



The Eikenberg Institute for Relationships
311A West 50th Street
New York, New York 10019

Critical Relational Factors for Promoting and Sustaining Difficult Conversations



Contact Information

Kenneth V. Hardy, Ph.D.
311A West 50th Street
New York, New York 10019
drkvhardy@gmail.com

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Difficult conversations, especially those involving race and other similarly highly charged issues are near impossible to successfully and effectively navigate without either preparation and/or facilitation. These conversations often require *will* and *skill*. The former refers to one's intestinal fortitude, stamina, and bandwidth to participate and remain in difficult conversations even during periods where they appear futile. Skill, on the one hand refers to the techniques and strategies that are amassed and are readily available to be deployed in difficult conversations.

Another salient aspect of skill acquisition is devoted to enhancing knowledge of oneself and how to manage and engage in the effective use of self in difficult conversations. The intersection of will and these skills help to prevent emotional escalation, implosion, and relational cut-off while attempting to participate in difficult conversations.

There are six critical relational factors that one must “master” in order to fully and effectively take part in meaningful and progressive conversations. These factors are metaphorical relational muscles that must be exercised and strengthened to avoid relational atrophy especially when participating in difficult conversations. The more the muscles are exercised the stronger they become. As they continue to develop, so does our ability to have difficult conversations that are progressive and sustainable.

The following is a brief summary of the six factors, which are:

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- Intensity
 - Intimacy
 - Transparency
 - Authenticity
 - Congruency
 - Complexity
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Intensity—refers to a willingness and capacity to develop an increasing level of comfort with discomfort. It means deliberately “stretching” oneself beyond one's normal and customary comfort zone. When making the effort to enhance the capacity for intensity, it is imperative to have an unrelenting and resounding commitment to *asking one question more than one is comfortable asking or making one statement more than one is comfortable making*.

When we only verbalize what we are comfortable stating, we have a tendency to only do what we always do, even when there is compelling data to confirm that it is not effective. While doing what we always do promotes comfort through familiarity, it offers little to promoting a deeper and more sustainable conversation.

In cross-racial conversations, intensity is often difficult to achieve for two principle interrelated reasons: 1) whites tend to conflate “comfort” and “safety,” and 2)

People of Color either withhold the expression of deeply seated authentic feelings that add intensity to a conversation for fear of reprisal by whites, or they express their underlying, often suppressed and accumulated unexpressed feelings in a way that is construed by whites as “threatening.” When whites express feeling “unsafe” in a cross-racial conversation, it is usually virtually impossible for it to continue. This dynamic unfortunately contributes to and perpetuates the ultra-polite, cautious, guarded, and non-substantive conversations that often characterize so many of our attempts to effectively engage with each cross-racially.

Intimacy—is another critical factor that is highly germane to promoting and sustaining meaningful and progressive challenging conversations. It refers to the ability to express vulnerability and *to be* vulnerable. In its purest form, it means approaching the conversation with a spirit of openness and non-defensiveness. The presence of intimacy helps to underscore the important role of reciprocity in relationships—the notion that we are in this together, even in the face of stark differences. It helps to exorcise blame and deliberate shame-inducing responses from the conversation and ultimately from the relationships as well.

In progressive difficult conversations, intensity and intimacy are often inextricable. When intimacy is increased in a conversation, it *de facto* contributes to an increase in intensity. The reverse is NOT true. Thus it is possible to heighten intensity in a conversation without any corresponding increase in intimacy. When

this occurs these are the types of conversations that are prone to rapid escalation without any possibility for meaningful resolution. A major guiding principle that should be exercised is that whenever and wherever intensity is increased, it is essential for intimacy to be as well. Intimacy is the connective tissue, the relational glue, that holds the interaction together especially in the wake of increased intensity. Relational intensity void of intimacy is seldom productive and is virtually always destructive and hurtful to all involved.

Transparency—refers to the willingness to show oneself and to be seen.

Transparency is the major vehicle by which intimacy is achieved. When one is transparent in a conversation there is openness, a willingness to admit, own, and exhibit all parts of oneself. There is a willingness to engage in a process of self-reflection and self-interrogation. It is the willingness to be transparent that makes it possible for one to entertain *the possibility* that one might have some degree of responsibility, accountability, or culpability in a strained relationship or the difficult conversation marked by intransigence.

Transparency involves an interlocking two-step process. On the one hand it involves possessing the willingness to *show oneself*, to let down defenses, and to risk exposing vulnerabilities. The other aspect of transparency centers on the willingness to *be seen*. It is possible to *show one's self* but not want *to be seen*. When this occurs, it makes it difficult to embrace feedback regarding how those with whom one is interacting might perceive one. The

recipient of the feedback insists, often in an unaccepting and argumentative manner, “...Well this is not how I see myself...I am not who you say I am or how you see me” rather than making a concerted effort to consider and conduct an analysis of the possible schism in perceptions.

Another dimension of transparency centers on those who want *to be seen* and ultimately understood while also being reticent to show oneself. The lack of comfort with intimacy and transparency makes it difficult to open up enough to show oneself despite the underlying desire to be genuinely understood. It is virtually impossible to have meaningful conversations when one or more of the participants are withholding parts of themselves from the conversation. The lack of transparency in a conversation not only affects intimacy and intensity but it also makes another critical relational factor, authenticity, difficult to achieve.

Authenticity—refers to the ability to “say what you mean” and “mean what you say.” Authenticity helps to promote transparency. Conversely, it is difficult to be authentic if/when one is unwilling to be transparent. When one fails to be authentic, it inhibits the ability to communicate congruently.

Congruency—is achieved when what one is thinking, saying, and exhibiting behaviorally are perfectly synched. In other words, there is a compelling compatibility and coherence between what is conveyed verbally and non-verbally as well as in what one appears to be thinking. While it is difficult to truly know what another is

thinking, it is surprisingly easy to detect when someone’s thoughts and verbal disclosure are not tightly aligned. It is this lack of congruency that compromises one’s ability to be authentic, and it is the absence of authenticity that is the major deterrent to being congruent.

Complexity—is another critical relational factor that is vital to conducting and sustaining difficult conversations. It refers to the ability to simultaneously hold two seemingly disparate entities. It is the ability to embrace complexity that allows one, for example, to strongly object to the egregious behavior of someone **and** simultaneously find a redeemable quality of trait in the person. Thus it is complexity that enables us to see “the good that is contained in the bad” and vice versa. Complexity facilitates the promotion of *both/and* positioning in difficult conversations and helps to avoid the traps of *either/or thinking* that often prematurely forecloses possibilities and paralyzes interactions.

There is a synergistic interplay that exists between and among these concepts. Thus it is neither prudent nor sufficient to rely on one independent factor to completely transform a difficult conversation. The commitment to effectively participating in a difficult conversation also requires similar dedication to developing some facility and/or mastery with incorporating these critical relational factors into one’s *modus operandi*.