Is This Really a Hard Conversation or Something Else?

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Nothing important comes with instructions.

—James Richardson

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS PROCESS

Something doesn't feel right. Something isn't going well. It isn't "working." It might not have been okay for some time. And, now is the time to speak up. So you think. But take pause. Before you jump into a hard conversation, here are a few questions to ask yourself. Ask yourself these questions as a checklist, perhaps—in order to place a "sandbox" around the challenge so you know it is truly a hard conversation as is described in this book, and not something else.

Is this something that is actually illegal, unethical? Is this behavior harming children? Is the action unlawful or going against policy of the school or district?

If an employee is drinking on the job, or texting children in an inappropriate way (sexually or being overly personal), or stealing, for example, those behaviors are *beyond* the type of hard conversation discussed in this book. If illegal or unethical actions are being taken, one needs to contact supervisors, human resources, or another appropriate organization. In these scenarios, the conversation that needs to take place is a "cease and desist" conversation or a "thank you, you are done here" conversation. Safety is at risk. These types of conversations aren't discussed in this book, but they are critical to have. Seek assistance. This book addresses *other* types of conversations.

What about hard conversations with individuals with mental illness or employees with dementia? Those suspected of being in an emotional state that is unstable and unsafe for students to be around? Those conversations are *also* beyond the boundaries of this book and need to be handled by those who have the expertise to manage the conversations in a humane, professional, and appropriate manner. Know who to go to when things grow beyond your purview. HR offices often know where to go in these cases.

Is this actually a clarifying conversation and not a hard conversation?

One of my favorite quotes of all time with regard to hard conversations work is from Blaine Lee. He says, "Almost all conflict is the result of violated expectations." The question I always ask is, "Does the other person know the expectations?" If so, then, if the expectations were violated, we could choose to move to a hard conversation. If not, a clarifying conversation needs to come first.

"Clarity First, Accountability Follows" Blog for *Education Week*

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2014/08/clarity_first_accountability_follows.html

We so often think we have been clear. We should be able to speak up and judge and express ourselves. Again, take pause. Did we *actually* make it clear what is and isn't part of the work? Did the job descriptions get reviewed this school year? Have we revisited the group norms for how we work together? With new positions in our schools, often with coaching roles or teacher on special assignment roles, we write at the bottom of the job description a phrase such as "other duties as assigned," and that part of the description grows ever bigger as the year moves on, but true clarification of what those duties were never happened. Not good.

I worked with one new principal who was frustrated that the team leaders at his middle school "weren't doing their jobs" until he discovered there was never a job description written. And so what did it mean to "not do your job"? Fuzzy.

We need to be "two feet in the present" with our work, and clarifying conversations need to take place before hard conversations. Clarity before accountability.

Don't Use "Fuzzy" Words

Don't presume you and your colleagues have the same definitions for the following words or many others. Articulate what you mean.

Prepare, Early, Professional, Engage, Inform, Communicate, Practice, Team Player, Initiative, Leadership, Timely, Connect

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Is this a problem that can be solved or a polarity that needs to be managed?

We think we have many problems in our schools today. For example, a teacher is not "following" the curriculum. He is labeled a "renegade" or a

"cowboy." Perhaps he needs alignment with the curriculum timeline, but does that mean we don't value his autonomy in other choices that he makes? I bet in this case as in many others in schools we aren't dealing with a problem that is solvable but a polarity that needs to be managed. In this situation, we aren't completely against autonomy in all ways; we just want a little more alignment in this one way.

Polarities are prominent in many of the debates and conflicts we have in our schools today. Should we focus on the social-emotional needs of students or the academic needs of students? Should we care about getting things done or care about the people who are doing the work? It isn't an either-or. Like inhaling and exhaling (you can't do one without the other), polarities are interdependent. They cannot be totally one-sided. Instead of getting too indignant and pushing your heels in on your side of the argument, realize there is no problem to be solved because in fact, we are facing a polarity that needs to be *managed*. Perhaps someone has "gone off the bubble" in one direction or another and needs to find more of a balance, but we cannot assume we can have one hard conversation and all will be solved. Some things are just not solvable. Just as we need to inhale and exhale and can't do one without the other, knowing the difference between a polarity and a problem will help you to better understand the challenge ahead.

Jane Kise is a master at untangling the challenges we face and determining if they are solvable problems or manageable polarities. Kise's work *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking in Our Schools* is an excellent book that "provides tools and processes for avoiding those pendulum swings by listening to the wisdom of multiple points of view" (Kise, 2014, p. 2). Look at the text box below to see if you are actually trying to solve something with a hard conversation that is truly unsolvable and needs some additional discussion in order to be better managed instead.

Common Polarities in Education

Not either-or but "Yes, and":

- Autonomy and collaboration
- Team relationships and team tasks
- Clarity and flexibility
- Continuity and change
- Conditional respect and unconditional respect
- Work priorities and home priorities
- Needs of students and needs of staff
- Teacher as lecturer and teacher as facilitator
- Centralization and decentralization
- School responsibility and social responsibility

—From *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences:
Polarity Thinking in Our Schools,* Jane Kise (2014)

Is this *my* conversation to have or should someone else be having it?

