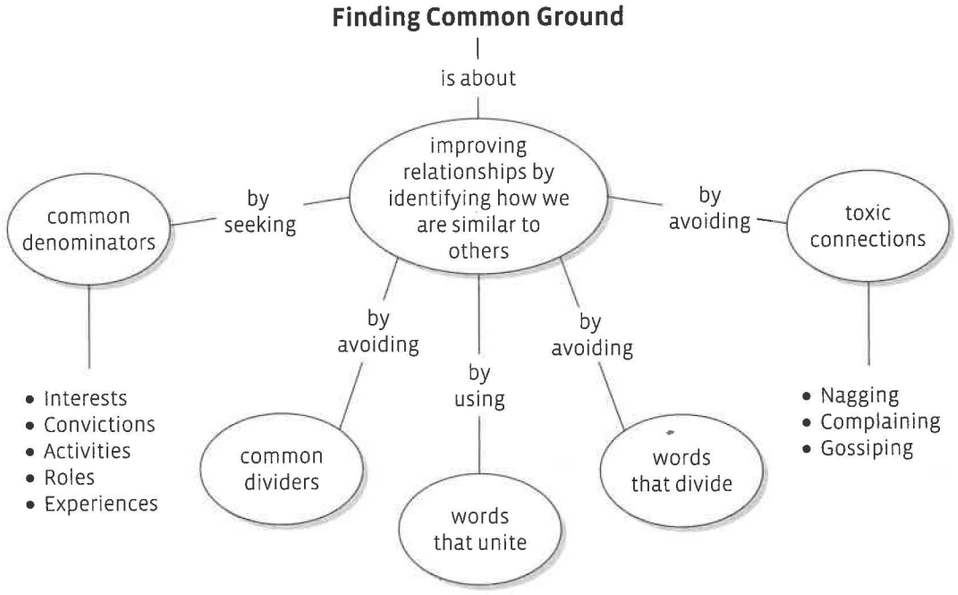


7

FINDING COMMON GROUND

I note the obvious differences between each sort and type,
but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unalike.

—From "Human Family,"
by Maya Angelou (1991)

We all want to be heard, understood, respected, and shown compassion. Very few people are really out to destroy others. They are out there, but they are acting that way because they feel threatened. It is hard to feel threatened when you feel similar to another person or when you recognize you may belong in some way to the same way of thinking, feeling, or doing.

—Jennifer Stadum,
Indian Education for All Specialist,
State of Montana Office of Public Interest,
Bozeman, Montana

For much of the last decade, my son Geoff and his wife Jenny have lived in the Mufindi Highlands of Tanzania, where they lead a charity dedicated to improving the lives of children who live in extreme poverty and who, in most cases, have lost their parents to HIV. Geoff's organization makes a huge difference, and I have seen first-hand that they truly save lives almost every week.[1]

[1]You can learn more about the work Geoff and Jenny do in Tanzania by visiting www.mufindiorphans.org.

Geoff has a gift for learning languages, and as soon as he moved to Tanzania, he started to learn the local ways of communicating. First, he mastered Kiswahili, and then Kihehe, the tribal language spoken in the Mufindi region where he lived. "My goal," Geoff told me, "is to be able to say at least a few words in every tribal language in Tanzania."

The Mufindi Highlands of Tanzania are a long way from Lawrence, Kansas, but I have been able to visit Geoff and Jenny and their family a few times. The drive to Mufindi from the main airport in Dar Es Saalam is a 14-hour marathon. On one occasion when Geoff was driving me back to the airport, a white-uniformed police officer flagged Geoff down as Geoff drove us through a village.

The officer walked up to Geoff's window, and, without even saying hello, barked at Geoff: "I'm going to fine you 400,000 shillings (at that time about $150.00) for driving 70 kilometers per hour in 50 kilometer zone."

Geoff explained quickly that he didn't realize the speed limit had changed. The officer barked back, "You didn't see the sign? I'm going to fine you another 400,000 shillings for not watching for the sign." At this point, Geoff was very worried about all the money he might have to pay since he was living on a volunteer's budget, and I was very worried about all the movies I'd seen about prisons in the developing world.

Geoff got out of the truck at that point, and he and the officer began to talk. I watched as the officer's facial expression and posture changed. The officer relaxed and smiled, then he and Geoff laughed together, and I knew things would be okay. Geoff soon got back in his truck and we were back on the road.

As we took off, Geoff told me what had happened. When Geoff shook hands with the officer, he asked him where he was from. When the officer told Geoff he was from Sumbawanga, Geoff spoke to him in his tribal language, Kifipa. Startled to hear his own language instead of English, the officer smiled and told Geoff, "No white man has ever spoken to me in my language before." The officer let Geoff off with a warning, and even gave Geoff his cell phone number in case Geoff might need help in the future. A few months later, Geoff's wife had her computer stolen in a local coffee shop, and Geoff called the officer for help. The officer quickly located Jenny's computer and she had

it back that day—all because Geoff found common ground with the officer.

Finding common ground is an important habit to adopt so that we can have better conversations. When we find common ground, we move beyond our differences, and we communicate that we truly see someone else. In this way, finding common ground is a way to show respect. One volunteer in our study described how finding common ground was profoundly changing how she related to the people in her school.

> I am connecting with teachers on such a deeper level. I remember someone saying to me, "I want to see God on everyone's face." I am now having that experience. It is connecting me to teachers at such a deeper level. I know this for sure: I am going to explore this more. Since we are connecting and we are exploring practices to move students and teachers forward, the teachers and I have become inspired. Our inspiration motivates us to want to do the good work.

Finding common ground, as one volunteer wrote, "gets the other person more engaged in the conversation." And as another volunteer wrote, "finding common ground is immensely important if meaningful, productive conversations are to occur." Indeed, to seek what we share in common with another person, as a point of departure for conversation, is a radical act in today's polarized world. Day after day, we see people do exactly the opposite; rather than finding common ground, people highlight and obsess over their obvious differences.

Today, the United States seems to be polarized by discussions around moral, religious, and especially political issues. Topics like gun control, health care, the president's foreign policy, gay marriage, and abortion can trigger incredibly hostile conversations. And our media seems to fan the fire. On the news programs we watch, the comments that get played are not the quiet moments of respect and agreement, but the loud statements of almost childish hostility. The more outlandish and insensitive the comment, it seems, the more likely it will show up on our Facebook page.

> I have found that common ground *always* exists somewhere. Sometimes it is hard to find, but when it is, that is because of my focus. I have also seen, especially with people that I have a more strained relationship with, that finding common ground helps to tear down walls, and helps to build relationships. The roadblocks are self-imposed. When I don't focus on finding common ground, it doesn't happen. When I forget about it, the conversation suffers, but when I really try to find it, I always can.
>
> **—Research volunteer**

In *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (2001), Parker Palmer describes how our time is dominated by what he calls "the politics of rage." Palmer reports on a study by David Gal and David Rucker that found that when people are "shown solid evidence contradicting their most fundamental beliefs," they often become "more forceful in advocating those beliefs" (p. 16). All around us we see our leaders attack each other, while television programs further heighten the anger in the rhetoric simply to get more viewers to watch their programs. All the more reason, I contend then, for us to stand against the politics of rage by striving to find common ground with others, especially those who see the world differently than we do.

The Psychology of Separateness: Why It Is So Hard to See Similarities

One reason we need to strive to find common ground—and why we struggle to do so—is that other people simply do not understand the very clear and simple things we say. One of the major barriers to finding common ground, and communication in general, is the perceptual errors (including our own) people make that stand in the way of clear communication.

People are meaning-making beings, and when they see something about another person that they do not understand, they often find ways to explain away their confusion. Meaning, in other words, exists in the minds of our conversation partners as much as it resides in our brains, and unfortunately, the meaning others make about what we communicate can be wrong. Psychologists have identified many perceptual errors that can lead us to unknowingly misunderstand what we see and experience. A few perceptual errors that most inhibit finding common ground are described below.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

One reason people may not see what they hold in common with others is confirmation bias. In *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work,* Chip and Dan Heath (2013) describe confirmation bias as our natural tendency to seek data that support our assumptions:

> Our normal habit in life is to develop a quick belief about a situation and then seek out information that bolsters our belief . . . Researchers have found this result again and again. When people have the opportunity to collect information from the world, they are more likely to select information that supports their preexisting attitudes, beliefs, and actions. (p. 11)

The tendency to seek out support for our own beliefs is a major reason people do not see what they hold in common with others. For example, a person with either a conservative or progressive political perspective might have a negative opinion of those who hold an opposite political opinion, and then see every action those other persons do through the political lens. The result is that even when colleagues could find common ground, they fail to see it since they are so focused on their differences. As one research volunteer wrote on her reflection sheet, "It's a lot easier to find common ground with people who say what you want to hear."

HABITUATION

A second reason many people misread others stems from a phenomenon psychologists refer to as habituation—the fact that we lose our sensitivity to just about anything we experience repeatedly. Through habituation, we can become desensitized to any experience, pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or ugly. This means that what at one time would have been impossible not to see can eventually become practically invisible.

