resulting in you being upset or reducing your productivity, she probably wants to hear about that.

Most leaders are open to receiving constructive feedback from their employees, but not all of them. If you work for a boss who doesn't want to hear feedback, you have three choices. You can try to *avoid* her as much as possible and communicate via sticky notes. You can decide to create an island for your team, and have only limited interaction with your boss. Or, you can find a new boss.

If you use the island metaphor, you have a responsibility to create barriers around your island. This assures that the only incoming or exchanged information will happen when a ship docks at one of your ports, or maybe an airplane flies over and drops some information or supplies. Sometimes, you might let the plane land. But other than that, you're going to limit any interaction with your boss or with other teams. I feel sad, but many managers and team leaders need to operate with this island mentality, because it's not safe to have open borders.

Many organizations are unhealthy. If you choose to continue working in that type of environment, and you feel like there's nothing you can do to set larger and stronger boundaries, then at least create a boundary around your island. Protect your team. Teach your team that, "On this island, we do things differently. We have high standards for ourselves individually, and we have high boundaries within our team. When we interact with other teams or with my boss, those boundaries don't work. Don't get frustrated or stressed out. They speak a different language outside our island. Be as civil as you can, and get back to our island as quickly as possible." Don't invest a lot of energy in trying to modify an unhealthy work environment by yourself. First, decide if you want to stay or go. If you decide to stay, work within the confines of that environment.

Please be alert to any slippage back into old patterns. In Proficiency 12, hold people accountable and surface any small amount of slippage immediately with the other person. It's better to surface the accountability issue as quickly as possible, so that *it* doesn't become a dreaded conversation.

In the last chapter, you'll learn how to develop organizational environments that transform dread into dynamic collaboration.

Chapter 10 Transforming Organizational Environments

Fifteen minutes ago, a meeting ended in a small computer software company. Sherry, the customer service manager, just realized that she feels uncomfortable about something that was said by Joe, the technical support manager. Sherry calls Joe immediately. Here's the resulting conversation:

Sherry: Hi, Joe. I'm calling about that conversation we just had in our team meeting. I felt uncomfortable about a comment you made about the timeline for developing the next software program. I'm feeling some dread as I say this. On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm at about a dread level of 7. But, I'd like to meet with you when it's convenient.

Joe: Sherry, I'm glad you called. I didn't feel or notice anything uncomfortable about that interaction. Well, now that you mention it, I could see how you'd feel uncomfortable, and I'm feeling a little dread about having your conversation, maybe at a level of 3. I'd be happy to talk with you about that. When would you like to meet?

Sherry: I'd like about 30 minutes to plan for your conversation. Could we meet at 11:00?

Joe: Yes, that works for me. Actually, if you'd like to sit down and plan it together, we could meet now.

Sherry: Okay. Let's invite a third person, either someone who was in the meeting or maybe Fred, because he wasn't there. He might be able to give us an unbiased viewpoint.

Joe: Good idea. He just walked by my office. Let me ask him. I'll meet you in the conference room in five minutes.

Sherry: Thanks, Joe. I'll see you then.

This story comes from my imaginary world where the forces of organizational power and politics are no longer in control. What *is* in control is people working together to achieve shared organizational goals. I dream of the day when individuals, leaders, and teams are no longer indiscriminately influenced by pressure-based and politically-based fears. People will no longer be afraid to speak up due to fear of losing their job or fear of hurting someone's feelings.

When an entire organization adopts dynamic collaboration, they agree to develop the qualities and the proficiencies needed to transform dread into cooperation. Then, there's no friction. Leaders no longer become frozen. In fact, they no longer fight, flee, or freeze. There's just a constant flow. Then, even in the moment when Sherry got upset in the meeting, she could say, "Excuse me, I'm feeling uncomfortable about something that just happened. Could we take a few minutes to talk about it?" When she makes the request, there wouldn't be any rolling eyes, or tapping pens, or pushing away from the table. There would just be an interest in discussing her concern because there would be an understanding at a deep level that Sherry surfaced it not for her personal needs, but for *everybody's professional needs* – so that the organization could operate in a more frictionless way.

