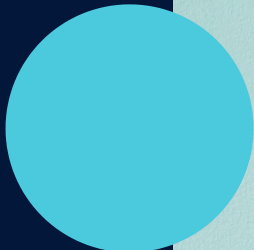


MACOMB COUNTY | SEPTEMBER 2021

Open Conversations



Part 1: What Holds Us Back?



Welcome to Open Conversations Part 1: What Holds Us Back?

No two people are the same. Each person is shaped by their communities, religions, ethnicities, generations, families and a myriad of other experiences. Even two people brought up in the same environment and surrounded by the same influences (e.g. siblings who are complete opposites) can be very different. It's why we're called "individuals." It keeps things interesting, that's for sure, but it also has its challenges, particularly when we are asked to achieve a common goal with a team of people who are different from us, as often happens in the workplace.

In an effort to better understand the people we work with, so we can accomplish those goals, we may label our coworkers, consciously or subconsciously. For example, we may label a coworker as “quiet” or “shy” when they choose not to participate in small talk or offer input at department meetings, while others who speak up more may be deemed “loud” or “overbearing.”

It's important to acknowledge that by labeling people, we “box” them in. We assign characteristics and qualities to them that may or may not fit. It leads to making assumptions about how people will act and why they will act that way, when in reality, we are largely unaware of the entirety of the experiences that shaped them. This can result in misunderstandings.

There is a way to avoid these misunderstandings - by practicing dignity. In situations where we seek to better understand someone, we practice dignity by engaging in positive, open communication. It is well established that open communication in the workplace has many benefits. A study done by Wright State University shows that open communication in the workplace significantly and positively correlates to motivation, trust, and increased exchange of ideas and information amongst coworkers. On the other hand, when communication is constrained, it becomes more likely for employees to experience isolation, conflict, or bullying (2010).

By approaching differences or misunderstandings with honest curiosity instead of judgment, we can gain knowledge and insight into the things that make our coworkers who they are, such as their preferences, rituals, points of pride, or insecurities.

Start with Perception

The way we're brought up, the experiences we've had, and the communities we are a part of shape the way we perceive things, particularly those around us. Knowing that not everyone perceives things the same way is key to open communication, and the best way to gain understanding of someone's perception is to start a conversation.



What Holds Us Back?

Oftentimes, our beliefs, fears, and insecurities hold us back from engaging in open conversations.

“Difficult conversations don’t have to be intimidating. Creating a psychologically safe environment and prioritizing open communication is an ongoing process that takes empathy, effort and dedication.”

*Elevate USA
Navigating Difficult Conversations Training*



Our Beliefs

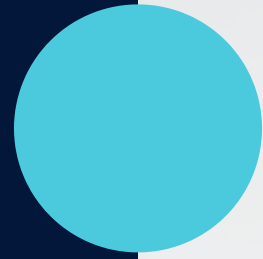
We may avoid open conversations because we believe that...

... we are naturally effective communicators and do not need to practice positive, open communication.

... it is unnecessary to hear others out.

.... our thoughts, ideas, opinions, etc. are not worth voicing.





Our Fears & Insecurities

We may hold back from open conversations for fear of...

.... a poor outcome, especially when the conversations seem difficult or personal.

.... appearing insensitive or ignorant.

.... not having enough background knowledge on the topic.

Six Ways to Overcome Obstacles in Communication

Start Off Strong

Recognize the Value

Embrace Discomfort

Keep Practicing

Take a Risk

Say "I'm Sorry"



Start Off Strong

Start a conversation over a topic that you don't know much about. For example, maybe you've always been curious about a coworker's religious rituals. Challenge yourself to ask if they'd be willing to explain further.

Don't forget to approach the conversation with sincerity, kindness, and willingness to listen.

Embrace Discomfort

A little discomfort is okay, as long as a safe space has been established for a conversation to be had. Open conversations are meant to be growing experiences, and growth is not always comfortable.





Take a Risk

When approaching difficult or personal topics, there is a risk that the conversation does not result in a positive outcome. However, assuming this risk and putting forth every effort to hold a meaningful, considerate conversation will lessen defensiveness in the other person and increase the chances of a positive, enlightening discussion.

Recognize the Value

There is so much worth to be found in striking up open conversations with others. Valuing our differences by taking an initiative to learn about each other will open doors to new ways of thinking. This exchange of ideas and beliefs helps to create a more trusting and comfortable work environment.





Keep Practicing

It may take some time before you find yourself successfully starting and conducting open conversations. Take comfort in knowing that open, effective communication requires practice and is a skill that can always be improved upon.

Say "I'm Sorry"

Didn't go as you had hoped? If the other person left feeling upset or offended, the best course of action is to apologize immediately. Recognizing that you may have unintentionally offended the other person, and reassuring them that it was not your intent, will help to preserve the relationship.



Although we tend to place labels on individuals based on what they look like, act like, or where they came from, our best tool to undo these "labels" is to learn more about the person.

Open communication is the best way to learn about the experiences, cultures, and backgrounds of other individuals, and brings us one step closer to seeing beyond the labels placed on them.

We appreciate the time and effort put forth to learning more about how we can break down barriers and get to know the individuals around us in a dignified manner.

Thank you.

You have successfully completed Part 1 of the Open Conversations training!