The impact of habituation is that over time we can lose sight of all that we share with others. Many of the volunteers in our study talked about, as one person wrote on her reflection form, "that we are all here for the same reason: to help students and support their learning." Over time, though, because of habituation, we can forget about all we hold in common and let our few differences keep us from moving forward in meaningful ways.

> Conversation . . . takes time. We need time to sit together, to listen, to worry and dream together. As this age of turmoil tears us apart, we need to reclaim time to be together. Otherwise, we cannot stop the fragmentation.
>
> **—Margaret Wheatley** (2002, p. 5)

PRIMACY EFFECT

Primacy effect occurs when our first experiences with someone bias us in favor of a particular impression of that person. For example, when I had my first game on a co-ed softball team, I hit a long homerun during my first at bat. That day I was pegged as the cleanup hitter, even though ground balls to the shortstop were more my typical style. It took about a month, and far too many double plays, before my teammates realized that homeruns would come few and far between when I was at bat.

The primacy effect can significantly interfere with other people's abilities to read us. As Heidi Grant Halvorson has written in *No One Understands You and What to Do About It* (2015), "The primacy effect is almost entirely responsible for the fact that sometimes, we can do no wrong in someone else's eyes, while at other times, we seem to be screwed no matter what we do" (p. 25).

STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes are a particularly tricky form of perceptual error. Grant Halvorson, again, writes that

> Stereotypes are the beliefs we have about categories of people, and we categorize people in lots of ways: by gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, profession, and socioeconomic class. Some of the beliefs associated with these categories are positive, such as *Asians are good at math* or *firefighters are brave*. Others are decidedly less so (e.g., *redheads are hot-tempered; women are weak; poor people are lazy).* (p. 29; italics in original)

Stereotypes are attractive because they reduce cognitive load, which is the amount of brainpower we need to use to do something. As a t-shirt I saw in an airport stated, "Stereotypes are a real time saver." The problem, of course, is that stereotypes can lead to racist, homophobic, sexist, or other dehumanizing beliefs that lead us to see others as being part of a group and blind us to each individual's characteristics.

Stereotypes also interfere with finding common ground. When we see another person as a stereotype, we do not see them for who they really are, and that makes it very difficult for us to see what we share. If I don't really know you, how can I know what we have in common? When we truly seek out what we hold in common, we can shatter stereotypes and come to see that the person we had dismissed as a type is actually an awful lot like us. As Parker Palmer writes in *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (2011), "The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy" (p. 5).

There are dozens of other perceptual errors that have been identified by psychologists, including the "halo effect," our tendency to be biased by our perception of people having one attribute (e.g., good-looking people are smart); the "worse than average effect," the tendency to think we are worse than others at tasks (despite the fact that there is no evidence to support that view); and even the "IKEA effect," the tendency to overvalue the worth of furniture we have put together ourselves. What perceptual errors show is that when people read what we say and do, they will make their own meaning out of what they don't understand about us, and often they will get us wrong. For that reason, to ensure that people do understand us, and to break through invisible barriers between us and others, we need to find common ground.

> I recognize that, although our personalities, our viewpoints, and our motives may differ vastly, we can connect with one another. Fundamentally, we all need to protect our spirit and feel that we have those two keystones to good relationships, choice and voice. If no other common ground exists, *those needs* are primordial in the human race. And, now that I really think about it, if only we could meet and honor those ancient and abiding needs in each other, *that* might be the only common ground we truly need to establish.
>
> **—Carol Walker,** Instructional Coach, Green River, Wyoming

Strategies for Finding Common Ground

Volunteers in our study who experimented with finding common ground saw the importance of implementing the habit in all kinds of situations. For some, finding common ground was an important way to build connections with other educators in schools. Volunteers wrote about finding common ground around "learning new curriculum and synthesizing old and new approaches," "struggles with students, especially behavior," and, as Carolyn Matteson wrote on her reflection form, "the deep desire everyone feels to do the best they can for and with students." Matteson added, "the motive to serve students provided the common denominator I needed to get me to listen to others' points of view when we talked about a topic that I have strong feelings about."

I believe that I need to cultivate patience in conversations. I seem to have become a more results-oriented person as I've grown older, and in my determination to eliminate barriers to our work (basically by being a heat-seeking missile), I wonder if I may be cutting myself off from understanding my colleagues as well as they deserve. There is such a strong drive within me, and maybe in many people, to be competitive and to achieve results. I do want results, but I wonder if I am allowing others to feel honored and happy.

—Carol Walker,
Instructional Coach,
Green River,
Wyoming

For many, the common bonds they found with others related to experiences they had outside school. When Sherry Eichinger discovered she shared interests in running and cooking with a fellow teacher, it made it easier for them to talk. Others found common ground in talking about their past work experiences (both had worked in urban settings), pregnancy, shopping, shoes, marriage, and even cheddar popcorn. Common ground provided an opening for many different types of conversations. As one volunteer wrote, "My grandmother taught me that we all laugh, cry, and love in the same way. Her wise words have served me well as I have tried to find common ground."

What was most striking about the many notes people wrote about their experiments with common ground was that they found the habit to be absolutely vital for some of their most important conversations. People wrote about finding common ground when talking with their 87-year-old father about moving into a retirement home, trying to convince a teacher not to quit the profession, talking with a friend about the death of one of her parents, and talking with a 21-year-old son about why life is truly worth living. Common ground made many important conversations possible.

Finding common ground is essential because, as one volunteer wrote, "there has to be common ground for a relationship to exist." Fortunately, there are simple strategies you can employ, and that were tested by many people in our study, to find common ground. Those strategies are (a) commit to finding common ground; (b) seek common denominators, avoid common dividers; (c) use words that unite, avoid words that divide; and (d) avoid toxic connections.

COMMIT TO FINDING COMMON GROUND

The first step in finding common ground is simply to commit to do it. The core belief in this strategy is that, as Maya Angelou wrote in her poem "Human Family," "we are more alike than we are unalike." Therefore, in every interaction, we should attempt to find common ground, especially with those who are or appear to be different from us. The creators of the Milestone Project, an organization dedicated to visually showing how much we each have in common with the rest of humanity, have developed a

pledge that both children and adults can embrace. The pledge puts in words what a commitment to finding common ground might look like.

Many of the volunteers in our study reported that the simple act of planning to find common ground significantly increased the likelihood that it would happen. As Marilyn Allen wrote, "It seems to me that whenever a person plans to find common ground at the outset, they will almost certainly be more successful at doing these things. By setting an intention, by identifying these goals prior to a conversation, it is like a guarantee that you will be more successful in achieving these outcomes."

SEEK COMMON DENOMINATORS

Another way to find common ground is to consciously look for similarities we share with our conversation partners. I have organized those possible similarities around the acronym I-CARE (Interests, Convictions, Activities, Roles, and Experiences) so that it will be easy to remember during conversations when you wish to find common ground. Seeking out I-CARE commonalities can be a point of departure for many conversations. One volunteer wrote, "I've developed a curiosity about finding common ground that I didn't have before. I like the challenge of finding common ground when I first meet someone—it's kind of a thrill for me when I recognize common ground for the first time."

Interests. Many participants wrote about finding common interests that they shared with others. For some, shared interests had to do with their work as educators. Janette Cochran wrote about talking with another teacher who shared her love for *The Frame Routine* developed by Ed Ellis. Others talked about their common goal of providing support for parents, or teachers, or students. For many in our study, the common ground was found outside school. Jenni Donohoo wrote about finding common ground when talking about husbands and shopping. Sidra Scharff talked about finding common ground when talking about music with a student. Other common interests might be passions such as particular books, food, local restaurants, or sports teams.

The Milestone Pledge

1. I pledge to notice the way people are like me before I notice the ways they are different.
2. I pledge to say only kind things to others and to stop myself before I say mean things.
3. I pledge to use respectful words to work out my problems with other people.
4. I pledge to encourage my friends to do these things too because . . . I know that if everyone does these four things, we will put an end to intolerance and hatred all over the world. (Steckel & Steckel, 2010)

Convictions. The most common conviction people shared was a commitment to students. When Jenny Gunja started to look for common ground, she found common beliefs about "politics and government, cultural heritage, dancing, movies, immigration reform, family, teaching urban youth, coaching, professional development, and budget cuts." Chris Slocum wrote about her team's common commitment to quality professional work. "We don't take this lightly. We want to do a professional job and provide powerful and easy-to-implement strategies for our teachers. We share many of the same values—saving teachers time, helping deliver useful information to teachers, improving teacher instruction to benefit students, and so forth." Other convictions or beliefs that surfaced were related to religion, ideas, and general principles of living.

Activities. Many participants in our study found common ground around activities that they enjoyed. For many, those activities were a big part of their daily routine. This was especially true for those who shared their passion for fitness, running, or a healthy lifestyle. Others wrote about finding a shared love for cooking, or baking, or even watching particular televisions shows. Some of the other activities that people found they had in common were singing, writing, or leading groups (such as youth groups) in their communities and places of worship.

