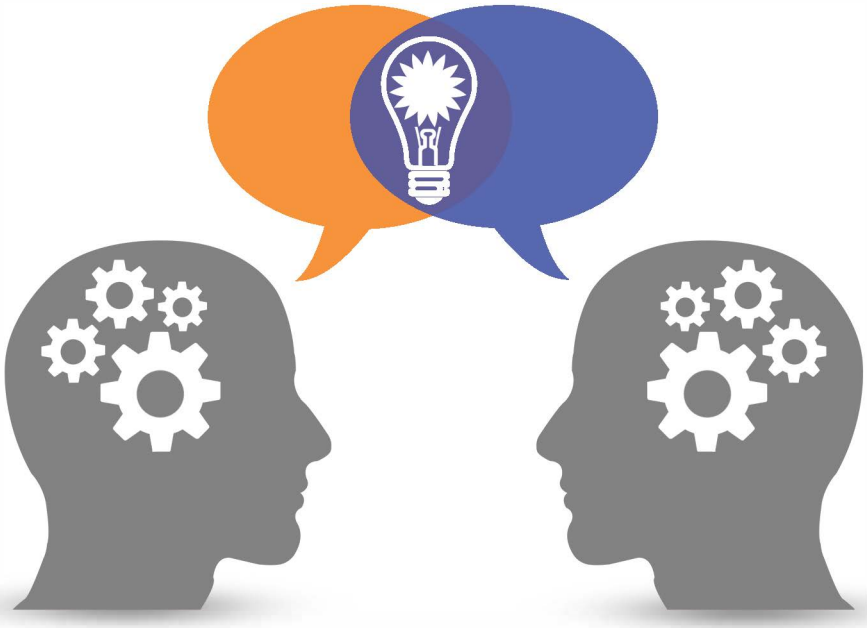
HEAD ON

How to Approach Difficult Conversations Directly



JANEL ANDERSON, PhD

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Janel Anderson, PhD



Head On: How to Approach Difficult Conversations Directly

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1. Business Communication



For Andrew, Jocelyn, and Blake—

who have taught me more about myself and life
than they could ever know.

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Head On

Introduction

Here's a secret, the product of my research, observations, and experience: difficult conversations are made, not born. Even the least acrimonious discussion can *become* difficult when one person makes another defensive.

When that happens, conversation shuts down. Someone on the defense can't listen or reason well. It's not his fault; it's a physiological fact. Here's the scientific explanation: when someone is under attack, the body diverts blood and oxygen away from the neocortex. That's the part of the brain that performs logical reasoning, and it all but shuts down. Where do these precious resources go instead? The arms and legs. To help that person either throw punches or run. You know: fight or flight.

When you start a conversation by making the other person defensive, it's hard to reach agreement. And it's darn near impossible to actually come up with a creative or innovative solution.

But there's hope. I've developed a process for starting and staying with a conversation that has the potential to be difficult—in a way that doesn't make your partner want to put up their dukes or flee the room. I've been training people in this process for years.

They always ask if there's a book to take home, to consult, to continue helping them through these challenging—and undeniable—conversations.

And now there is.

WHAT'S THE SECRET?

Fear and anxiety significantly influence our interpersonal communication at work, whether we want them to or not. Difficult conversations are fraught with these emotions, which in turn, prohibit us from being fully aware and present in those conversations. In those difficult situations, if fear and anxiety run the show, we lose the ability to regulate our thoughts and emotions. Instead, we react. And we react defensively. Most often, these very conversations are the ones in which we most need to be fully aware and present.

What if there were another way? What if you had a method for holding a conversation in a manner that kept defensiveness at bay? Imagine a conversation on a difficult topic with a coworker or a family member in which neither party got defensive. A conversation in which neither party was provoked to defend her position or protect his self-concept. This book offers just such a method.

The result? Both partners can bring their best listening and critical thinking skills to the table. No one gets upset. Each person begins to understand the other person's position and perspective, even if they don't necessarily agree with them. They also start to see who else is affected by the situation. And finally, they reach agreement, or at least understanding.

This book provides exactly such a process, a process you can begin using in your very next conversation on a difficult topic.

THE SKILLS YOU WILL LEARN

The book is divided into three sections. In the first section, you will come to understand why we get defensive in the first place. This section, Communication and the Brain, takes a close look at what is happening in the brain when we feel threatened and how we are biologically wired to defend ourselves when we encounter threat. Chapter 1 examines what happens in our brains when we face threatening situations and how that directly influences our ability to communicate clearly and effectively with others. Chapter 2 explores stress and the degree to which it supports or inhibits our ability to discuss difficult topics. In Chapter 3 you'll come to know some of the major regions of the brain and how each of them plays a role leading up to and during difficult conversations.

