



CHAPTER 3

The Art of Mutual Agreements

Starting the Conversation

I remember taking a parenting class when my boys were young. The big takeaways from the class were the requirement to tell your child what the consequences of their behavior would be and to be clear on what you expected from them. I recall my boys' mother and me saying to each other on numerous occasions, "We can't get mad at them if we weren't clear with our expectations."

Sometimes, it sounded like, “Don’t punish them if you didn’t tell them they would be punished.”

When my sons were teenagers, I became involved with training salespeople. Three rules* jumped out at me because they are so eloquent in their simplicity.

- ◆ First, people don’t get mad at you when you tell them what you are going to do and they agree to it.
- ◆ Second, you shouldn’t get mad at someone for doing something you didn’t tell them they couldn’t do.
- ◆ Third, no “mutual mystification.”** Make sure all parties to the conversation have a clear understanding of what was said and what is going to happen next.

Basically, these were the same strategies I learned in the parenting class. When you start a conversation, get agreements up front about what you and the other person want to happen and what you don’t want to happen as you talk; then, confirm what you both decided.

When you find yourself in a conversation with someone who did something you didn’t want them to do, ask yourself this, “When did I tell them I didn’t want them to do

* Source: Sandler Training.

** *The Sandler Rules*, #3.

that?” The follow-up question is, “If I did tell them, when did they agree not to do it?”

Let’s spend some time on the key things you need to get agreement on when starting a conversation. When I say “conversation,” I am not talking about the chitchat or banter that people often engage in with each other. Conversation in this context means a purposeful interaction between people to persuade or exchange required information essential in decision making.

Did you catch the clarification above as an example of no mutual mystification? Are you clear on the type of conversations we are now discussing?

Purpose

All participants in the conversation need to have a clear understanding of its purpose. If you and your spouse want to have a conversation about planning your next Hawaiian vacation, make sure you both agree to discuss the planning. If the conversation is more serious, such as deciding how to discipline the kids, be crystal clear on why you are having the conversation. If you want to have a conversation with your teenagers or your teenagers want to have a conversation with you about curfews, be sure you all know this is the purpose. Stick to the purpose of the

conversation. Do your best not to get sidetracked on other issues unrelated to your stated and agreed-upon purpose.

Don't forget that your Nurturing Parent ego state can help set the stage. "Thanks for taking the time to plan our trip to Hawaii with me," sounds much better than, "Sit your butt down and help me plan this Hawaii trip!" How you open the conversation can set the tone for what is to come.

When setting the purpose of the conversation, there is no wrong purpose. You have the right to discuss whatever you feel the two (or more) of you need to discuss. The strategy is to make sure you all agree to the purpose of the conversation before you jump into the conversation. This will ensure no one is surprised.

Few things are worse than hearing, "We need to talk," or "Do you have time to talk?" Add what it is you want to talk about immediately so the other person can determine if now, or later, is a better time to discuss the topic. A better way to begin could be, "We need to talk about..." Providing a subject is a clue to the purpose of the conversation.

Time

The next item to be very clear about is the amount of time required or requested. Conversations have a way

of expanding or contracting to fill the amount of time given. If no specific duration is agreed upon, a conversation can drag on for what seems like an eternity. When you let people know how much time you need of their undivided attention, they are more apt to give it to you. You must make sure your time request is reasonable. If the other person feels that you are asking for more time than is reasonable or more than they are willing to give, there is a good chance they will decline or, if they agree, they will not be totally focused.

It is OK to schedule a time to discuss a topic. It could sound like this: “Do you have 15 minutes to start planning our trip to Hawaii?” Notice that this combines the purpose with the request for time. If the answer is “yes,” go forward with your discussion. If the answer is “no,” simply ask, “When can we schedule 15 minutes so we can start planning?” If you need 30 minutes, ask for 30 minutes. Schedule the time and have the conversation as planned.

When the scheduled time arrives, start the conversation with nurturing. “Thanks for taking the time to work on a plan for our trip to Hawaii. Are you still good for the 15 minutes?” Confirm the time in case something may have changed. It shows you respect the other person’s time. Be prepared to end the conversation in 15 minutes.

If you need to schedule more time, do so and continue the conversation later. Agreement on the amount of time is crucial.

Carefully choose the time to have your conversation depending on the purpose or topic. The more serious or potentially emotional the conversation, the more reason to choose or schedule a time when both are rested and relaxed. A tough conversation after a not-OK day at work is a recipe for disaster.

A final thought on time. For the important conversations, do your best to schedule uninterrupted time. Turn off smart phones, televisions, and computers (unless you need one of these tools to gather information during your discussion).

Their Expectations

In the beginning of your conversations, be sure to discover the important or key areas the other people are expecting to cover. Remember, your goal is to understand them first, which will allow you to better focus the exchange.

