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The majority of the work in any conflict conversation is work we do on ourselves.

Purposeful Communication

A Role Play

by Judy Ringer

“I’m sick and tired of HR’s red tape. I need this employee now, not next month. My department suffers while you drag your feet trying to get references I don’t need. I want THIS person. Get off the stick and make it happen!”

OK! Jack is trying to communicate an important need. What’s his likelihood of being heard? You’re right if you said “not so great.” Unless the HR rep herself is a skilled communicator, this conversation is likely to go downhill fast.

A Checklist for Difficult Conversations

The majority of the work in any conflict conversation is work we do on ourselves. No matter how well the conversation begins, staying in charge of me, my purpose, and my emotional energy is the key to a successful outcome.

You can prepare for a difficult conversation by clarifying your intentions and assumptions. Then this simple 4-step model will help you stay centered and constructively shape how you are and what you say.

Step #1: Inquiry

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don’t know anything, and try to learn as much as you can about your opponent/partner and his or her point of view.

Step #2: Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment means showing that you've heard and understood. Try to understand the other person so well you can make his argument for him. Then do it. Explain back to him what you think he's really going for.

Step #3: Advocacy

When you sense that your "opponent" has expressed all his energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that he missed? Help clarify your position without minimizing his.

Step #4: Problem-Solving

Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful. Ask your opponent/partner what he thinks would work. Whatever he says, find something that you like and build on it. If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry.

Practice, Practice, Practice

The art of conversation is like any art—with continued practice, you acquire skill and comfort.

So what might Jill say if she were able to stay in charge of herself, her purpose, and her emotional energy in the face of Jack's verbal attack? Let's try one possible scenario, using our 4-step model.

JILL: Jack, I will certainly do my best. You obviously like this person and want them on your payroll as soon as possible. (Acknowledgment)

JACK: That's it. Absolutely.

JILL: Do you have all the references you need? (Inquiry)

JACK: I have plenty. I'll give them to you if you like.

JILL: Great. Is there anything else I should know? (Inquiry)

JACK: Just get the job done, Jill. I can't wait around for this to happen.

JILL: Jack, I get how important this is to you and your department (Acknowledgment). And our company requires due diligence in hiring new employees. (Advocacy) This process protects you, me, the company and the employee, and if I don't do what I'm supposed to, it could come back to haunt all of us. (Advocacy; Mutual Purpose). I will get to work on this immediately. That I promise. And I'll follow up with an email at every stage of the process. How does this sound? (Problem-solving)

JACK: I want this person now.

JILL: What would you have me do, Jack? (Inquiry; Problem-solving)

JACK: I don't know... If you can promise me you'll start right away and stay in touch at every opportunity, I guess that's all I can expect. But if you don't, I swear I'll be on the phone to you.

JILL: Fine, and I'll answer. Jack, I hope the next time you need something from HR you'll feel you can just ask. It doesn't help to start off our conversations as if we were opponents in a contest. I'm trying to accomplish the same things you are, and I'll do whatever I can to support you and your department. (Advocacy; Mutual Purpose) Okay?

JACK: Okay. Thanks, Jill.

Reversing Roles

Now, let's try it from the other side. What if Jack, realizing the importance of getting his message across, had started his conversation using the 4-step model?

JACK: Hi, Jill. Thanks for taking the time to meet with me about what feels like an important request (Purpose; Respect)

JILL: Hey, no problem. Thanks for calling ahead to set aside the time. What can I do to help?

JACK: Well, here's the deal. I need a new tech person for my department and I needed her yesterday. I should have seen it coming but didn't. Now I'm desperate. The good news is I have identified the person I want, and she's perfect for the job and ready to start tomorrow, which is ideally what I'd like to happen – I'm not kidding. (Advocacy) What do I need to do to get her on board right away? (Inquiry)

JILL: You know what's required, Jack. I can't just make this happen tomorrow. I've got references to request, interviews to hold, and more. I can't bypass the system. You remember what happened last year when we did that for Mike, right? My department got into all kinds of trouble when his employee didn't work out.

JACK: I remember. That's why this new system of checks and balances, right? (Acknowledgment)

JILL: Yes, exactly.

JACK: Listen, I have references – can that help? (Advocacy; Inquiry)

JILL: It doesn't matter. I may be able to use some of them, and I may still need to get others that the company insists on – former supervisors and so on.

JACK: So maybe I can help by giving you what I have? (Acknowledgement; Inquiry). What else can I do to speed things up? (Inquiry; Problem-solving)

JILL: Well, yes, give me anything you have on this person – references, resume, whatever. If you can get them to me right away, I'll get started today.

JACK: Anything else I can do? (Inquiry)

JILL: Not that I can think of right now, but I'll keep you posted.

JACK: Great. Thanks, Jill. Just to confirm our discussion, I will get you all the information I have, and you'll begin today to do whatever you can to expedite the vetting and hiring process. Yes? (Problem-solving)

JILL: Yes.

JACK: Would you mind emailing me at the end of the day to let me know how things are going, and maybe again in a couple of days? (Problem-solving)

JILL: I can do that.

JACK: Thanks, Jill, I really appreciate your willingness to go after this for me.

JILL: You're welcome. I'll do my best.

What are the chances that Jill will do her best? Pretty good, I'd say. She's been treated with respect, her position has been acknowledged, and she has a sense that she'll be helping someone that she also respects.

Whether sender or receiver, your power will always derive from the clarity and positive intention you bring to your communication challenges.

Download the pdf version of [Purposeful Communication](#)

Read additional articles on conflict and communication, including a [longer version of the 4-step model](#). You may also find the following helpful:

- [Turn Enemies Into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace](#), by Judy Ringer
- [Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict](#), by Judy Ringer
- [Managing Conflict in the Workplace: An Aiki Approach](#) (CD), by Judy Ringer
- [The Magic of Conflict](#), by Thomas F. Crum (www.aikiworks.com)
- [Difficult Conversations](#), by Stone, Patton, and Heen (www.triadcgi.com)
- [Crucial Conversations](#), Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler (vitalsmarts.com)

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About the Author

Judy Ringer is a conflict and communication skills trainer, black belt in Aikido, and founder of [Power & Presence Training](#) and [Portsmouth Aikido](#). Would you like free tips and articles every month? [Subscribe to Ki Moments!](#)

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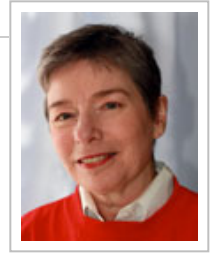
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ABOUT ME

The title of my book, *Turn Enemies Into Allies: The Art of Peace in the Workplace*, says it all. Through interactive presentations and individual coaching, I'll help you transform conflict by changing your relationship to it. Aikido is the metaphor we'll use to become more intentional and less reactive, to communicate directly and respectfully, and to create your life and work on purpose.

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ABOUT KI

Ki (pronounced "key") is Japanese for universal energy or life force; it's the central syllable in Aikido and the symbol you see in my logo.



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