The second section of the book specifically describes a step-by-step method for holding conversations on difficult topics, both when you initiate them and when they find you. This section, *Difficult Conversations, Step by Step*, provides a recipe of discrete, proven steps to follow when conducting the conversation. Chapter 4 goes over the first step in the process: preparing for the conversation, but not in the ways you might typically prepare. Instead, this chapter offers guidance on how to ready yourself emotionally for the conversation—even when someone else starts it. Chapter 5 covers the critical first steps in how you begin the conversation and offers a process for opening the conversation in a manner that is specifically designed to lower the other person's defenses.

Chapter 6 offers a technique for staying present in the conversation and dynamically responding to the other person so they feel heard and acknowledged. Chapter 7 prompts you to get curious and stay curious throughout the conversation. It encourages you to think more expansively about who is affected by the situation. And Chapter 8 helps you reach agreement even when agreement is hard

to come by. It also addresses the inevitability that sometimes we aren't able to reach agreement, and explains how to close those conversations with the relationship intact.

The third section, Difficult Conversations in Context, applies the content from the first two sections to specific situations in work life. Chapter 9 addresses holding difficult conversations with your teams and how to approach problematic issues as they arise in meetings. In Chapter 10, you will learn how to handle awkward and difficult situations as they occur with colleagues in common areas such by the copier or in the cafeteria. Chapter 11 provides guidance on facilitating your annual performance review as well as incorporating feedback throughout the year for continuous improvement. Chapter 12 examines difficult conversations with senior leaders.

Finally, Chapter 13 concludes with a discussion on how to drive lasting cultural change, so that confronting difficult situations in organizations head on becomes commonplace.

A WORD ABOUT EXAMPLES

I provide a lot of stories throughout this book to illustrate the points I'm making and to demonstrate the concepts and techniques in action. In the years I've been doing this work, I've trained, given speeches, coached, and facilitated meetings for literally tens of thousands of people. I've heard stories that may sound very similar to your experiences. Other stories may surprise you, amaze you, or be drastically different from your experience. I use some of those stories in this book.

The stories come to me in side conversations with participants at training programs I deliver, in the hallway with audience members after keynote speeches I give, on the phone with coaching cli-

ents, and in prep calls and debriefs with executives when I facilitate meetings. My audience has been very generous with me in sharing their stories, sometimes seeking help or support or to get my reaction, and other times to share their triumphs in navigating difficult situations. Whatever the reason, I am indebted to my audience members for trusting me with their stories.

All of the stories in this book are true. Aside from changing the names and surface details to protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with me, I share the stories as they came to me. The examples come directly from people like you, facing workplace and personal issues that are sometimes mundane, sometimes awful, and many, many more, somewhere in between.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I encourage you to *do* this book. Naturally, you will read it but I challenge you to take it a step further and to *experience* the book, in addition to reading it. Use *Head On* as a guidebook for understanding what happens in the brain when fear and anxiety are present—for both you and your co-workers—and how that distorts communication and relationships at work. And then do something about it. Actively use the techniques and methods in the book to get different results than you have gotten before.

Each chapter concludes with a pair of exercises to help you implement what you learned. To take your practical learning further, there is a companion volume to this book called *The Head On Handbook*. There you will find many more exercises, checklists, and activities that will help you apply what you learn in this book to real situations you face in the workplace.

If you really use the resources in this book—no, *when* you do—you will develop a much higher degree of self-awareness (even if you are already highly self-aware!) that will, in turn, lead to better emotional regulation and enable you to achieve better overall outcomes in conversations on challenging topics and not-so-challenging topics too.

And as you will discover, they don't need to be "difficult conversations." Rather, they can be conversations that happen to be on challenging or difficult topics. The topic may remain difficult, but the conversation doesn't have to be.

In short, when a conversation makes its participants feel anxious, the clear and rational thinking that can help to address the situation head on is more difficult to access. You are about to discover how to get more of that clear, rational thinking in conversations on challenging topics, both from yourself and others.

Part 1

Communication and the Brain

CHAPTER 1

Fight or Flight

Shawn arrived to work on Thursday like any other Thursday. He managed by walking around, checking in with his team members who were already at their desks, saying hello to the office manager and heading to his office to check email and prepare for his morning meetings. He was a bit surprised to see a meeting invitation in his inbox for a meeting with his manager's boss, Mike, the vice president of the division. Meeting topic: Project Work. "That's odd," thought Shawn. He wasn't accustomed to getting project assignments from Mike.

