

CLEAN/N Conversation Worksheet

Dealing with the really difficult conversations

Many difficult conversations can be resolved easily using any combination of the less direct tools discussed thus far. However, when a conflict has risen to the level of dispute or discord, a more structured conversation will be needed and this is what the CLEAN/N approach provides. If you integrate any of the other tools with the CLEAN/N approach, it will be even more effective in resolving the conflict.

In most conflicts, both sides are convinced they are the victim and they have very different interpretations of the facts. The CLEAN/N model guides both parties to a healthy dialogue.

The challenge for resolving a dispute or discord is that both sides have added multiple layers of interpretation to the facts of the situation. These interpretations are focused on the other party's intentions. Also, each party's Reticular Activating System guarantees that their interpretations will differ. More importantly, each side will see themselves as the victim and the other party as the villain.

The CLEAN/N approach unravels these opposing interpretations. This guides both parties to a healthier dialogue which opens the door to a better result for both sides.

Using the worksheet

You can prepare for a difficult conversation by completing as many sections of this worksheet as seems appropriate. At the very least, complete the "List the Facts" and the "Share your meaning" sections. Just these two sections alone will change how you approach the conversation.

If you have a conversation that unexpectedly becomes emotional and difficult, chances are the conversation did not end well. When that happens, use the worksheet to re-think the situation. After completing most or all of the worksheet, you can ask for a "do-over." When you have the follow-up conversation, the effort you put in completing the worksheet will change the conversation and you will have a much better outcome.

The value of scripting a conversation is that when a conversation becomes emotional, clear thinking deteriorates. It takes less energy to recall something than to construct a new idea or statement. If you have used this worksheet, you are in a better position to respond to the difficult conversation because you are not putting the same energy demand on your brain.

Components of the Worksheet

Can we talk?

The CLEAN/N approach begins by asking, "Can we talk?" This gives the other party some sense of control. There may be legitimate reasons for not holding the conversation "this minute" and asking permission to have the conversation demonstrates respect for the other party's priorities and context.

You should start creating and maintaining safety in this step and this should continue throughout the conversation. Safety tools consist of: showing that you care, apologizing if there has been a transgression, establishing a shared purpose, or using a contrast tool. These are all good tools for creating safety. They can be used individually or you can combine them for an even greater effect.

Apologizing is a familiar tool and does not require a lot of explanation. Showing that you care is also familiar but there is one aspect of it that is worth looking at more closely.

Saying something kind or clarifying your respect for the other person is a straightforward strategy for showing that you care. However, we don't always think about listening as a tool for demonstrating caring - but being listened to is a gift we all crave. To help you to get past just hearing the other person to truly listening in a way that builds trust, I suggest using the acronym: CARE to listen.

- C – Seek clarity by asking open-ended questions.
- A – Assure the other person by verbalizing your positive feelings for them.
- R – Rephrase key concerns that the other party may have shared.
- E – Encourage the other party to continue sharing with filler words and nods.

Creating shared purpose and contrasting also require a little explanation.

It is hard to talk to someone when they are on the other side of a wall. When you establish a shared purpose, it puts you and the other party on the same side of the wall. It makes it clear that you are both working toward the same outcome, it's just your strategies that are different. A simple statement such as, "We both want this project to succeed" can remind both parties that they share the same goal.

Contrast statements are the most powerful tool for creating safety but they are not something you learned growing up. Developed by the authors of *Crucial Conversations*, this tool creates safety by clarifying your intention. In a discord or dispute, the other party sees you as the villain, someone who is intending to do them harm. The contrast statement begins with a clear statement that you are not intending harm and then it specifies exactly what your intention is. For example: "I don't want to control your personal style; what I do want is to be sure you understand the dress code."

Listing facts

The next step is to list the facts. Facts are objective and can be verified. Facts can be captured by a video camera - either you smiled or you didn't; you stood up or you stayed seated. By listing the facts, you create a base of agreement because they are devoid of differing interpretations.

Explaining your meaning

Once you have listed the facts, you can now share your own interpretation of those facts. What meaning did you draw from the sequence of facts? What are you feeling? Your interpretation of those facts is almost

CLEAN/N Conversation

- Can we talk?**
- List your facts.**
- Explain your meaning.**
- Ask for their meaning.**
- Neutralize Emotions**
- Next Steps**

guaranteed to be different from the other party's interpretation. Because of this, it is not unusual for the other party to feel defensive when you share your meaning. If you detect defensiveness in either body language or verbal response, you will need to create safety by using one or more of the safety tools before continuing the discussion.

Asking for their meaning

Since the meaning you attached to the facts is most probably different from the other party's meaning, you must ask them to share their version of what the facts meant to them. This is not yet the time to problem-solve. If you try to solve the problem before the other party has had the opportunity to share their meaning, you will increase their resistance. They need the chance to share their perspective.

If you stay quiet and listen carefully to their story, one of two things will happen. The conflict might resolve itself because you now have information you were previously missing. The other outcome is that you now have a better understanding of the other person's perspective and they feel heard. You now have a better base to work from for problem-solving.

Neutralizing emotions

While listening to the other party's meaning, it is not unusual for you or the other person's defensive emotions to increase. Once again, if this happens, safety must be restored before proceeding to problem-solving. Safety can be restored using the C.A.S.H. system:

- C – Clarify your intentions - contrasting
- A – Apologize when appropriate
- S – Show that you care - C.A.R.E. to listen is a great strategy for showing that you care.
- H – Highlight your shared purpose and/or goals.

Next steps

The final step is to create a plan. This is the problem-solving phase of the model. At this point, both sides have been heard and you have built a foundation of respect. From this base, a win-win result can be discovered.

CLEAN/N Conversation Worksheet

1. Can we talk?

How will I ask permission to have the conversation about the conflict?

Which safety tools will I use? [*Using more than one tool is always more effective.*]

- Clarify intentions - contrast statement
- Apology
- Show that I care
- Highlight a shared purpose

How will I clarify my intentions?

If appropriate, how will I apologize?

How might I use CARE (Clarity, Assuring, Rephrasing and Encouraging) to listen?
[*Using CARE to listen is a good strategy for further demonstrating that you care.*]

What shared purpose or goal can I highlight?

2. List your facts.

[Begin by brainstorming all the facts in the scenario and then place a check mark beside the facts that you will present in the conversation with the other party. There are always more facts than you will use but listing them all out will help you to identify the most important facts.]

3. Explain your meaning.

[Describe what the facts mean to you. What conclusions have you drawn? What is your interpretation of the facts?]

4. Ask for the other party's meaning.

[How will you ask for their perspective or meaning? Make your ask simple and be careful to avoid problem-solving here.]

5. Neutralize emotions.

[Sharing your meaning and hearing the other party's meaning often heightens emotions; you will usually need to be ready to reinstate safety at this point.]

Which safety tools will I use? *[Using more than one tool is always more effective.]*

- Clarify my intentions - contrast statement
- Apology
- Show that I care
- Highlight a shared purpose

How will I clarify my intentions?

If appropriate, how will I apologize?

How might I use CARE (*Clarity, Assuring, Rephrasing and Encouraging*) to listen?

Using CARE to listen is a good strategy for further demonstrating that you care.

What shared purpose or goal can I highlight?

Next Steps:

What next steps might I propose?

[Be careful to be open to other ideas that might surface later when you have the conversation. This is just some preliminary thinking.]