You might find yourself thinking, "I personally need to handle this." And you could be right. *You* do need to take action. The question is to whom should you be speaking. Instead of talking directly to the individual you think you should be talking to might you need to be talking to someone else? Do you need to have a hard conversation *up?*

Co-presenting with a director, higher up than myself within the hierarchy of the school district, I often struggled with extensive absences of members of our team at our meetings. Was it my conversation to have with those team members or was it the director, who was higher up in the hierarchy than myself, who should have those conversations? She had more "pull" than I did. Sometimes it is someone above you with whom you need to speak, not the person you initially wanted to address. Sometimes you discover a bigger conversation happening across the organization and whatever you wanted to talk about is actually a systemic problem. Something hasn't been clarified from above. It doesn't mean you shouldn't speak up. The question is to whom.

Should I have a coaching conversation instead of a hard conversation? Is this conversation one in which to use humble inquiry instead?

Edgar Schein, author of *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (2013) and *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help* (2009), observes that many of us in higher-status roles often default to telling or into "confrontational inquiry." Instead of speaking so directly, consider being "here and now humble" and put yourself in a vulnerable place, admitting dependency on the other and shifting to a truly curious space that brings you to a space of questioning, not *addressing.* Admittedly, our task-oriented, high-speed culture of accomplishment seems incongruent with slowing down and "getting curious," but if you think sitting down as equals and asking honest questions might lead to the outcome you hope for, you could consider inquiry instead of a hard conversation.
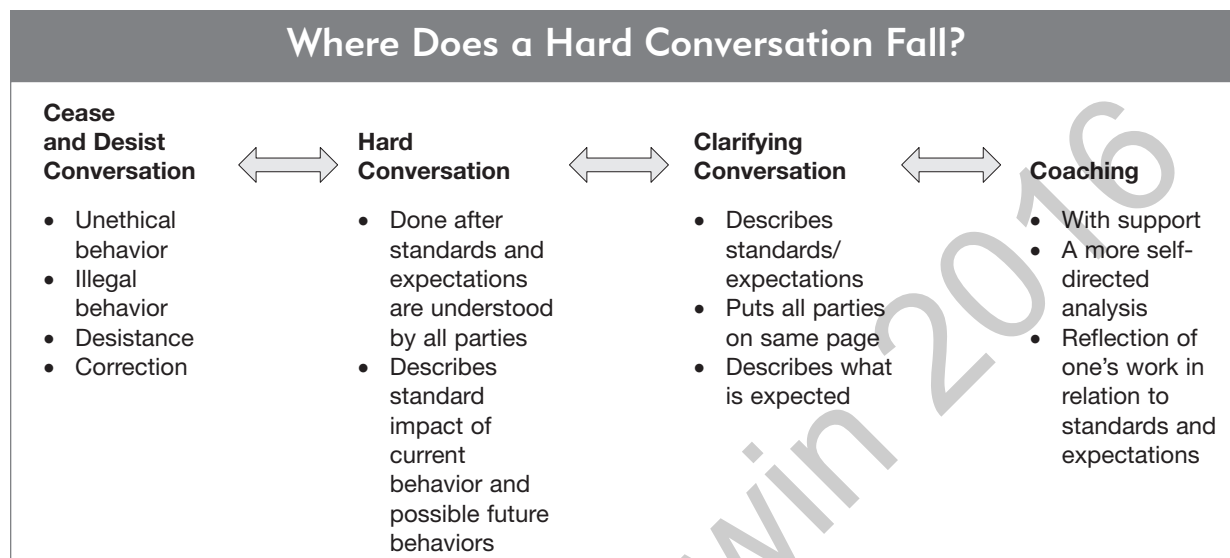
These are not the only questions to ask yourself before you continue with the planning of a hard conversation, but they are good ones to consider. I always consider defaulting to coaching, curiosity, and question asking as my go-to communication style.

Yet, if something is

- educationally unsound,

- physically unsafe, or

- emotionally damaging,

and you think a conversation with declarative sentences versus question asking would be best, then move forward with planning this type of hard conversation.

There are so many types of conversation to have, so be sure you know which one to start with. See below for a visual representation of where a hard conversation could fall in the scheme of all types of conversations.

Where Does a Hard Conversation Fall?

Cease and Desist Conversation	⟺	Hard Conversation	⟺	Clarifying Conversation	⟺	Coaching
• Unethical behavior • Illegal behavior • Desistance • Correction		• Done after standards and expectations are understood by all parties • Describes standard impact of current behavior and possible future behaviors		• Describes standards/ expectations • Puts all parties on same page • Describes what is expected		• With support • A more self-directed analysis • Reflection of one's work in relation to standards and expectations

Note: There is no single direction for having conversations correctly. One can move back and forth on the continuum as needed.

THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES . . .

Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help by Edgar H. Schein, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009

Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling by Edgar H. Schein, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013

Unleashing the Positive Power of Our Differences: Polarity Thinking in Our Schools by Jane A. G. Kise, Corwin, 2014