He had ten minutes until the meeting so he swung by his manager's office to see if he might glean some information. The office was empty. Shawn started to get a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He'd heard rumors of layoffs that were being announced this week. Most of those affected were in the New York office, or so the rumor went. But now he began to wonder if he would be among the fallen.

The ten minutes crawled by. Shawn took the elevator to the third floor and walked the very long hallway to Mike's office. When he arrived, Mike and Jasmine, from

human resources, greeted him. There was a large, white envelope on the desk with Shawn's name on it. The sinking feeling he'd felt in his stomach earlier was gone. Now it felt like his stomach had completely dropped out of his body. His mouth was a desert wasteland, not a drop of moisture to be found. He swallowed hard and said hello.

"I'm sorry to be the one to deliver the news," Mike began. "As you know, the company is making some changes in our business model, based on the economy." Shawn struggled to hear the rest of what Mike said. A deafening sound thundered through Shawn's head. It sounded like the roar of a locomotive. He literally couldn't hear. He blinked and squinted, trying to focus on what was being said.

"It's all spelled out in the letter and the additional materials in the envelope," Jasmine explained. "Do you have any questions that we can answer right now?"

"My team," Shawn stammered. "My team. Do they know? Are they affected?"

"There's a meeting at eleven o'clock this morning with your team. They'll stay on. They'll be reporting to Jennifer starting next week. They'll have this week to wrap up the projects they've been working on with you and your clients," Mike explained.

Shawn took the envelope and walked to the door. His knees felt unsteady, his eyes blinked frequently and the sound of the locomotive still flooded his head, blocking all other sound. He passed by the elevator and took the deserted stairwell instead. The sound of his wingtips on the stairs echoed in the cement stairwell, and he could faintly hear the echo amidst the roar of the sound in his head. As he continued to his office, he wished more than anything that he could hide, not show up at the meeting with his team in two hours. If only he could disappear.

Shawn was experiencing classic symptoms of the sympathetic nervous system in his body. This chapter examines the impacts the

sympathetic nervous system has on our bodies and can, in turn, have on interpersonal communication at work. In Shawn's case the additional blood flow away from his brain to his limbs accounted for the roar of the locomotive in his head and his difficulty hearing. His body was mobilizing for fight or flight. The blood that normally circulated to his brain for critical thinking, listening, and other cognitive tasks was rushing to his limbs to help him either fight off his attackers or run for his life.

From an evolutionary biology perspective, that's what our body is programmed to do: protect us by escaping from threats we are not able to easily fight off. Modern work activities typically are not ones we must fight (with our bodies) for our livelihood, nor are they the stuff we typically must run fast and climb a tree to safely escape from. Although it sometimes feels that way!

The evolution of work and life has occurred much more rapidly than our brains and bodies have evolved. We are still programmed to use our physical strength to fight and defend ourselves or run for our lives, escaping from threats at all costs. Our bodies do not distinguish between modern office politics and a saber-toothed tiger chasing us down. The body mobilizes quickly to escape the threat and does not slow down to critically examine the particulars of the situation. Our ancestors did not pause to thoughtfully consider what they would taste like when the tiger caught them. No, they ran for their lives and climbed that tree as fast as they could!

Likewise, we do not carefully consider the details and subtle nuances of our situation when the sympathetic nervous system is fully engaged and we are in full on fight or flight. We are programmed to find safety. Shawn's only refuge for the time being was his office. He wanted to flee, but he had just enough rational thinking to override his desire to leave the building.

Another person's response might have been different. Another person may have been argumentative and combative if they responded with the "fight" nature of the sympathetic nervous system. Others still might freeze up and find their ability to move, no less ask pertinent questions, to be completely incapacitated.*

The sympathetic nervous system, often referred to by its nickname "fight or flight," governs our reaction to threats, real and perceived. The emphasis for us is on *perceived*: since our brains and bodies have not evolved as rapidly as our modern environment, they get a lot of false positives in the "run for your life" category. That is, the body reacts as if the boss's explosion *du jour* is an actual threat to our survival—and whether you gear up to fight or shut down in flight, your boss will probably respond in turn.

Fight in the workplace shows up as yelling and screaming at staff and co-workers. It shows up as bullying and passive-aggressive behavior. It shows up as fierce competition for resources. It shows up as cc-ing your peers in an email accusing a co-worker of botching a project. And at its worst, it shows up as violence—from verbal attacks to punches thrown.