On the one hand, I would be happy if only one leader in every organization began using the qualities and proficiencies that transform dreaded conversations into dynamic collaboration. On the other hand, I'd feel sad, because that person would be working alone. She'd be the sole salmon swimming upstream trying to educate and evolve an environment all on her own. My dream is that not only all leaders in an organization but all employees, too, would have both a deep understanding of the qualities as well as a skill level with the proficiencies so that everyone would know how to transform dread into dynamic collaboration. This level of organizational competence would make dreaded conversations almost unheard of. It would eliminate virtually all the dread.

My ultimate goal is for these qualities and skills to spread throughout a workplace and create organizational change. One view of organizational change is called the *whitewater rapids* metaphor. Today, organizations are in constant whitewater. It's as if you're in a kayak in open water and having to micro-analyze change not just on a monthly or weekly basis, but also sometimes on a moment-to-moment basis. This makes change much more complex and difficult to manage.

"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, ...but the one most responsive to change."

--Charles Darwin

Immense Change

Can you imagine an organization where you show up one day and not only has your office been moved, your furniture changed around, but your phone number, email password, job title, and responsibilities are new? You are on a completely different team of people who you don't know. Your boss is new. You have completely different clients. What if those levels of change happened to you every day or week? It sounds extreme, but a growing number of leaders have accepted that this is how volatile organizational cultures can be.

If you believe in the ideas in this book and want to share them with your organization, a valid question is, "How do I take a process like transforming dread into dynamic collaboration and introduce or diffuse that into an organization that's constantly changing?" As you begin to answer that question for your unique environment, here are some axioms of organizational change.

Axioms of Organizational Change

1. People don't resist change; they resist being changed. Keep this in mind as you think about being a crusader for transforming dread into dynamic collaboration. Some people may react to you with, "It sounds like one more fad. We really don't have time for this."

2. Unless things change a little bit, they're probably not going to change at all. Since change has to begin somewhere, you are the best person to role model that change. Think of yourself as the change agent. Your job is to find other people who are called early adopters, who would be willing to experiment with transforming dread. Think of it as developing a critical mass of people who would be willing to experiment with and adopt the qualities and proficiencies.

3. People are highly complex behavioral systems. People aren't very predictable, which means you can't always count on them. If you truly want to bring these qualities and proficiencies into your workplace, understand that there will be a lot of questions about your intentions and about expectations. There may also be some judgment or blame.

How to Promote Change

If you're excited to create change in the way your organization deals with conflict, what are some helpful steps for getting started? The most helpful literature I've found on change is from two organizational consultants, Edwin Olson and Glenda Eoyang. They've written an excellent book entitled *Facilitating Organizational Change* that defines organizations as complex adaptive systems. They describe three factors that influence change in organizations:

- ❑ containers,
- ❑ significant differences, and
- ❑ transforming exchanges.

As you read about these factors, think about how to combine them in your organization to introduce collaboration.

Containers

A container sets the boundaries for a sub-organizing system. The container can be physical, like a geographic location; organizational, like a department or a team; or conceptual, like a purpose or procedure. The container gives you some sort of semi-permeable boundary within which change can occur. What are some containers that you could use to introduce the dreaded conversation ideas? Those authors recommend small containers. For example, if you have several geographic locations, how could you get two different locations to interact around dynamic collaboration? Organizationally, which two teams or departments could you bring together to discuss collaborative ways to resolve conflict? Conceptually, ask customers to identify a procedure that you use that's ineffective or stress producing. In a team meeting, brainstorm how to improve the procedure based on customer input.

Significant Differences

The second factor that impacts complex adaptive systems is significant differences. Examples of significant differences include:

- ❑ power differences between two people or groups,
- ❑ levels of expertise,
- ❑ quality,
- ❑ gender,
- ❑ race, or
- ❑ educational background.

Olson and Eoyang recommend putting individuals or teams together who have significant differences as a way to create organizational change. Find ways to have them learn and use the transformational qualities and proficiencies. Think of small containers with significantly different people or groups inside.