Roles. Greg Netzger and his wife are both school principals, and because they share common jobs, Greg says they "almost always have something to talk about." Such was the case for many volunteers in our project. When they discovered they shared a role with someone else, they had many points of departure for conversation. Teachers, adjunct professors, specialists, and coaches shared with each other the rewards, challenges, and even the loneliness of their roles. Others talked about their roles outside schools, including such roles as parent, daughter or son, committee member, scout leader, or choir leader. When people found they shared a role with someone else, they often found they suddenly had an awful lot to talk about.

Experiences. Sometimes, a shared experience can be a powerful link between people. Volunteers in our study wrote about the connections that developed when they realized they had traveled to the same places (London and Paris at the top of the list). Others talked about working for the same principals or in the same schools, or jobs they've had—including selling ice cream in the 1980s. Other experiences people shared included people they have known, universities they have attended, or experiences related to being a husband or wife, or simply living day-to-day, like going to the beach. Shared experiences included everything from trips to Broadway to traveling around the country to watching the Grateful Dead.

The Milestones Project is an organization that is dedicated to visually showing how much we each have in common with the rest of humanity. Founded by photographers Richard and Michele Steckel (2010), the project assembles photographs of children from around the world to show, as they say, "a world where what divides us is healed and what unites us is loved by seeing how we are all the same." Their photographs can be found at www.milestonesproject.com.

AVOID COMMON DIVIDERS

When we find something we share with another person, it can be the steppingstone to establishing an authentic connection or relationship. However, if we call attention to a major difference between us and our conversation partners, it can build a stone wall between us.

Interestingly, all of the potential common denominators listed above (interests, convictions, activities, roles, experiences) can also be dividers. An obvious example of this is political beliefs. If you and I have the same political bumper sticker on our car, we can probably find a common bond in our shared political views. But if we have different bumper stickers supporting different parties, we may have a little difficulty relating when that difference surfaces. In situations where we have obvious differences, we need to be especially intentional about seeking common ground.

Even trivial issues, like which college basketball team we cheer for, can become dividers. I have had people come to my presentations and say that their spouse told them not to come because I worked at the University of Kansas, a rival to their spouse's basketball team. The challenge is to seek what we have in common first, before we address our differences—not to be upset by our different teams, but to be united in our appreciation of the sport itself.

Common dividers, when they become personal, can deeply separate people, even those who love each other. One of the volunteers in our study described how politics had divided her and her mother. "I told my mother, 'I don't like talking about this with you. I don't like talking to

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

people who have different views than me. I can't believe you support that law. It's racist. It encourages prejudice—there is no other way to look at it. I don't want to come to your house for breakfast if there is going to be tension. I just don't understand you.'"

Like this volunteer in our study, many of us don't like "talking to people who have different views." But this is the real challenge we face. To overcome the polarization and divisiveness that is at epidemic levels in some locations, we need to start by finding what we hold in common. As Parker Palmer has written, the challenge we face—to see what we hold in common with others with whom we differ—is the same challenge Abraham Lincoln described in his first inaugural speech on March 4, 1861:

> We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touch, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature. (as cited in Palmer, 2011, p. 27)

USE WORDS THAT UNITE; AVOID WORDS THAT DIVIDE

Words have the power to bring people together or push them apart. To find common ground, we should use words that unite and avoid words that divide. The most fundamental word choice is to say *we* instead of *I*, *yes* instead of *no*, and *and* instead of *but*.

Volunteers in our global study of communication kept track of the words they used when they acted to find common ground. Generally, their choice of words can be organized into single words or phrases. The words that people recorded communicated unity and demonstrated that people shared the experiences of their conversation partners. Thus, people wrote that they used the words *me too*, *yes exactly*, *I understand*, *wow*, and *us*. One person wrote that she was careful to replace the word *help* with *collaborate*. Many of the words communicated hope, including *love*, *God*, *family*, *team*, *together*, and *thank you*.

Participants in our project also shared phrases they said built common ground. The phrases validated others and communicated unity. Some examples include "That's what we do," "Have you experienced ___?," "We could ___," "What do you think about ___?," "I'm here for you," "So do I," and "You have every reason to expect that." One person wrote that she felt a common bond with a teacher she was coaching when the teacher said, "You make me a better person."

A useful online resource is "Forty Inviting Comments" and "Forty Disinviting Comments" identified by William Watson Purkey and John M. Novak (n.d.) at their website *Forty Successes:* http://www.mysdcc.sdccd.edu/Staff/Instructor_Development/Content/HTML/Forty_Successes.htm.

Using words that unite is important, but a second part of this strategy is avoiding words that carry negative emotional implications. For example, words like *careless*, *dishonest*, *lazy*, and *unprofessional* can be very divisive when directed at others—even when they are used indirectly. To say to someone, "It would be dishonest to say that," is not much different from telling someone, "You're lying." We must avoid such language and continually look for language that unifies.

AVOID TOXIC CONNECTIONS

For most of us, the connection that comes from finding common ground generates very positive emotions. We like it, and we feel good when we connect with others. We need to be careful, however, not to assume that all connections are good connections. Some kinds of connection can be counterproductive and even toxic. As one volunteer in the study wrote, "I've experienced lots of good things, but also some disturbing ones. Most disturbing was how easy it was to unite around negative things." Simply put, there are two kinds of common ground—one is healthy; the other is not.

Unhealthy or toxic connection involves any kind of common ground that diminishes others. This type of talk is not good for the community or workplace, is demeaning to others, and diminishes our own sense of self. Perhaps even worse, toxic comments spread like an unhealthy virus. Kegan and Lahey, in their book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (2001), describe the unhealthy impact that can come from toxic connections.

> The language of complaining, wishing, and hoping is a highly frequented conversational form, but it . . . [does not foster] . . . personal learning and

> reflective leadership . . . [and] complaining grows on its own—and it grows everywhere just like a weed. (p. 20)

The quick hit of pleasure that comes from criticizing a boss or gossiping about a peer usually carries its own punishment. When we engage in toxic connection, we are at least partially aware that we are being duplicitous, that who we are with one person is not who we are with others. When people realize their lack of authenticity, that they are not treating others the way they would like to be treated, it can significantly lower their self-esteem. As Parker Palmer (2011) has written, "There are times when the heart, like the canary in a coal mine, breathes in the world's toxicity and begins to die" (p. 3).

Toxic connections should be avoided, and Chapter 8 describes strategies we can use to redirect toxic conversations. But positive connections can move us much closer to better conversations. Finding Common Ground is a habit to build unity with others by seeing positive ways in which we are alike. It is an attempt to connect with others, especially others who, on the surface, seem a lot different from us.

Finding common ground holds great promise for strengthening relationships, but it will not work if it is done in an insincere way. To find common ground is to see others clearly, and then to share how we are similar. Finding common ground is not a cheap trick to build connection, but rather a way to respect and validate those with whom we interact—especially those who hold views that are different than our own.

Finally, "finding" common ground is not the same as "telling" others we share the same goals, or objectives. When we are finding common ground, we never begin a sentence with "I know we can all agree . . . ," which is a rhetorical way of saying, "Let's do it my way." Finding common ground is about what we hold in common, but it is also a mutual exploration, a mutual discovery. We do it together, not to each other, and that is part of the reason finding common ground can have such a positive impact on relationships. By finding common ground, we open authentic doors to communication, connection, and meaningful relationship; we seek out what William Orville Douglas calls "the common ground binding all mankind together."

The videos created by the filmmakers at Playing for Change powerfully illustrate the idea that we hold much in common with everyone else in the world. The artists at Playing for Change create short movies by filming people all over the world playing the same songs, and then they edit the recordings to create the impression that everyone is playing the song together at the same time. You can view the videos at www.playingforchange.com.

Getting Better at Finding Common Ground

Strategies for Finding Common Ground

1. Commit to finding common ground.
2. Find common denominators, avoid common dividers.
3. Use words that unite; avoid words that divide.
4. Avoid toxic connections.

Often, the first thing we need to do if we want to find common ground is to recognize and abandon any existing judgments about others that might interfere with our ability to find common ground. Something as simple as another person's allegiance to a sports team that is a rival to our team can get in the way of seeing how much we are similar to others.

Once we have done our best to clear our heads of judgments, our task is simply to try the habit and see what happens. To help with this, I have created the acronym I-CARE. Of course, acronyms can be annoying. They can be too cute and simplistic and they can dumb down ideas so much that they lose their power. In this case, though, the purpose of the acronym is to provide a simple memory hook so that at the start of any conversation, we can have in mind many different ways we can seek out common ground. If it seems silly to call up the acronym in your mind as you meet people and talk, then don't do it, but many people have found the acronym to be a valuable point of departure for conversations.

To develop the habit of finding common ground, I suggest you memorize the acronym and then try it with as many people as you can. Try it with coworkers, students, family members, cab drivers, hair stylists or barbers, or pretty much anyone you meet. I suggest you especially try it with people with whom you feel you have little in common.

When you try to find common ground, pay attention to what happens during the conversation. Are you able to find common ground? If so, do you feel more positive about your conversation partner? Does anything make it difficult for you to find common ground? Does anything make it easier to find common ground?

To help you find common ground, as with all of the other habits, I have created reflection forms you can use to help you make these ideas become habits.

