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Tough Questions: Recognize and Resolve Communication Breakdown

ABSTRACT

This column discusses six tools for recognizing and resolving communication breakdown.

J Contin Educ Nurs 2008;39(2):57.

We all have experienced a breakdown in communication with someone during which we totally “lost it.” Think about the last time you were in reaction. It may have been in a classroom or learning situation when an upset student asked an angry or irate question. It may have been during a family argument of some type with either a significant other or children. It may have been in a difficult workplace situation with coworkers or a boss. It may have been with a friend. Friendships are sometimes never repaired after such breakdowns.

When there is a communication breakdown in the workplace, it is important to understand what went wrong and how you contributed to what did not work. A breakdown during which you totally lose it usually occurs when you are surprised or caught totally off guard or “blind sided” by another person. In this situation, an angry or accusatory question or statement may be spoken. When your response is dismissive or sarcastic, it exacerbates high levels of emotion that lead to defensiveness.

There can be physiological responses in these stressful situations that provide clues that a problem is emerging. Heat may rise in your neck or face. The tonality and vol-

ume of your voice may increase. Once you learn these signs, you can choose a different response. The following tools could be helpful:

Recognize That You Are In Reaction. It takes time to learn your response and to recognize when you are starting to lose it. This is a critical aspect of learning how to correct situations in which you have lost it.

Feel It! Get In Touch With It! Recognize the feelings that can occur. There could be feelings of fear or thoughts of fleeing (fight or flight). There could be feelings of immobilization. It is okay to feel the surprise and shock and to remember other situations in which you had similar responses and what you learned. Later you can also institute a process of self-reflection to determine what can be learned about such situations.

See What the Truth Is. Determine the root cause of the flight, fight, or freeze. Often, it is experiences that occurred when you were not as resourceful as you are as a fully functioning adult. It is helpful to understand the source of the feelings so that you can choose different responses.

Have Compassion for Self. We are hardest on ourselves. Most of us envision doing things perfectly. Although we know this is not reality, that does not prevent us from wishing it were. It is important to realize that we are all on a journey of personal growth and learning. Because we are learning and practicing, we need to be gentle with ourselves. If you “blow it” in any given situation,

simply know you will have to own your part of what does not work.

Experience the Safety of Being Vulnerable. One of the most difficult things for instructors or presenters is to be vulnerable rather than the expert. It seems antithetical to be safe through being vulnerable. However, the more humanity we demonstrate, the more others are apt to understand our foibles and give us space to be human.

Choose Love for Self. Most of us have a little voice some think is our conscious that delivers negative messages when we have not acted according to our full potential. This little voice says things like, “You certainly blew that one” or “That was a stupid thing to say.” It would be great to have a little voice delivering positive messages such as, “You really did that well,” “Think how much you learned from this event,” or “You can have a better relationship with this person because of the way you handled this issue.” These messages exemplify choosing love or compassion for oneself.

When you lose it, an apology is mandatory. A heartfelt apology will go a long way toward healing a difficult situation. When you can be positive and compassionate with yourself, realizing that you, as the presenter, are learning along with the participants, you role model what really works about communication, relationships, and the use of questions.

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