Transforming Exchanges

The third factor, transforming exchanges, comes from the connections between system agents. Channels that allow transforming exchanges include:

- ❑ face-to-face meetings,
- ❑ email,
- ❑ delivery of products and services,
- ❑ financial transactions,
- ❑ memos, and
- ❑ phone calls.

When resources flow through these channels from agent to agent, the resource is transformed. For example, when a customer pays a bill, that money is transformed from the service he received into a resource for developing new products and services, or for rewarding innovation to an employee or team. The authors suggest that you use a variety of these channels to promote transforming exchanges.

Traditional Change Methods

There are unlimited ways to combine the three factors of containers, significant differences, and transforming exchanges in your organization. Challenge yourself to continually find new ways to bring the qualities and proficiencies of dynamic collaboration into your work environment. There are a variety of traditional change methods that you can also use such as:

- ❑ offering communication skills training,
- ❑ allowing more time for conversations,
- ❑ adding one or more transformational proficiencies to performance appraisals so that they are measured each year,
- ❑ storytelling in small or large groups about transforming dread into collaboration,
- ❑ adding collaboration to the organization's strategic plan,
- ❑ team-building activities,
- ❑ a large group event like a retreat or project kick-off, or
- ❑ reorganization to reduce power differentials.

Be a Proactive Change Agent

Throughout the change process, stay committed to your role as a change agent. It's normal for change agents to become exhausted and to want to give up. There's a tendency to abandon your efforts when you meet resistance from other people. In tough times, keep these positive assumptions in mind:

- (1) *Influence isn't related to either size or speed.* It doesn't matter where you are in your organization or how quickly you work. If you're consistent and have a strong intention, you will be a successful change agent.
- (2) *Anyone who interacts with a new system influences it in some way.* Even a highly reluctant person who engages in a dreaded conversation with you is still interacting with the transformational elements. Even if she complains to her team, "This guy tried to use these proficiencies on me. He wanted me to identify negative communication patterns," that negative report is a transforming exchange.
- (3) *Small changes can have enormous effects.* Even one short dreaded conversation that's transformed slightly could have a positive contagious effect.

- (4) *Change happens easily.* It's perpetual, although not always productive or permanent. When you get discouraged, remember that things are always going to be different tomorrow.
- (5) *Important patterns emerge over time, not in an instant.* Major cultural changes like the women's movement and the civil rights movement happen over time. Your organization's transformation into dynamic collaboration will take some time. If you have the commitment and a strong intention, it will happen.
- (6) *Resistance does not exist.* When people appear stuck, it's because they're being attracted to an existing pattern of behavior. Instead of getting upset with them, change agents can feel compassion for people who are stuck. It's not necessarily that they like the old pattern, or that they've chosen it. It's just that it's the only available pattern, and they're stuck in it. Your job is to create opportunities for new patterns to emerge by encouraging small containers of people with significant differences to have transforming exchanges.

Handling Resistance

If you encounter hostility, apprehension, uncertainty, or confusion from other people in your organization, remember the QUELLS acronym. Ask questions, paraphrase to show understanding and empathy, let them vent, listen at a deep level, and use silence. Some possible questions in response to resistance include:

- ❑ What's frustrating or uncomfortable about the collaboration techniques that I've shared with you?
- ❑ How is this new approach different from the way you have communicated in the past?
- ❑ What changes would you recommend in how we communicate?
- ❑ Where do you personally feel stuck? How is your team stuck?
- ❑ What are your concerns or fears about adopting any part of this collaboration model?
- ❑ What activities would help you bridge the gap between old and new communication patterns?

Any conversation using these questions is a transforming exchange. Their answers will give you new ideas on how to adapt the transformational elements for your organization.