Use the *Looking Back: Finding Common Ground* form to reflect on a conversation after it is over. In the best situations, you might review an audio or video conversation that

had some other purpose (for example, a coaching conversation), and then consider how effectively you implemented the habit. In most cases, you will need to use this form even when there is no recording of the conversation, just to consider what worked and what still needs to improve as you try to find common ground.

Use the *Looking At: Finding Common Ground (1 of 2)* form to keep track of the interactions you had where you attempted to find common ground. Note the interaction, what you did, and the outcome. The purpose of the form is to help you be more aware of what happens when you attempt to find common ground.

Use the *Looking At: Finding Common Ground (2 of 2)* form to experiment with the I-CARE model for finding common ground. This form might be used by members of a team who are learning the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits or by two people who are learning together.

Use the *Looking Ahead: Finding Common Ground* form to plan how you will find common ground with someone during an upcoming conversation. This form might be especially useful when you are planning an important meeting, or when you are first attempting to use this habit.

TO SUM UP

Finding Common Ground is a powerful communication habit we can use to improve our relationships and communicate more effectively. It is also a noble act that makes the world a better place.

We can employ four simple strategies to help us find common ground.

- Seek common denominators and avoid common dividers. We can do this by remembering the I-CARE acronym—Interests, Convictions, Activities, Roles, Experiences.
- Avoid common dividers, which is to say keep the I-CARE acronym in mind to avoid topics that might put a barrier between us and others. Once common ground has been found, it will be much easier to discuss where we disagree.

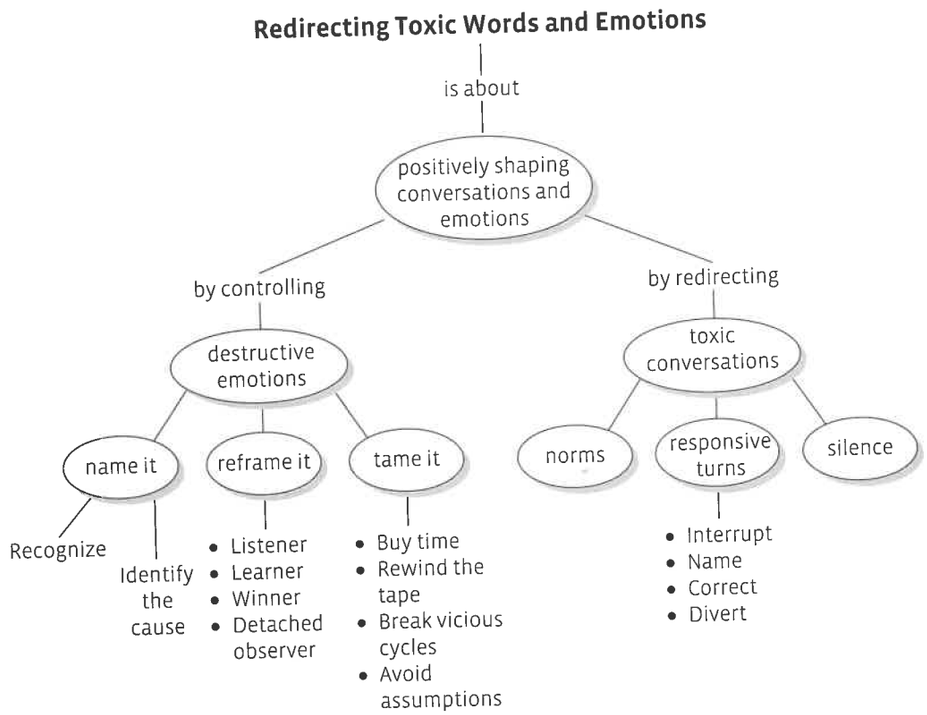
- Use words that unite and avoid words that divide by monitoring what you say to ensure that your words don't become a barrier to understanding.
- Avoid toxic connections such as nagging, complaining, gossiping, and so forth. Conversations that diminish others are never healthy.

GOING DEEPER

Parker Palmer's *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (2011) is a book for our times. At a point where the world seems to be more and more polarized around political and religious topics, Palmer humbly asserts that we should revisit President Lincoln's message in his second inaugural address. Palmer writes that "In his appeal to a deeply divided America, Lincoln points to an essential fact of our life together: if we are to survive and thrive, we must hold its divisions and contradictions with compassion, lest we lose our democracy" (p. 4).

I am a huge fan of Palmer's other works, and his wonderful book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, 10th Anniversary Edition* (2007) is my favorite gift for new teachers. Palmer writes beautifully about the importance of respecting others, living an authentic life, and the challenges and rewards of teaching. His other books are also definitely worth reading, and I learned about facilitating groups and life in general from his book *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (2009).

Heidi Grant Halvorson's *No One Understands You and What to Do About It* (2015) is a accessible, evidence-based summary of research on communication. Grant Halvorson describes how what we think and do and what others think and do make simple communication difficult, and then describes strategies we can use to overcome those difficulties. Her book is especially useful for those whose work hinges on trust—as she gives excellent advice on how to build trust.



REDIRECTING TOXIC WORDS AND EMOTIONS

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

I have decided that there are too many people who enjoy hurting people with their words. I do not want to be in that camp.

—Research volunteer

Imagine yourself as the hero of an action thriller. Somehow, to save the day, you have to walk across a small plank that traverses a fiery lake filled with toxic waste. Every step you take, you keep your eyes on both sides of the board to make sure you maintain balance. You know one false step could dump you into the toxic mess, so you watch carefully and proceed with caution to ensure you get across the plank safely.

This is more or less what we need to do during emotionally charged conversations. We need to watch and keep in mind that a conversation could become toxic quickly, and when talk becomes toxic, we lose the chance to have a better conversation. When we interact, we need to make sure we don't fall into the toxic dump.

Consider two scenarios.

Scenario One: It is morning on a school day. The clock is ticking, and your son is still in the shower. He is going to be late for school, and you are likely going to be late for work. He is 16. He should get himself going without you having to tell him. It seems like he really doesn't care a bit if he's late, or more important to you, if you're late. You bang on the door and yell at him to get moving. Then, when he finally comes downstairs, you both run to the car without breakfast, and the drive to school is a long, silent, angry trip.

Scenario Two: Over a holiday meal at your in-laws, conversation circles around all the changes taking place in your spouse's home community. A visiting neighbor points out that the racial makeup of the town is changing, and to him the town just doesn't feel like home any more. Then he goes on to add, "Those people don't want us around anyway." An innocent conversation about their hometown has suddenly become a vehicle for racist comment. You are at your in-laws, and you don't want to cause trouble, but you heard what you heard. Remaining silent avoids conflict and speaking up might lead to angry comments at the friendly dinner table, but you have Martin Luther King's statement, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter," pinned to your bulletin board. What do you do?

In both scenarios, a conversation became toxic quickly. Little that is good comes out of hostile, demeaning conversations. Clearly, to have better conversations, we need to control our emotions so they don't poison our interactions, and we also need to speak up and shape conversations when other people's comments are damaging to others. This chapter describes how to deal with both kinds of toxicity.

Controlling Our Emotions

Some of the most toxic phenomena happen inside us. Our emotions, when getting the better of us, make it practically

impossible for us to employ any of the Better Conversations Habits. When we are angry, we might not listen, interact, demonstrate empathy, or find common ground. In those moments, often all we want is revenge.

Participants in our study shared many situations where they had to work to control their emotions. Often their experiences occurred outside schools. As Susan Ellison wrote on her reflection form, and as many volunteers reported, "It is a lot easier to control destructive emotions at work than it is at home." Lisa Benham, for example, wrote about talking with her teenaged daughter about her F in English 12 during her senior year. By learning to control her emotions, Lisa wrote, she was able to shift from "being a frustrated Mom that can't understand why her daughter will not put forth the effort in her senior year!!" to being someone in control of her emotions. On her reflection form Lisa wrote:

> I've realized that allowing myself to consciously monitor my emotions has promoted my tolerance of events, people, and situations in which I usually am really frustrated. I have taken the power back to control destructive emotions that were draining my daily energy. This has especially helped me with my 18-year-old daughter, but also helped me promote goal-oriented topics in conversations with administrators.

I find that I am using this in all walks of life, not just in professional coaching. I am seeing aspects of my personal life differently because I am focusing on what I can do to control my reactions to situations. It is forcing me to think more about practicing what I preach.

—Ron Lalonde, Middle School Principal, American School of Dubai

Other volunteers described challenging situations where it was important for them to take the power back and control their emotions. Patty Brus wrote about regretting words she said at a funeral for a cousin, a marine who had died in combat. "Since the conversation," Patty wrote, "I have tried to reframe my emotions to respect individuals' choices and not impose my own." One research volunteer wrote about talking with her son about looking for a summer job and discovering how "paraphrasing my son's dialogue was a powerful tool in which potentially difficult emotions were avoided and meaningful conversations took place. Brilliant!!"