Flight, on the other hand, may show up as a literal physical departure (i.e., leaving the room) or as checking out and becoming less engaged. Flight, while seeming more innocuous than fight, significantly impacts individual relationships and organizational outcomes. When interpersonal communication between managers and employees is strained or dysfunctional, the resulting literal flight can cost millions of dollars in turnover. Remaining on the job while "checked out" may be costing organizations even more. Recent reports estimate the active disengagement of American workers results in an annual loss of $350 billion.[1]

*For an excellent discussion of all the possible responses to threat, I recommend reading *Extreme Fear: The Science of Your Mind in Danger* by Jeff Wise.

Another reaction to fear is the freeze response. The freeze response is produced by the same part of the brain that generates both fight and flight. It is a response that no longer suits our environment, at least at work. When a manager, for example, puts an employee on the spot, stunning him or her to the point of no response, that's freeze. Standing utterly still may have helped our ancestors to avoid detection, but it's not very effective or professional in the concrete jungle.

YOUR BRAIN ON THREAT

As Shawn's example above demonstrates, a brain experiencing "threat" is not working at its best. When the brain is running an "escape threat" program, it will not be doing its optimal, clearest thinking. Rather, it will be seeking self-preservation and protection. In short, it is operating out of pure defensiveness. Think of the most recent time you were talking with someone who was feeling defensive. Whether it was a co-worker, a client, or your teenager, the threat—real or perceived—got in the way of them doing their best thinking, listening, and participating in the conversation.

Interpersonal Threat

Long before the recent breakthroughs in neuroscience, communication researchers were observing and documenting the causes and effects of defensiveness in communication. Chief among the early researchers was Jack Gibb. Dr. Gibb's work in the 1960s and 1970s at the University of Colorado, where he directed the Group Process

Laboratory, is critical to our current understanding of how defensive communication comes about. [2]

Gibb and other researchers found that defensiveness is sometimes caused by intolerance of those who hold different views. When we encounter views or beliefs that are different from our own, the juxtaposition of holding those two viewpoints simultaneously results in cognitive dissonance, or a set of incompatible perspectives, which can easily lead to defensiveness. In sum, when we encounter new information that is contrary to our present thoughts, feelings or beliefs, it may result instinctually in a fear that we may have to change those thoughts, feelings, or beliefs.

Researchers in the field of interpersonal communication have also been studying this phenomenon for decades. Dr. Anita Vangelisti at the University of Texas, Austin and a team of other researchers have found that defensiveness is predicated on a cycle of self-awareness of a flaw or inconsistency in oneself and a refusal to admit or acknowledge it. For example, if a person is inconsistent with how they handle money and their spouse wants to have a conversation about financial matters, the person may get defensive almost immediately at the start of the conversation. Additionally, the person experiences an accompanying sensitivity to the issue and easily perceives an attack on that area by another person, whether or not it is real. [3]

Defensiveness Begets Defensiveness

Neuroscience research focusing on mirror neurons demonstrates how easily we are influenced by other people's words and actions. In functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies, researchers have found that when one person sees another individual per-

forming an action, the same part of the observer's brain that is required to perform that action is activated, even though it is the other person who is performing the action.[4] So it is not surprising then that when one person acts defensive, the other person is likely to get defensive, too.

Throughout this section of the book, we are going to be discussing some of the parts of the brain that have a direct influence on communications and how they are related to our emotions. Keep in mind, though, that our human brains are extremely complex and handle many different kinds of processes, from remembering birthdays to dancing the Funky Chicken.

Additional research has shown that the defensive response is generated by the limbic system—the emotional part of the brain—before the neocortex—the rational part of the brain—is activated and has a chance to respond to the threat. When you form an initial perception of a situation, information that seems threatening is handled directly by the amygdala, part of the limbic system and the center of your fight or flight response. It bypasses the neocortex where critical thinking and listening occur.

For example, if your boss's boss sees you in the hallway and says rather sternly, "I need to see you in my office in five minutes," there is a good chance that your body will automatically react to this as a threatening situation. Your heart may begin to race or you may break out into a cold sweat, whether or not there is indeed a real threat. The information, including the verbal message and the nonverbal cues that accompany its delivery, gets passed directly to the amygdala before the neocortex can even get a chance to consider whether there is a real basis for a threat.

