

The Unfear Team: High Stakes Conversations

Dear Reader,

If an unfear team is a jazz band, what, then, is their music? While the specific answer depends on industry and function, we believe that all teams must master one skill: having high stakes conversations, which are often difficult, well. A high stakes conversation is any interaction where we care deeply about its impact on ourselves, other people, or some objective or outcome. Any strategic discussion, brainstorming session, best-practices meeting, results report, etc., can be high stakes and therefore difficult. The teams that master these conversations produce the most extraordinary results.

Identity: What Makes High Stakes Conversations Difficult

Almost all of us have been burned by a high-stakes conversation that went wrong, but few of us can articulate why the conversation turned sour. We struggle with this because we usually believe that a conversation only occurs on a factual level. However, literal “facts” make up only a tiny fraction of most conversations. Instead, we mostly share interpretations of facts. We develop our interpretations through two lenses: our feelings and our identities. For example, a natural risk taker, who takes great pride in their competence and ability to make quick decisions, will likely feel impatient in a protracted decision-making process. They will interpret the fact that it has taken three weeks to make a decision as “we are moving too slowly.” On the other hand, a more risk-averse person, who takes pride in their belief that everyone likes them, might look for confirmation from every source they’re making the right decision. They will interpret the same fact as “we are doing our due diligence and building necessary consensus.”

If neither person recognizes how their identities/feelings impact the conversation, they could both quickly become offended. The risk-taker might perceive their colleague’s reluctance as an attack on their competence, and the risk-averse person might perceive their colleague’s impatience as anger and dislike. If they’re not careful, the conversation will quickly spiral downward, and each person’s bruised egos will prevent them from collaborating to make the best possible decision.

Reflective Listening

Because we interpret everything through our identity/feeling lenses, we often fail to *actually* understand what other people mean. For that reason, the first key to mastering difficult conversations is to learn how to listen not merely *actively* but *reflectively*. To do this, stay alive and curious about your colleagues’ verbal and nonverbal language, and ask clarifying follow-up questions. For example, if a supervisor says it’s fine if you turn in work a little late, but sighs first, ask why they sighed, and if they have an objection, they did not share. Repeat this process enough times, and you will better understand how the other person feels.

Worth thinking about

Usually, we are so accustomed to the filters we use to interpret the world that we barely notice them. When we force ourselves to notice the filters and what stories about our identity we use as a source of self-esteem, it grants us a great deal of perspective. Suddenly, we can better articulate our impulses and perspectives and begin to understand more about how our colleagues interpret the world and perceive us. All of this fosters more effective communication.

Take it to go

In what situations do you feel discounted or attacked when talking to colleagues? What stories do you tell yourself about your value? How do these stories interact with the triggers that upset you in these situations?

[Watch yourself the next time you feel attacked.](#) Ask, how are the stories I tell myself impacting my experience? Then, step outside yourself. Practice reflective listening to truly understand the other person’s perspective. Do you still feel attacked, or can you find some common ground? What becomes possible now?

Questions?

Please contact us and schedule a call if you are interested in applying Unfear to improve your team and organizational culture and effectiveness. We’d love to hear from you.

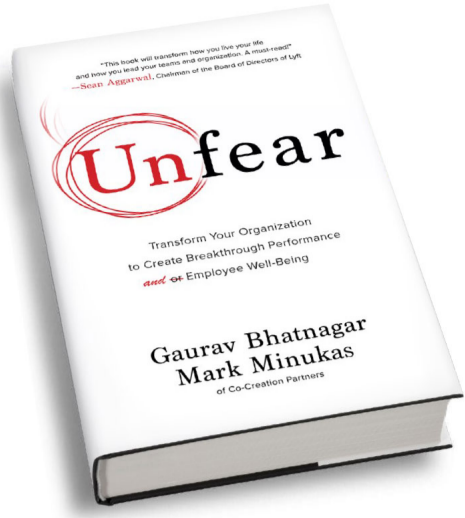
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