

Easier Said Than Done: Building Bridges When the Conversation Gets Heated

By Yvette Erasmus, PsyD, LP

We've all been there: a conflict-ridden situation suddenly finds us in a confrontation where we feel angry and defensive. When frustrations run high, the words we use with ourselves and others can really hurt. Our lack of self-awareness and inability to communicate effectively can lead to increased abuse and pain. Alternatively, with the right skill set, we can make inroads that build bridges of compassion, trust, and connection with others even while feeling internally triggered. So what exactly is the "right skill set"?

Lashing Out or Leaning In

I wasn't very far into my first career as a teacher before I was called out by one student in front of my entire high school class for being a "terrible teacher" who "didn't know anything" and "didn't care about her students." I lacked the skill set back then to experience that comment as anything other than devastating. Health care workers regularly face similar criticisms from patients, families, or colleagues. Such devastating experiences can happen at the beginning of our careers, but just as often can happen throughout our workplace interactions.

In my ongoing work as a psychologist and consultant, I've come to recognize that there are three options available when fielding a critical or triggering message, be it from a student, patient, or colleague.

We can turn on ourselves by taking things personally and agreeing with the criticism: "Yes, I know ... the problem is I don't know what I'm doing. I'm a new teacher, and I'm not cut out for this. I'm not smart enough to do this job. I don't know the things I should." Judging and blaming ourselves often increases our feelings of guilt and shame and comes at great cost to our own sense of well-being and resilience. When we believe someone else's negative interpretation of who we are, it becomes increasingly difficult to engage with real agency in our own lives, which can lead to distress and depression.

Alternatively, we can judge and blame others. By responding with defensiveness and self-righteousness, we point out that the fault is obviously found in the other party. "You have no right to say that to me; I bend over backwards around here and get paid peanuts to try and teach you something, and you can't even bring a pencil to

class." Judging others is the quickest way to get caught in power struggles destined to bring more anger, misunderstanding, and frustration.

But the third, and often most effective, option is to lean in to our collective human experience, especially the painful parts, and to connect with our own and other's perceptions, feelings, and needs. How is this possible? How can we stay connected to our own humanity, and that of others, when caught in a fraught dynamic?

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Skill #1: Remember It's Not Personal

It is very common, in the middle of a tense and dramatic confrontation, to take the situation personally. What I didn't understand in my first teaching job was the practice of compassion-based detachment. In order to practice compassion-based detachment, we first connect with the parts of ourselves that can witness what is happening, instead of defaulting to the part of ourselves that takes things personally.

Our inner witness-self helps us remember the difference between being responsible for people's pain versus being responsive to their pain. Although we may be fielding another's pain, anger, or distress, we are not personally responsible for that pain, anger, or distress. Remembering that we are only ever responsible for our own choices but not others' feelings can make it easier for us to relax and lean in to the emotions and perceptions that others are experiencing.

Skill #2: Ask a New Question

A common initial reflex during conflict is to wonder where it all went wrong and to rush in to find a solution: "Who's right?" "Who's wrong?" "What should happen next?" These are all typical questions in a situation riddled with high emotion. Unfortunately, these questions often ignore the subtle nuance and complicated dynamics behind intense emotional interactions and are ultimately unhelpful. A much more valuable approach is to ask, "What will help?" This accomplishes something essential: it dissolves the illusion that there are two separate, conflicting sides.

By asking "What will help?" we show interest in working *with* the other party

to find a solution. This immediately releases any power struggle inherent in the conflict. Trying to discover a solution to the conflict together, instead of from two opposing sides, allows everyone to drop the primal need to be "right" and instead redirect our energy into imagining a workable solution.

Skill #3: Focus on Needs

Everything people do is an (often tragic) attempt to meet a deep, universal need, and our feelings are simply data about the state of our needs. For example, when we feel hungry, we need to eat; when we feel tired, we need to sleep. Beyond the needs of our bodies lie the needs of our human spirit: the need for connection, for beauty, for joy, for peace. By tuning in to our feelings and needs, we can align our strategies to meet those needs. (For my list of universal human needs, see <https://bit.ly/3JUFagL>.)

When emotions run high and people are triggered, one of the most powerful de-escalation strategies is to relinquish our lens of judgment and replace it with a "lens of needs." When we focus on the need a person is trying to meet — instead of on the often misguided strategy to meet that need — we build connection and understanding.

Thinking back on the dramatic interaction I had with that outspoken student in my first year of teaching, I can see now that her outburst was a misguided strategy to meet a deep need for mattering. She did not think that she mattered; she did not perceive my care. It's not surprising how quickly situations can become emotionally, verbally, and even physically violent when people do not perceive that they matter. In health care, this is no different. Understanding that human dynamics are driven by our own deep needs and the deep needs of others allows us to reframe our lens around what is needed instead of what is wrong.

Under even the most trying of circumstances, we are able to choose who we want to be: kind, engaged, compassionate, and trauma-informed professionals. While we may not be in control of or responsible for what others do and say, we can still nurture relational conditions that make it more likely for us to experience empathy, care, and compassion in the face of tragedy, disappointment, fear, and loss.

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I wrote a short eBook titled: *The Blame-Free State* in which I described the key mechanics of blame and how to overcome it (see <https://www.francoisbeausoleil.com/resources> for a free download).


The first step to decrease blame is to consider the other person's experience, including what might be emotionally painful for this person. In the example of the employee who declined vaccination, Dr. Wright guessed that this individual may hold the perspective of not trusting the medical community and might be feeling resentment regarding the vaccine mandate. In turn, this could stimulate fear about accepting an injection with no trust in the people who manufactured the vaccination. This initial step is designed to offer an immediate decrease in the intensity of the blame that we feel. Decreasing blame does not necessitate that we agree with the other person; rather, it means that we choose an empathic response rather than a judgmental one.

The next steps involve guessing what matters the most to the other person and reflecting on how we can integrate that information to create a narrative that further decreases the blame. Consider a situation in which you hold someone at fault and use the Blame-Dissolving Sequence (<https://bit.ly/3I5Gaxn>) to see if you experience a shift.

Best Practice 5: Creating Empathic Support Structures

Finally, we can proactively create empathic support structures to receive empathy from others and to practice these skills, especially when we experience a highly activating situation. A mutual relationship in which you can receive (and provide) empathy is paramount to creating new habits that support empathic and compassionate responses and decrease blame. It can be as simple as an agreement to check in with someone a couple of times a day. The ELI outlines suggestions and guidelines to navigate these sometimes challenging conversations at <https://bit.ly/3rLSg91>.

Conclusion

Compassion resilience includes a variety of skills. These five best practices are the foundation of compassionate living that can provide relief in distressing situations and stimulate progress toward resilience and moral wellness. 

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