This bypass is designed for our survival. The human brain is conditioned to protect the body it inhabits. When there is a perceived threat, alarms are sent immediately to the body to mobilize

and defend or to get out of harm's way quickly. That bypass, designed for efficiency, may not serve us well at the office, but it just may be responsible for our species still roaming the earth.

Breaking the Cycle

With the amygdala jumping into action in a threatening moment, how do you stand a chance at acknowledging the perceived threat and then examining that threat through the lens of the executive function of the brain? If you can manage to do it, you'll get an opportunity to apply critical thinking skills to the situation. Then you can evaluate the perceived threat to determine the best course of action to take, given your desired outcomes.

This requires conscious and deliberate effort. It requires slowing down and interrupting the stimulus-response cycle which governs our bodies and brains in potentially threatening situations. To do so requires an intimate and conscious awareness of how threat feels in our bodies. We each react somewhat differently to threat. To some it feels like a punch in the gut, to others it may feel like the oxygen has been sucked from the room. Still others will get a racing heartbeat or sweaty palms. And some may react like Shawn from the beginning of the chapter, with the deafening sound of a locomotive roaring through their heads. For most of us, it will vary from one situation to the next.

Take a minute now to reflect on a time when you felt threatened. Recall the experience with as many of your five senses as you can. Then, scan your body from head to toe and notice any and all sensations. Bringing your conscious awareness to these sensations will enable you to identify them more readily in situations of perceived or real threat. When you sense your body reacting, you will

be more able to rationally evaluate situations that initially show up as threatening. You will be more able to head off false positives, making it more likely that what you say and do next is, in fact, informed by your rational brain and not by an unchecked, instinctive response to a threat.

EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY AND WORK CULTURE

The modern workplace has evolved much faster than our brains and bodies. You don't have to look farther than your boss sending you an email that says simply, "See me," to strike fear into the minds and bodies of most people. Our brain senses ambiguity in this message. Without knowing the valence of the message, that is, whether the message is a positive message or a negative message, the instinctive brain will default to interpreting it as a negative message. This is by design. Here's how it works:

When we encounter ambiguity around a particular situation and don't know if it is negative or positive, our amygdala first perceives the situation as negative or threatening as a protective measure. Assuming the worst can protect us from a possible threat. Threats, as we have already discussed, generate defensiveness.

From an evolutionary biology standpoint, our brains and bodies have a long way to go to catch up with the changes in the modern workplace. It is in our DNA to feel defensive when we feel threatened. In fact, this is an essential part of what it has kept our species alive for hundreds of thousands of years. But in the modern workplace is not always helpful. We get a lot of false positives because we face increasingly ambiguous situations at work.

Being aware of such false positives, and the frequency with which they happen, is one of the best ways to intercept defensive responses when they are not necessary. By bringing conscious and deliberate attention to situations that we perceive as ambiguous, we can begin to get a better read on the valence of the situation—that is, whether it is negative or positive or neutral. From there, we can engage the neocortex and take appropriate action.

AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP

Working with the sympathetic nervous system is not a simple thing. After all, it is part of our autonomic nervous system and runs, for the most part, automatically. There are several things, however, that you can do to manage your sympathetic nervous response and your fight or flight reactions.

The first of these is raising your levels of awareness to your bodily sensations. Whether you are in a stressful situation, a threatening situation, or an enjoyable situation, a deep knowledge and understanding of how your body feels in those situations is powerful information.

Because the amygdala sends information to your body so quickly, your body receives and acknowledges the information before the critical thinking portion of your brain does. The human body is a terrific barometer. When you learn to recognize the information in real time as it shows up in the body, you may gain an edge in regulating your response. You can slow down and deliberately engage your critical thinking skills so that the rational mind and executive function get an opportunity to process the information. That is to say, with a conscious recognition of the information your body is

giving you, you may be able to take more deliberate action instead of merely reacting instinctually.

How can you develop the skill to slow this process down and be more in touch with your fight or flight triggers? I recommend two different techniques, detailed below.

The first practical way to develop this skill is to keep a journal of bodily sensations, often referred to as a body journal. At various intervals throughout the day, check in with your body to see what sensations you are feeling. Jot down the time of day, what you were doing, and what you notice in your body.

Begin with a quick scan of your body, top to bottom. Notice if anything feels off or out of whack. You might notice that there is tension in your shoulders or that your neck hurts. (Did you just relax your shoulders after reading that last sentence?) You might realize that you have been clenching your fists or furrowing your brow. You might find that every time you receive an email from a certain colleague your shoulders raise up to your ears and your upper back feels strained. Maybe their name in the "Sender" column is all it takes to generate that reaction. Or you might find interacting with someone else makes you feel relaxed and at ease. Record these reactions in your journal.