Our toxic emotions can negatively affect us in many ways. They can keep us from saying something that should be said, or they can prompt us to say something we will

1. **Name It.** Identify situations where your buttons might be pushed and what the root cause is for your anger.
2. **Reframe It.** Change the way you think about emotionally difficult conversations by adopting a new frame for understanding them. See yourself as a listener, learner, game player, or a detached observer.
3. **Tame It.** Use one of the following strategies to keep your emotions under control: (a) buy time, (b) rewind the tape, (c) break vicious cycles, and (d) avoid making assumptions. Or, use your own strategies to maintain control of your emotions.

regret. "When we fail to control our destructive emotions," Debbie Kessler wrote, "we fail to hear what needs to be heard." For many reasons we need to control our emotions if we hope to have a better conversation. Three simple strategies can be used to do this—Name It, Reframe It, and Tame It.

The names for the three strategies—Name It, Reframe It, and Tame It—might seem kind of cutesy, but I have chosen these easy-to-remember names so when we are in the midst of emotionally charged interactions, we can easily recall them. As one research volunteer wrote, "The strategies are short and sweet and easy to think about," and LuAnn Fountaine wrote, "I think it is very helpful to have simple, concrete strategies to hold on to and to refer to often."

The three strategies are described in the box on the left.

NAME IT

The first way to control our emotions is to recognize when we are in a situation where we might react emotionally. If we can recognize a situation, topic, person, or other stimulus that might trigger an emotional response in us, we will be better able to maintain control of our emotions should we feel prodded or provoked. Sybil Evans and Sherry Suib Cohen, in *Hot Buttons* (2001), describe these triggers as hot buttons:

> A hot button is an emotional trigger. Hot buttons get pushed when people call you names, don't respond to you, take what you think belongs to you, challenge your competence, don't respect you, give you unsolicited advice, don't appreciate you, are condescending. When someone pushes one of your hot buttons, it makes you a little crazy. That's all it takes. You explode. Not all explosions are loud, and maybe no one can see your eruptions, but you still explode inside. (pp. 1–2)

There are as many different hot buttons as there are people, and what triggers one person to jump out of his chair and shout may pass over another person like a cool summer breeze. Triggers can relate to our work, family, beliefs, or many other factors that are important in our lives. What matters, though, is that we recognize them before it is too late.

Many participants in our study wrote that being able to name potential triggers helped them plan for future conversations that might involve difficult emotions. Gretchen Brown, an instructional coach from Cecil County, Maryland, for example, wrote on her reflection form that she found it really helpful "to identify emotional situations before I enter into them. Being aware of these situations and preparing myself for them is more than half the battle."

An important but challenging part of "Naming It" is to try to identify the root cause of our anger. Organizational leaders often use a problem solving model known as Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to identify the true cause of a problem within an organization, and we can do something similar with our own emotions. The goal of RCA is to study a situation until you identify the real reason why a problem exists. You will know when you have gotten to a root cause when you recognize that removing the cause will resolve the problem.

RCA involves a variety of methodologies far more extensive than what is possible when we think about what makes us angry. A simpler strategy is one you may know that was first employed at Toyota Motor Company: The Five Whys.[1] We can use The Five Whys by stepping back and analyzing our situation until we identify the root cause of our anger. There is no magic in the number five. You might get to the root cause by asking fewer questions, or you might need to ask more questions.

Volunteers in our global study used The Five Whys to help them better understand their anger. One educational researcher wrote about a conflict when her sister told her to adopt their father's dog after their father was placed in a retirement home. The sister said she was allergic to dogs even though she had two of her own. The Five Whys helped the researcher realize that what really angered her was not the request, but that she allowed herself to be manipulated by her sister. She realized that if she could learn to resist that manipulation, she would stop being angry.

> There are so many things working against us that I always just try to tell myself that nice matters. This doesn't mean I let myself be a pushover. I just take it as a personal challenge when I am frustrated to try to find the kindest way possible to resolve the problem. I find that this helps me when I feel my buttons being pushed because even if I am not understanding where someone is coming from, or someone is doing something that frustrates me, I still try to remember to be kind and respectful.
>
> **—Stephanie Kilchenstein,** Instructional Coach, Cecil County, Maryland

[1] If you do a quick search online, you will find several descriptions of The Five Whys. The concept was largely popularized by Matthew May in *The Elegant Solution: Toyota's Formula for Mastering Innovation* (2007).

Building positive relationships with staff can only come from positive interactions.

—**Jenni Donohoo,** Windsor, Ontario

A principal of a school in China wrote about being upset because the district leader failed to acknowledge the work of his team and him. The Five Whys helped him see that he was angry because his team was underappreciated, but also because he felt he had failed to adequately advocate for his team. He realized that if he advocated more aggressively for his staff and was heard by district leaders, he would no longer feel angry.

The angry father described at the beginning of this chapter could also use The Five Whys. He might ask: Why am I angry? My son is making me late. Why does that make me angry? My son doesn't seem to care if he is late or if he makes me late. Why does that make me angry? He doesn't listen to what I say or care. Why does that make me angry? I feel like I could be doing a better job as a father. Why does that make me angry? I feel so overwhelmed with work that I can't do what I should, and I feel really guilty about that.

The Five Whys won't get the son out of the shower any faster, at least not at first, but the strategy could help the father see that his anger is more about him than about his son, and that realization could lead him to take a different approach. Maybe he will create a ritual that makes it possible for him to have more time and better conversations with his son. Perhaps he doesn't yet know what he will do, but he at least finds some comfort and control by understanding his emotions. Either way, once he names the root cause, the father at least has a chance to deal with his anger.

REFRAME IT

Often, naming the situation as one where our emotions can get the better of us is all we need to do to control our emotions—especially when we can identify a root cause. Also, when we identify a potentially emotionally complex situation in advance, we create a plan to go into the conversation prepared to keep our emotions under control. Unfortunately, though, there are often times, as Gretchen Brown wrote, when we "don't see the emotionally charged situations coming, and we find ourselves in difficult conversations before we realize it." In those moments, we need to learn how to reframe the interactions to better keep our destructive emotions under control.

We can understand the power of reframing if we imagine a simple scenario. Imagine you are driving your car and another car bolts through a stop sign, almost hits you, and then roars down the road. What would your reaction be? Odds are you might be tempted to engage in some angry, unpleasant nonverbal communication. But what if you knew that the driver of the car was a husband driving his pregnant wife to the hospital? Then you would only be concerned about the couple. You might even want to help them. Your anger would be gone.

Such is the power of reframing, and we can apply the method to help us control our emotions. To do this, we recognize and name a trigger when we see it, and then reframe the potentially negative situation so it becomes one we can control. Rather than allowing our emotions to have power over us, we "take back the power" by using reframing to stay in control. The reality of reframing is, as was the case with the husband rushing his wife to the hospital, sometimes our new frame is more accurate than our old one. When we reframe a conversation, we open ourselves to a better understanding, and we have a chance of keeping our emotions under control.

There are several ways you can reframe a potentially dangerous conversation to maintain control over your emotions.

Think of yourself as a listener. One simple way to reframe a conversation is to position yourself as a listener, and use the strategies of Habit 2, Listening With Empathy, to . . . well, listen. When you make it your task simply to take in everything your conversation partner says, you may keep yourself from saying things you will regret. Furthermore, if you make it a point to listen and really understand your conversation partners before you passionately tell them why you disagree, you may find that they actually agree with you.

Participants in our study shared what they learned when they reframed challenging conversations by thinking of themselves as listeners. Karen Taylor wrote on her reflection form, "Deciding to be the listener has made me a lot more cognizant of what the speaker is trying to say, so when I do say something, it's not reactive, and I have a better understanding of where the person is coming from." One participant wrote, "Listening is the key to controlling

> I like using the strategy of thinking of myself as a listener and a learner. But, boy is it hard when you are in the thick of things.
>
> —**Lu Ann Fountaine,** Special Education Teacher, Brodford, Massachusetts

your emotions. Rephrase what the person is saying to show that you are listening. Wait to offer advice. Sometimes they just need to vent and then they will come up with answers that they are looking for."

Think of yourself as a learner. A second way to reframe an emotionally charged conversation is to think of yourself as a learner. In some ways, this is a focused way of seeing yourself as a listener. When you approach conversations as a learner, rather than reacting, you ask questions, listen, and dig deep to find out why the other person is as upset as she is. You reframe the conversation from one where you have to make your to point to one where you make it your point to identify the source of your conversation partners' emotion.

Andrea Broomell found herself in an emotionally charged conversation with her husband and decided to reframe her approach by thinking of herself as a learner. She and her husband were having a heated discussion about their daughter's behavior. When Andrea shifted to thinking of herself as a learner, she discovered that she and her husband actually had the same opinion. She wrote, "I realized that it was his agreement that was causing me to feel frustrated toward him! Poor fella!"

Have a personal victory. Another way to reframe a difficult conversation is to reframe it as a competition or game you win by maintaining control of your emotions. When people attack us or treat us badly, often what they want is for us to get angry, too. When we don't react, we throw the conversation out of balance, and keep our emotions under control. Stephanie Kilchenstein wrote, "I like the freedom of the 'Reframe step' because even when others are pushing your buttons, you can choose how to react, and we have control over that." She also wrote, "I continually try to keep in mind that others' perceptions are their reality, and I try to use that to help me keep perspective."

