

Engaging in Crucial Conversations without Burning Bridges

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Over the years, I've come across multiple situations in which individuals (myself included) have hesitated to share important perspectives, because of concerns about how the information might be received. It's a lot easier to agree with those around us than to offer a different perspective, particularly if we're talking to individuals in senior roles or those with more extensive experience. So, how should one approach these situations? How does one engage in crucial conversations without burning bridges?

In certain business settings, if you don't offer a different perspective during a meeting, your contribution may be considered less valuable. Offering a diverse opinion is an expectation, not an exception, and using rationales like "this is how we've always done it" are not appreciated. Group-thinking is highly discouraged, and brainstorming is very much embraced. In fact, a lot of times, this is how innovation is born, by considering the unthinkable ideas, you know, the ones that are usually met with rolling eyes!

But, you might say, the health care setting is a different environment, one that is risk averse, where patient safety is highly emphasized. We have limited options for working with strategic partners, so we don't want to burn any bridges. The clinical pharmacy world is relatively small, so we don't want anything we say or do to backfire—and what do I say to all that? It's about the "how" as much as it's about the "what"! Content matters, but how you say something or approach a situation matters just as much, if not more.

Let me elaborate by providing you with a simple approach for expressing your "radical" point of view:

1. Identify the common goal of the discussion. What is the thread that brings everyone together? What is the mission/vision for the project/committee work/departmental task, etc.?
2. Determine the problem that everyone is trying to solve. Can everyone agree on that?
3. Explore the options that can be pursued. This is a crucial component of the process, where people need to be encouraged to listen and to not jump to conclusions. This is the brainstorming phase. Encourage everyone to dig deep and to jot down ideas. Create a safe space where diverse opinions are welcomed.
4. Examine the pros and cons of each option. This may include a cost-benefit analysis, exploration of risk tolerance, and budgetary considerations. The more in depth your analysis, the more solid the rationale behind your ultimate decision.
5. Make your final decision based on steps 1–4.

Does this process ring a bell? Well, it's similar to the process we use for drug therapy identification and resolution, and effective, transparent, and respectful communication is engrained at every step of the way. By using a systematic approach to enable crucial conversations, we can take attention away from the individual offering a diverse perspective and focus on the value proposition where it's needed most: to solve an important problem.



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