In addition to checking in with your body regularly, also check in when something stressful happens. Your sympathetic nervous system, the fight or flight response, will be triggered and your body will be reacting. Notice what you feel and experience at those times and record them in your journal as well.

The more skill you develop in understanding how fight or flight shows up in your body, the more seamlessly you can react to reevaluate when necessary, and the more likely you will be to ensure that what comes out of your mouth is indeed influenced by your *rational* mind. Your faster reaction time will also help tremen-

dously when you need to correct for a false positive, that is, when you perceive a threat that is not actually threatening.

Secondly, meditation and other mindfulness practices can have a measurable impact on how you respond to stress. Meditation can allow you to cope better in difficult situations. The goal of meditation, after all, is to become more mindful and intentional in where you place your focus and how you respond to stimuli in your environment. Indeed, this goal is in line with having a faster response time to false positive "hits" on the sympathetic nervous system. While there is no shortage of information available on meditation, yoga, and other mindfulness practices, it is worth briefly discussing a simple technique that can help you regulate your emotions in times of stress.

A simple place to start is by spending five minutes in meditation two times each day. Even the busiest person has ten minutes to spare. Set a timer for five minutes and silence the voices in your head, the concerns of the day, and any thoughts that may come up. When thoughts do come up, as they inevitably will, thank them and send them on their way. Do not worry about doing it wrong. Meditation has no right or wrong.

As you get comfortable with creating a still mind for five minutes twice a day, begin to lengthen the amount of time you spend in meditation during each session. Grow your practice in very small increments. Move from five minutes at a time to six minutes at a time. Maintain that practice for a week before adding another minute to each session.

Eventually you will develop mastery in producing a quiet mind on demand. Imagine: silence in your brain anytime you want. No critical voices from your past. No worrying. No wondering what other people will think. No replaying past conversations over and

over in your mind. Just silence and a still mind. When and where you want it. Priceless.

In keeping a body journal and in developing a meditation practice you will develop speed in gaining control over your reactions and be able to communicate more effectively in high stakes situations and in times of stress. Your fight or flight response will no longer be single-handedly running the show. The executive function of your brain will play a more significant role in how you respond.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we've discussed the relationship between the sympathetic nervous system's fight or flight response and your ability to communicate clearly and effectively. When we perceive threat, we are biologically predisposed to respond with defensiveness. If we listen to the cues our body provides when we feel threatened, we can gather more information about what is occurring and in so doing, gain more control.

In the next chapter, we look specifically at stress and its impact on the body and, in turn, communication.

EXERCISES

#1: Your List of Conversations

What are the difficult conversations you have queued up, the ones you have yet to hold? Who are they with and what are they about? Getting that down on paper is the first step toward holding them. It also releases you from some of the angst you have about holding those conversations.

Make a list of the people and topics you have not yet addressed. It's okay if you have more than one topic with the same person. Put them all on the list.

Person	Topic	When

#2: Ghosts of Conversations Past

Many people avoid holding difficult conversations because they remember a time when they had a conversation on a difficult topic that did not go well. When memories of conversations that went poorly continue to haunt you, it will be daunting to try again.

Let's expose the ghosts for what they are: phantoms that belong squarely in the past. Review them one last time, and then let them go so they no longer haunt you.

Make a list of any conversations that you recall that did not go well. Then, remind yourself that that was then and this is now. You are developing a new set of tools to tackle those situations with grace and diplomacy, even if they didn't go well in the past.

Your list:



About the Author

Janel Anderson, PhD is a recognized expert on workplace communication and culture. She helps organizations untangle complex communication and relationship issues so employees and leaders alike can collaborate better and serve their customers more effectively.

Even more importantly, Anderson helps her clients develop new ways of relating to one another at work so they can get products to market faster, shorten sales cycles, and create value for their customers, all while recognizing their own humanity in the process.

Anderson holds a PhD in organizational communication from Purdue University. She has been a manager in a start-up company, a college professor, a director in a global organization, and in 2010 Anderson left her corporate role to found Working Conversations and hasn't looked back.

With clients like 3M, Wells Fargo, Cargill, Delta Dental, General Dynamics, Mayo Clinic, and Polaris, Anderson has helped notable brands improve their communication and culture. In addition, she's worked with hundreds of associations and government groups, sharing techniques on how to communicate more effectively at work.

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