Go to the balcony. One of the world's leading experts on negotiation, William Ury, wrote about another strategy for controlling our emotions: going to the balcony. In *Getting Past No: Negotiating With Difficult People* (1991), Ury writes,

> Going to the balcony means distancing yourself from your natural impulses and emotions . . . The balcony is a metaphor for a mental attitude of detachment. From the balcony you can calmly evaluate the conflict almost as if you were a third party. You can think constructively for both sides and look for a mutually satisfactory way to resolve the problem. (p. 38)

When I go to the balcony, as William Ury suggests, I literally imagine myself watching the conversation I'm involved in from above. This mental trick helps me feel detached from the emotion of the situation. As Jim Justice wrote, "Detaching myself from the emotion is key. The negative emotion totally hinders my ability to think rationally about stressful situations. I have to remember to be conscious of my intentions in the conversation and to behave in accordance to them."

In summary, a powerful way to maintain control of your emotions during tough conversations is to reframe the interaction and see it as an opportunity to (a) listen, (b) learn, (c) have a personal victory, or (d) detach.

TAME IT

Unfortunately, reframing the conversation may not be enough, so we need to have a repertoire of strategies to help keep our emotions under control. As a research volunteer wrote on her reflection form, "A conversation is not a conversation when emotions are out of control. Those interactions become like medieval jousts in which no matter who wins, everyone involved goes through unnecessary pain."

Some of the ways we can control our emotions are tricks our moms taught us, like counting to 10, and others are more complex. Many of them were first proposed by the outstanding thinkers at the Harvard Negotiation Project.

Buy time to think. According to William Ury (1991), "The simplest way to buy time to think in a tense negotiation is to pause and say nothing. It does you little good to respond when you're feeling angry" (p. 45). Simply counting to 10 slowly can work. Even taking a quick break from the conversation, say, to go to the restroom, can help. Ury suggests

we "follow the biblical dictum: 'Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to act'" (p. 46).

Katie Cook found "buying time" helped her "stop and think about different perspectives." She wrote, "Just giving myself more time to think and not respond so quickly made a difference." Another participant combined going to the balcony with buying time to think. She wrote, "I have learned to step outside the box and be an observer and to use wait time to put myself in the other person's shoes."

Part of buying time is choosing the right time to have an emotionally charged conversation. We should never make an important decision when we feel flooded with emotion. Deidre Smith wrote:

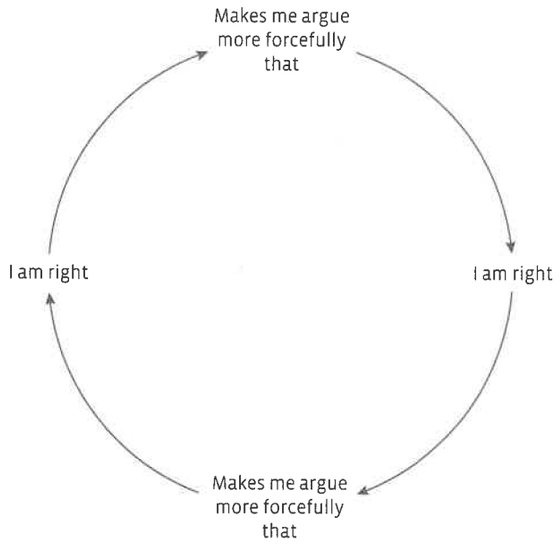
> I need to ensure that I do not attempt a difficult conversation when I'm already in a heightened state. I now believe it is better for me to postpone a potentially emotionally charged conversation until I am calm and have time to think and reflect. This will allow me to enter into the conversation and remain more aware of the potentially destructive emotions the topic might raise.

One of the easiest ways to buy time is to check in with our partners and make sure we understand what they said. To do this, we tell them everything we think we have heard them say. William Ury (1991) refers to this as rewinding the tape. He suggests we "slow down the conversation by playing it back. 'Let me just make sure I understand what you're saying'" (p. 46).

Others in our study found other ways to buy time. For example, one participant wrote that she "maintained eye contact and focused on my breathing to buy time to think about my reaction to the situation."

Break vicious cycles. Some conversations leave no room for graceful exits. When I am intent on proving you wrong, and you are intent on proving me wrong, we likely will find ourselves in a vicious cycle. As the following figure illustrates, the more aggressively I make my point, the more aggressively you will defend yours, and there is no easy exit.

Vicious Cycles in Conversations



Stone, Patton, Heen, and Fisher (2000) describe these vicious cycles as "what happened" conversations, in which "we spend much of our time . . . [struggling] . . . with our different stories about who's right, what meant what, who's to blame" (p. 9). If we recognize a vicious conversation cycle like this, the best we can do is stop the cycle by calling attention to it. Shawn Johnson from Cecil County, Maryland, used this tactic when he found himself leading a team that was headed toward a vicious cycle. Shawn headed off the conflict by saying, "It wasn't my intent for us to have this problem. Instead of getting more frustrated, let's work together to find a solution."

Don't make assumptions. One of the strategies I introduced in the chapter on dialogue, don't make assumptions, is also a powerful way to keep our emotions in check. Don Miguel Ruiz (2001) writes that

> The problem with making assumptions about what others are thinking is that we believe they are the truth. We could swear they are real. We make assumptions about what others are doing or thinking . . . then we blame them and react . . . We make

I like holding myself accountable. It is hard work, but worth the effort. This process allowed me to work myself through the process, analyze the situation, and change the direction because it was thought out and planned. I will ask for feedback to help my own growth and build the relationships at the same time.

—Lisa Benham,
Credential Coordinator, Fresno County Office of Education, Fresno, California

> an assumption, we misunderstand, we take it personally, and we end up creating a big drama for nothing. (pp. 63–64)

Controlling our assumptions is easy to say and hard to do. Emily Peterson wrote that she found it challenging to keep her assumptions "in check," but when she did, she had to be "open to the very real possibility that I just might have something in common with someone I don't much care for!" She added, "It takes some real skill and effort for it to be genuine and sincere."

Our assumptions can lead us to be angry in situations where if we knew everything the other person was thinking, we might feel much more compassion than anger. For that reason, it is important to test out whether or not our assumptions are correct. To do that, the simplest way is to ask questions. Ruiz (2001), again, offers some suggestions:

> Have the courage to ask questions until you are clear as you can be, and even then do not assume you know all there is to know about a given situation. Once you hear the answer, you will not have to make assumptions since you will know the truth. (p. 72)

In total, the three strategies that are a part of the habit of controlling toxic emotions—Name It, Reframe It, and Tame It—provide a set of strategies anyone can use to try to improve. No doubt, when it comes to implementing those strategies, many of us are like Stephanie Sandrock who wrote, "I am still very much a work in progress." To move forward, all we need is to start. And, to do that, we simply need to identify how we can get better and then do our best to implement the strategies that seem to work best for us. Juliana Dempsey wrote that during her reflection on conversations, she was able to create "containers" and identify exactly where her skills were breaking down. The coaching reflection forms have been designed to give everyone a similar opportunity to learn how they can have better conversations by maintaining control over their toxic emotions.

Use the *Looking Back: Controlling Toxic Emotions* form to analyze any potentially emotionally charged conversation from the past where you did or did not control your emotions. The form is meant to help you recognize what you did well and also areas where you might improve your ability to control your emotions.

Use the *Looking At: Controlling Toxic Emotions (1 of 2)* form to move through The Five Whys to identify the root cause for your anger. Keep asking yourself why until you identify what needs to be changed so you can extinguish your anger.

Use the *Looking At: Redirecting Toxic Emotions (2 of 2)* form to better understand how you physically react to prompts that make you feel strong, negative emotions. If you are a progressive in the United States, you might watch Fox News. If you are a conservative, you might watch MSNBC. Pay attention to how your body reacts. Does your skin feel extra warm, heartbeat quicken, or breath feel short? By understanding your emotions, you'll be better able to prepare for situations that might previously have surprised you.

Use the *Looking Ahead: Redirecting Toxic Emotions* form to plan how you can use the Name It, Reframe It, Tame It strategies to plan being in control during a conversation that has the potential to provoke you to react emotionally.

> Analyzing the situation I went through helped me take full responsibility for my role in creating drama. That was uncomfortable. I hope that I can think of all three categories next time I am in a similar situation—because I will be, because I have people in my life whom I care deeply about, because communication is difficult and takes an enormous amount of effort to do well in challenging situations.
>
> **—Research volunteer**

Redirecting Toxic Conversations

Controlling our emotions to avoid a toxic meltdown is one way to more frequently experience better conversations. However, creating a setting where better conversations can flourish also involves shaping the kind of conversations that happen around us. As Kegan and Lahey have written in *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (2001), a leader should be "a discourse-shaping language leader" (p. 20), standing against talk that is not respectful, open, and honest, while also remaining a part of the school culture. Everyone in a school can create a setting where better conversations will flourish by never giving toxic conversations a chance to begin.

The notion we should control conversations, even simply to root out hateful comments, might seem contradictory to the Better Conversations Belief that people should have a lot of autonomy; but autonomy in any civilization only

extends so far. Autonomy cannot be used as a justification for language that dehumanizes others. We show respect not only by the way we communicate but also by the way we redirect others when they speak in dehumanizing ways. We do not redirect toxic conversations to close off dialogue or silence people with opinions different from our own. Our goal is to create an environment where better conversations flourish. To do this, sometimes we have to speak out in support of respect and correct others when they do not.