Managing Your Discomfort as a Change Agent

Remember that it's not about resistance; it's about people who have only been exposed to old communication patterns. Notice that when you encounter uncertainty or hostility, you'll probably feel discomfort starting with a thought like, "I knew I shouldn't be doing this. I'm out of my league here. I can't help these people. They're too stuck." Negative thoughts like that can quickly lead to feelings of isolation, fear, or anger. Feelings can lead to physical reactions ranging from mild to severe. Physical reactions can lead you back to your old behavior patterns. So, not only do you give up on trying to initiate organizational change, but you also give up on dynamic collaboration yourselves.

Please don't take this change process too seriously. Your unpleasant emotional and physical reactions are just a form of inner resistance to the external resistance that you're

encountering. When you aggressively resist someone else's hostility, you're only role modeling hostility and resistance.

As a change agent, you have the opportunity to go to a higher level of communication. Come back to the QUELLS approach. Keep asking questions in a neutral, non-aggressive manner. Give yourself plenty of room to experiment with how to cope with hostility and uncertainty in other people. When you can be comfortable with another person's discomfort, you will truly be a transformational force in your organization.

Frictionless Organizations

I envision a frictionless organization. We'll still be different from one another and have diverse perspectives. But, when people in organizations can protect and communicate their own needs in a calm, direct, neutral way, we'll spend less time afraid to communicate and more time working toward shared achievements.

I wish you much success in your individual and organizational pursuits of transforming dreaded conversations into dynamic collaboration at work. I'd love to hear about your experiences using these skills. Please email them to me at sk@theMindtoLead.com or mail them to me at P.O. Box 11892, Washington, DC. I'll share successes and challenges on my website, www.theMindtoLead.com. Please contact me if you're interested in individual or team coaching, or in having me assist your organizational change processes to develop dynamic collaboration. Thank you.

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**"Never for the sake of peace
and quiet deny your own
experience or
convictions. "**

-- Dag Hammarskjold

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**Appendix
Worksheets**

Worksheet 5.1 Developing the Transformational Quality of _____

	In the past, I would...	In the future, I want to...
Think		
Feel		
Do		

Worksheet 5.1 Developing the Transformational Quality of _____

	In the past, I would...	In the future, I want to...
Think		
Feel		
Do		

Worksheet 5.1 Developing the Transformational Quality of _____

	In the past, I would...	In the future, I want to...
Think		
Feel		
Do		

Worksheet 5.1 Developing the Transformational Quality of _____

	In the past, I would...	In the future, I want to...
Think		
Feel		
Do		

Worksheet 7.1 Planning for a Dreaded Conversation

Name the issue: _____

Name the person(s) I want to talk with: _____

1. Schedule the conversation

Date and time: _____

2. Write down your goals for the conversation.

Content goal: _____

Process goal: _____

3. Identify the unproductive communication patterns.

(a). When s/he _____,

I usually _____.

To break the pattern in this conversation, I'll _____

_____.

(b). When I _____,

s/he usually _____.

To break the pattern in this conversation, I'll _____

_____.

4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation.

When I break a pattern, s/he might respond to me in a way that is....	Her/his specific behavioral response might be to...	In that case, I will respond to her/him by...
Positive		
Neutral		
Negative		

Worksheet 8.1 Analyze and Strategize for the Four Discomforts

Discomfort	Example of How Discomfort Surfaces in Me	How I Can Overcome Discomfort
Mental		
Emotional		
Physical		
Behavioral		

Worksheet 8.2 Identifying Standards and Boundaries

My Standards	How consistently do I treat myself and others this way? (0 = never 10 = always)	My Boundaries	How consistently do I require that others treat me this way? (0 = never 10 = always)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8			
9.			
10.			

Worksheet 9.1 Celebrating a Dreaded Conversation

Level of risk	A thing I could get for myself	An activity I could do by myself or with friend/family
Low		
Medium		
High		

Worksheet 9.2 Comparing Your Original Plan to Your Actual Accomplishments

Proficiencies	Original Plan	Actual Accomplishments
<p>1. Deadline for having the conversation</p> <p>2. Content goal</p> <p>2. Process goal</p> <p>3. Break unproductive communication patterns</p> <p>4. Plan for a variety of responses in the conversation</p>		