When you understand what they want to talk about or their key issues regarding the topics, you will get a clue as to how to proceed. If the issues they prefer to discuss are not the same as yours, it is OK. At this point, you only want

to uncover their topics. There is no wrong agenda or expectations for them to have regarding the conversation. Once they share their concerns, review to be sure there is mutual agreement concerning their expectations.

It might sound like this:

You: “Thanks for taking the time to chat about our vacation to Hawaii. I know we decided yesterday to start this process today. Are you still OK with the 30 minutes we planned for today?”

Other: “Sure, now is a good time.”

You: “Great, I’ll turn off my cell phone so we don’t get interrupted.”

Other: “Makes sense; so will I.”

You: “So what are the key areas you think we should focus on?”

Other: “Let’s start with airfare and times.”

You: “OK. So if we get through the airfares and times to depart and arrive, that would be a good start?”

Other: “Oh yeah, a great start.”

What has happened, in the above idealistic conversation, is that you have involved them, which allows them

to feel ownership of the trip and the planning. Did you notice how I also included purpose and duration in the dialog? You also confirmed, via mutual agreement, what they consider to be important. Beware of your Critical Parent ego state when you want to tell them how off-base they are for not choosing the issues you think are more important. Stay in your Adult ego state and acknowledge their right to have an opinion.

Your Expectations

Now is the time for you to get your expectations on the table. Both parties will benefit by knowing each other's expectations. It could sound like this: "It makes sense to get the dates and airfare squared away, but I also want to make sure we spend some time deciding on a hotel."

If you want to discuss different aspects of the topic other than what the other person came up with, the beginning of the conversation is the time to let them know your desire to explore additional related issues. It wouldn't make sense if you want to talk about buying a new car if the purpose of the conversation is to plan the vacation. Or would it? What if buying a new car affects the budget for the vacation? Now it becomes a related topic. All conversational strategies are situational. What to include or

leave out is determined by the actual context in which the conversation occurs.

A major expectation, which is always a positive, is an increased understanding of the other person. To accomplish understanding, there is a good chance you will need to ask questions. Get permission to ask questions. It could be as simple as this: “Just to make sure I don’t get confused, is it OK if I ask questions as we go along?”

Outcomes

At the end of your conversation, what are the possible outcomes? What decisions will need to be made? Conversations will be more productive and achieve more positive outcomes when you know in advance what options are available. The outcomes fall into one of two categories: *yes* or *no*.

A *yes* and a *no* can have many different meanings. A *yes* can mean that a conflict has been resolved, that information has been exchanged, or that you and the other person agree to continue the conversation.

In the previous example, it could sound like this: “So, at the end of our 30-minute planning session, we should be able to nail down our flights, decide which hotel, and

have a good idea of what needs to be done next. Make sense to you?”

Alert!

Mutual agreements are not "one and done." They should be occurring throughout the entire conversation.

The Five Key Components: PLATE

An easy way to remember the five key components of getting the conversation starts with the mnemonic PLATE.* Think of it this way. To have a civilized dinner, you first put the food on the plate. The same is true for a civilized conversation. Get the mutual agreements on the PLATE, up front, before you get started.

- ◆ **Purpose.** Letting the other person know why you want to have the conversation is required. You can't wait until time runs out and surprise them with a purpose of which they knew nothing. Remember,

* Source: Sandler Training.

no mutual mystification. Be up front with why you want to engage in the conversation.

- ◆ **Limit the time.** You must agree on the time limit of the conversation and live up to that agreement. If you need more time, set another mutual agreement as to how much more time is needed, when you will continue, and what else needs to be discussed. You could also have agreed to more time in the beginning.
- ◆ **Agenda of their expectations.** Discover what is important to them first. Even though it may be your desire to have the conversation, allow them to go first. Once you know what is important to them, you might decide to alter your approach.
- ◆ **Topics.** Let the other person know your expectations of what you want to discuss or not to discuss. Always get permission to ask questions so you can understand what is important to them. Get the truth on the table. Let them know exactly what you want to talk about and what you will be doing during the conversation, like asking questions. If both understand the concepts of the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states, I like to add this question: “Can we do our best to stay in the Adult ego state?” Tough

conversations make it very easy to slip into Critical Parent or Rebellious Child ego states.

- ◆ **Eventual goal.** Share what you hope the outcome of the conversation will be. Perhaps it is resolution to a problem or agreement on a plan of action. The point is to have a goal to go for in the conversation defined up front, in the beginning of the conversation. This will certainly help keep you on topic.

Mutual Agreement

If for some reason the current conversation needs to be continued in the future, mutual agreements still apply. To start the next conversation properly, the end of this conversation should have a mutual agreement about the purpose, timing, expectations, and probable outcomes of the next conversation.

The art of mutual agreements is not a one-and-done deal. Mutual up-front agreements are obvious ones, but don't forget to formulate mutual agreements as needed throughout the conversation as both parties agree to concepts, duties, responsibilities, and compromises. You also need to agree if there is another conversation needed for a resolution regarding the issue being discussed.