Correcting others is not easy, however. Amy is an instructional coach from the southern United States. She was confronted by a toxic conversation almost on her first day of work. When she was prompted to write about her experiences redirecting toxic conversations, Amy said she recognized that "I'm supposed to be a change agent, not an enabler of toxic conversations," but she admitted she struggled when she had to redirect conversations.

As a new coach in a new building, Amy was very keen to find ways to support teachers, and she scheduled one-to-one meetings with staff. In one of her first conversations, she felt lost as she listened to a teacher's toxic comments:

> As soon as the meeting started, the teacher was gossiping about other teachers in the building. We never had a chance to really get to the purpose of our meeting because for 30 minutes I listened to the teacher engage in toxic conversations.

"Very quickly," Amy wrote, "I recognized that the conversation needed to be redirected, but since this was my first year in a new building with new teachers, I went into panic mode. I wanted to be a good listener and build new relationships, but it felt as though I was only attentive to listen to his gossip." Amy added, "As I read the pages about toxic conversations, I realized that I feel worse today, almost a year later, than I did that day."

I wish I could report that toxic conversations like the one Amy experienced are rare, but every participant who wrote about toxic conversations was able to identify several examples. Many of the conversations dealt with gossip and criticism of others in the school, especially with respect to workload. Sadly, some were even more troubling. More than half of the volunteers in the experiment reported being in conversations with people who made racist comments. Volunteers in the project had no difficulty finding toxic conversations to study.

A number of volunteers found themselves in toxic conversations with family members. One coach's comments describe the kind of situation many experience:

> I was with my husband's family prior to our marriage and there were very racially charged comments made. I was shocked and caught off guard, but due to the "newness" of my relationship with the extended family, I did not feel comfortable doing anything other than refuse to comment.

Every volunteer in the experiment recognized the importance of redirecting toxic conversations. For example, Stacie Collins wrote, "As a coach, redirecting toxic conversations is really important. The effectiveness of my position is dependent upon how trustworthy I am. If I engage in these types of conversations, how can anyone really trust me?"

Most volunteers, however, also mentioned how difficult it can be. One coach wrote, "I need to stay strong and recognize these toxic conversations from their outset. Then, I might be less tempted to get sucked in." Patty Sankey spoke for many who participated in the experiment when she wrote, "It is easy for me to redirect novice teachers, but I definitely struggle with people who are master teachers in the classroom, but toxic in professional settings."

Redirecting toxic conversations is a very important, complex task, and likely each situation is unique. Having said that, there are a few simple strategies that can help you keep toxic conversations from poisoning your organization's or your family's culture. Those strategies are (a) defining toxic conversations, (b) identifying your nonnegotiables, (c) stopping toxic comments before they start, (d) using responsive turns, and (e) silence. Each of the strategies is described below.

DEFINING TOXIC CONVERSATIONS

Toxic conversations are dehumanizing statements in which people are diminished, considered inferior, demeaned, or oppressed in some way. Thus, racist, sexist, homophobic

It is difficult. I feel preachy and better than thou when I try to stop toxic conversations. I know people are just blowing off steam and it is easy to convince myself that there's no harm in that. But I want people to see their conversations as a part of something larger. In the moment, the conversations never seem that important, but it is in the aggregate that the toxicity mounts.

—Stacie Collins, English Teacher, Northern Valley Regional High School, Old Tappon, New Jersey

I think it's important to highlight the impact these conversations can have on the work of teachers and the culture of a school. As a middle school leader, I am not provided much training, although I am told that controlling toxic and difficult conversations is part of my role. To be effective at redirecting toxic conversations, we need an array of strategies, and we must also feel comfortable using those strategies properly. Having the leadership group look deeply at this topic would have a powerful effect—those conversations would be affirming and they would further build our capacity as leaders to continue tackling toxic conversations in a systematic and confident manner.

—Alex Geddes, Middle School Leader, Melbourne, Australia

statements or conversations are obviously toxic. However, conversations that put people down or stereotype them are also toxic. We do not promote a safe and healthy emotional environment by engaging in gossip, abuse, or blame.

I find it useful to distinguish between what I call Level 1 and Level 2 toxic comments. Level 1 comments are rarely spoken in public, and they are obviously offensive. Racist, sexist, homophobic, and profane statements are Level 1 comments. A public figure would probably get fired for saying a Level 1 comment.

Unfortunately, as our global communication study shows, Level 1 toxic comments are often uttered in private. On vacations, in homes, and even during meetings in schools, the volunteers for this project reported, Level 1 comments are too frequently spoken. One teacher described how her colleagues attributed their students' success or lack of success to their race, and she wrote, "I realized immediately this was a toxic conversation by the way I was feeling about what was being said. It was disrespectful and stereotypical, and I was not comfortable sitting at the table." To her credit, she immediately redirected the conversation.

Level 2 comments are often more ambiguous, but nonetheless destructive. Gossip is a Level 2 comment; so is blaming others rather than accepting responsibility. Complaining and judging others can also be Level 2 toxic comments. Often Level 2 toxic comments are especially difficult to redirect. Stacie Collins wrote, "I don't encounter the overtly wrong (like racism, etc.) in my everyday dealings. It's the more subtle gossip that can seem innocuous enough but slowly poisons conversations."

The trouble with some Level 2 toxic comments is that people often feel pleasure when they hear something like gossip. As one coach wrote, "Hearing the gossip felt wrong from the get-go, but being included in gossip feels good." Don Miguel Ruiz describes this in *The Four Agreements* (1997):

> Gossiping has become the main form of communication in human society. It has become the way we feel close to each other, because it makes us feel better to see someone else feel as badly as we do. There is an old expression that says, "Misery likes company," and people who are suffering in hell don't want to be alone. (p. 38)

Gossip, Ruiz writes, is like a virus that infects a system or a poison that destroys a culture. Nothing good can be said of gossip. It diminishes the gossiper, breeds dishonesty, separates us from others, and all too often brings real pain to those who are its objects. Other Level 2 toxic comments are equally destructive. When people judgmentally blame others for their own struggles (teachers blame parents, coaches blame teachers, principals blame district leaders), they do damage by absolving themselves of responsibility and by making judgmental statements that belittle others' good intentions. To create an environment where better conversations can flourish, all educators need to adopt strategies that stop toxic comments from poisoning the environment.

STOP TOXIC CONVERSATIONS BEFORE THEY START

One way to redirect toxic conversations is to make sure they never happen. Leaders in organizations can accomplish this by establishing and reinforcing norms of respect and humanity. For norms to matter, everyone in a community has to have a voice in their development and agree that the norms are appropriate. Norms won't have much of an impact if they are written up and handed out as a done deal. People need to own them for them to work.

The norms also need to be enforced and reinforced. In part, that means leaders need to walk the talk, and it also means violations of the norms are identified and discouraged, preferably by everyone on the team.

When I was first studying instructional coaching, our team, guided by my colleague Mike Hock, established team norms. Everyone had a say in creating those norms, and we refined them until everyone felt proud of the statement we had created. Then, we used the norms as an evaluation tool for every meeting. Each of us would complete a survey online where we assessed how respectful, honest, and supportive we had been. Then, each meeting began with us reviewing the cumulative evaluations. In this way, we kept our norms present in our minds, and we each made adjustments when they were necessary to ensure our team was productive and positive.[2]

[2]I've written more about how to establish norms in Chapter 6 of my book *Unmistakable Impact* (2011).

It is vital to redirect toxic conversations because when we let them progress, people say things that can't be taken back, and that affects the long-term working relationships. Toxic comments create bigger problems that are hard to resolve when people say things that don't respect the dignity of others affected by the conversation. But it is hard to redirect toxic conversations as they happen quickly, and the skill to recognize them and successfully choose an appropriate strategy takes thought and practice. It is easy to get caught in a toxic conversation when you can actually relate to the problem even if you wouldn't choose to deal with it in a toxic way.

—Tess Koning, Lismore School District, New South Wales, Australia

It is very important to have strategies to redirect toxic conversations, and norms are necessary, but even the word *respectful* does not define what is offensive to others. There is of course etiquette or being polite in teams, but that can go out the window quickly if you do not define "What are toxic conversations?"

—Ruth Poage, MTSS/Program Facilitator, Woodstock, Illinois

RESPONSIVE TURNS

When we redirect a conversation, the best approach is to address the words, not the person. If we judge others, we set ourselves up as superior, and as a result, we significantly limit our ability to ever engage in any kind of meaningful conversation with others in the future. To reject a person and leave no room for future conversation is a quick fix. We stop the words in the moment, but we never really address the more fundamental issue of what has been said.

In their book *The Shadow Negotiation: How Women Can Master the Hidden Agendas That Determine Bargaining Success* (2000), Deborah Kolb and Judith Williams suggest a strategy that can be used to redirect conversations—responsive turns. Kolb and Williams' book discusses negotiation, but their ideas of responsive turns can be applied to toxic conversations. Responsive turns are moves you can make to redirect a conversation. The authors suggest four moves: interrupting, naming, correcting, and diverting.

Interrupting. We can interrupt a conversation at any point if we feel we the need to stop. As Kolb and Williams (2000) write, "Interruptions stop the action. They prevent you from being swept up in a momentum that is not going your way" (p. 110). You can interrupt a conversation by taking a break or leaving the room (often because you recognize you are out of time). Kolb and Williams write that interruption is "such an important tool . . . [because] . . . it allows you time to regroup and consider what other responses you might have to make" (p. 113).

When Ruth Poage was leading a team discussion, she redirected the conversation by interrupting. "I didn't address what was said," Ruth wrote, "I just started another topic. I said something like, 'Let's get away from opinions and back to facts and things we can control.' Once we moved to facts and actions, things were productive. This is not to say, though, that beliefs were changed; they just were not tolerated at the table."

Naming. When we name what is happening in a conversation, we make the negative unspoken suggestions explicit. Kolb and Williams (2000) explain when using the naming strategy, you "let your counterpart know that you are perfectly aware of what is going on and are unfazed" (p. 109). Often, we can tactfully but clearly name another person's behavior by asking a simple question that pointedly states the negative implications of what has been suggested. "You don't really think that men should get paid more for doing the same job a woman does, do you?" Usually, when a toxic statement is surfaced, the speaker goes back on what he or she said.

Michelle Harris, an assistant principal in Beaverton, Oregon, wrote that she uses questions to name toxic comments. "I tend to get worked up about these kind of issues, so I think breathing and having some questions ready to go in my toolbox, so to speak, really helps," Michelle wrote. "I usually name what has been said by asking specific, open-ended questions." "It's getting easier the more I practice and do it," she said, "but I fail to redirect toxic conversations more times than I can count, and it is still hard, especially with family members."

Correcting. When we correct what has been said, we clarify that something communicated is simply incorrect. "Correcting turns," Kolb and Williams write, "go beyond simple protests and denials. They restore balance to the [conversation] by elaborating on just what's right about your rendering and why" (2000, p. 119). We can correct what has been said by making a statement, posing a question, or referring to an external source such as a trusted Internet website. Correcting "stop[s] moves the other person might use to justify holding you or your opinion in little regard" (p. 123). "I usually ask questions," Michelle wrote, "but sometimes if it is egregious, I have to make a statement."

Dehumanizing comments have to be stopped. We won't flourish in a society where hateful comments are allowed, but that doesn't make it easy. As Tess Koning wrote, "This is not an easy thing to do. You really need to understand adult learners and yourself. It takes a lot of practice to get comfortable redirecting conversations."

Redirecting is a lot like asking the right questions as a coach. You want the teacher to reflect while you facilitate the conversation without saying too much. Less is more, so knowing the right question or the right strategies to redirect toxic conversations is essential.

—Tess Koning, Instructional Coach, Lismore School District, New South Wales, Australia

Diverting. We can divert conversations by simply taking them in a different direction. If we are talking with

someone, and he or she wants to share some gossip, we can simply ignore the gossip and talk about something else. During a negotiation conversation, diverting the conversation usually turns the conversation away from a personal topic to a focus on the issues. More broadly, though, diverting simply redirects the conversation away from a toxic topic. Instead of gossiping about Tom, we divert the conversation and talk about Tom's daughter who just got a scholarship for an Ivy League university. That would probably be a better conversation anyway.

Tactics

Deborah Kolb and Judith Williams (2000) suggest that we can shape culture by redirecting conversations from unhealthy topics, like gossip, or other forms of destructive comments, by using communication maneuvers they call responsive turns. Responsive turns are communication tactics we can use to redirect potential unhealthy conversations. Four responsive turns suggested by Kolb and Williams, along with my definitions and some examples, are listed below:

Tactic	What Is It?	Example
Interrupt	Cutting off the negative conversation before it begins	"Oh crap, I'm late; I've gotta go."
Name	Describing what's going on so everyone can see it	"I just feel that if we keep complaining about kids, we're never going to come up with anything useful."
Correct	Clarifying a statement that is not true	"I was at the meeting, and Mr. Smith was actually opposed to the plan."
Divert	Moving the conversation in a different direction	"Speaking of Tom, when does the basketball season start this year?"

REMAINING SILENT

While staying silent may not seem like a powerful approach for stopping toxic conversations, strategic silence

can be as clear a message as an explicit statement. When we are a part of a team, and the conversation takes a toxic turn, the best way forward may be simply to not participate in the discussion. Our refusal to participate—our silence—can speak volumes.

The attraction of some destructive conversations, like gossip, is that the persons who share their words with us make us feel like we are especially close, and that is why they share their information with us. "I wouldn't share this with just anyone," they might say, "but did you know . . . ?" However, the reality is we do not enhance any relationship by participating in a toxic topic. When we gossip, we show we are duplicitous and can't always be trusted. When we talk behind someone's back, our partner is right to ask, "What does he say about me when I am not around?"

Silence can be a clear way of indicating that we don't agree with gossip. Years ago I was on a team that spent far too much time criticizing others and gossiping. One member of the team, however, never once entered into the negative discussions. By staying silent, the team member communicated that she was a woman who could be trusted, and because of her silence, everyone on the team had a high opinion of her.

When we are confronted with a toxic comment, there are many responses we can take. If a racist comment is made at our in-laws' dinner table, we may choose to name the behavior by asking a question, "What is it that you experienced that leads you to say that?" or "You don't really think that every Latino in town is against you, do you?" Or you might choose to be silent, perhaps discussing the comment with your spouse later. What matters is that you identify the kind of conversations that are toxic, you develop the habit of always redirecting them in some way, and you practice until you can confidently stand up for conversations that communicate a deep respect for others.

Developing the habit of redirecting toxic conversations is not only going to be a difficult task for me, but also for the people who are not used to this behavior in me. Often I resort to silence (something my mother told me to do). However, I have found that my silence doesn't stop the toxicity. I like having words and a plan to guide my conversations.

—Patty Sankey,
Sussex, Wisconsin

GETTING BETTER AT REDIRECTING TOXIC CONVERSATIONS

The first step in redirecting toxic comments is to identify the topics you believe should never be tolerated. For example, you might identify racist, sexist, or homophobic

I think I need to keep these strategies posted in a conspicuous place so I am aware of them. I think if I review these strategies in a timely manner, it will help me remember to use some of them.

—Jason Lowrey, Graduate Level Instructor, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

comments as always being unacceptable. You can use the *Looking Ahead* form to identify the kinds of conversations that are never acceptable and to identify the strategy you will use to redirect the toxic conversations. Following that, you can use the *Looking Back* form to analyze how effective you are at redirecting toxic comments.

The *Looking Back: Redirecting Toxic Conversations* form can be used to identify what you are doing well and how you can improve the way you redirect toxic conversations.

The *Looking At: Redirecting Toxic Conversations* form can be used to explore your beliefs about how you should react when you experience toxic conversations.

The *Looking Ahead: Redirecting Toxic Conversations* form can be used to identify the conversations you need to redirect and the strategies you will use to redirect them.

TO SUM UP

Better conversations will not occur if toxic emotions lead us to act in counter-productive ways, nor will they occur if toxic words or topics are allowed to take root. Fortunately, there are several strategies we can employ to control our emotions and redirect destructive comments.

We can control our emotions by using the following three strategies:

- **Naming:** Identifying situations where our buttons might be pushed and identifying the root cause for our destructive emotions.
- **Reframing:** Changing the way we think about emotionally difficult conversations by adopting a new frame for understanding them. Seeing ourselves as listeners, learners, winners, or detached observers.
- **Taming:** Using strategies to keep our emotions under control, including buying time, rewinding the tape, breaking vicious cycles, or avoiding making assumptions.

We can redirect toxic conversations by using a number of different strategies. Some of the most powerful are:

- **Establishing norms** with team members that can be reinforced and encouraged over time.
- **Using responsive turns,** especially those identified by Kolb and Williams (2000), which include interrupting, naming, correcting, and diverting.
- **Staying silent,** especially in situations where we feel our comments would not move us closer to a better conversation.

GOING DEEPER

Many books on the topic of negotiation have informed the development of the ideas in this chapter. In particular, the books from the Harvard Negotiation Project—especially Fisher, Ury, and Patton's *Getting to Yes* (1991); Ury's *Getting Past No* (1993); Stone, Patton, Heen, and Fisher's *Difficult Conversations* (2000); and Fisher and Shapiro's *Beyond Reason* (2005)—are all packed with valuable insight into the topics in this chapter. Roger Fisher and his colleagues have deeply influenced my thinking about interpersonal communication.

Deborah Kolb and Judith Williams' *The Shadow Negotiator: How Women Can Master the Hidden Agendas That Determine Bargaining Success* (2000) does not embody the partnership approach in the way that is evident in Roger Fisher's win-win negotiation, but the book provides excellent advice on how to turn a conversation away from a toxic topic.

Don Miguel Ruiz's *Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book* (1997) is a simple, wise book that many people treasure as one of the most important books they've read in their lives. Ruiz's four agreements are (a) Be Impeccable With Your Word, (b) Don't Take Anything Personally, (c) Don't Make Assumptions, and (d) Always Do Your Best. These are simple ideas, but, if they were embraced universally, they could have a profound, positive impact on our lives together.