

Honest Conversation, Cricket White, Tools for Change Caux 2009

The power of words is immense – have you ever had a friend or family member say to you: “We need to talk”? It can be scary, intimidating ...and you don’t necessarily know what they are going to talk about!

And in the spirit of honest conversation, I must tell you that to be speaking at this point in the conference after so many excellent, thought provoking morning sessions is a little bit stressful so I’m grateful that I have my partner – Hind – and Ajmal - with whom to share this responsibility.

In English, there are many words and phrases that denote the exchange of information between people and/or groups – deliberation – dialogue – debate - - discussion –

So I decided to look into what those words mean, and I used the Miriam Webster Dictionary online -

Dialogue –

a: A conversation between two or more persons; *also* : a similar exchange between a person and something else (as a computer) **b** : an exchange of ideas and opinions.

Conversation –

a: an oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas; **b:** an informal discussion of an issue by representatives of governments, institutions, or groups.

Deliberation –

a : the act of *deliberating*; **b** : a discussion and consideration by a group of persons (as a jury or legislature) of the reasons for and against a measure.

Do you know the term buzz word? A buzz word is a word that is used often in the public to show new emphasis on an older word – and if you use the buzz words, you are knowledgeable about current language and slang. You are informed, up to date – in the know. Right now in the US, dialogue and engagement are the most frequently used ‘buzz words’

There is a National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation, a Canadian Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation, and Obama has created a special office of public engagement.

In fact, when I searched dialogue online recently, on Amazon I found 338,114 titles which included the word 'dialogue'.

How do we distinguish between Debate and Dialogue? I'm sure you have done one of these exercises:

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Assuming that there is a right answer and that you have it	Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they craft a new solution
Listening to find flaws and make counter arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
Critiquing the other side's position	Re-examining all positions
Defending one's own views against those of others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve on one's own

Dialogue is a way to create a conversation that is mutually positive as we attempt to approach each other as allies rather than enemies.

So what is honest conversation? Honest conversation involves dialogue with the other but I propose it goes further. It includes a deep level of introspection.

Honest conversation is characterized by several terms:
It starts with the decision/conviction to engage with someone or another group with whom one may disagree or be different from ...and then the courage to act on that conviction.

So in honest conversation we make a decision to engage and gather the courage to do so. Then what?

Honest Conversation is being transparent about you or your group’s responsibility for the current crisis or issue and sharing it with those on the ‘other side’. And this happens before the other side accuses you of that very thing. We engage with ourselves about our motives and what goes on inside and then model intentional transparency. This prepares the foundation for the conversation to proceed in a startlingly honest way and becomes a powerful invitation to join in.

Why is it important to make one self or one’s side so vulnerable?

If you think about any situation in which there are two sides – each side knows what the other one has done: that is NOT a secret – but when one side or the other steps forward, takes responsibility for those actions or thoughts, it upsets the balance of ‘I insult you and you insult me’. It says I want more than dialogue, I want to be a part of healing this wound. This level of conversation begins to create safe space in which to talk honestly.

This week in this room we have heard about quiet, listening, about identity, about core values that guide us. How do we get to the place we can begin to see our *motives*?

In our course, we used a work sheet to help evaluate a situation and which begins to get us ready to really engage. It looks like this:

Things they have done that they should apologize for	Ways you have been harmed by the tension/conflict with them	Ways they may benefit from not resolving the tension/conflict with you	Actions you want them to commit to improve the relationship
Things you have done that you should apologize for	Ways they have may been harmed by the tension/conflict with you	<i>Ways you benefit from not resolving the tension/conflict with them</i>	Actions you will commit to improve the relationship

The third column on the bottom row is the hardest, most painful and most necessary of all.

Yet without that honest conversation with YOURSELF, you may not ever get as far as you hope in the larger conversation.

I'd like to tell you a quick story about how this works.

I was in a new job, excited and the first week my new organization was going to hold a big special event.

The person in charge of this event was a very smart, very decisive African American lady.

I was given the job of arranging the seating charts. This lady had given me the names of the people she wanted at her tables. Others came to me with their requests. Many wanted to be sure the 'important people' sat at their tables.

I began agonizingly to try to fit the pieces of this puzzle together. Another colleague, another woman of color, but not African American, came to help and after looking at the list, told me to just seat folks so that more people could meet the important ones. I resisted somewhat, but she said it didn't matter, so then we quickly were able to finish the task – by 1 am!

The next day the head lady came into the event, quickly saw that things were different than she had asked and she rapidly and silently made the changes. The event went VERY well.

I went to her at the end of the event, after most of the guests had left and as I began to say, "Did it work out alright?" this woman, gritting her teeth, seething with barely repressed RAGE got her face close to mine and without trying to be quiet at all snarled at me that I had insulted her, discounted her, dismissed her, and been a racist and that I was basically worthless in her eyes. She stomped off and I almost stopped breathing.

Other colleagues who either saw it or heard it (and you may have heard it here she was so loud!) came to me to express their regret, check on how I

was doing. And this happened a number of times over the next several weeks – people checking to see if I was all right. It benefitted me NOT to solve this, as I had the empathy, the concern, the care of my colleagues. Though this feeling was not conscious, it is clear to me now as I look back how I benefited – especially as the new person – from this incident **not** being resolved.

We had tacitly agreed not to discuss it and tried to just ignore the event. Needless to say, it constantly poisoned our interactions in the most insidious ways.

Several months later – MONTHS – I woke one morning with the most embarrassing, shameful, awful question in my mind....”Cricket, would you have made the same decision to rearrange the tables – even if someone else had said it was ok - if the head person had been a white man?” With more pain and dismay than I can tell you, I realized that I would not have done so at that time. It was like digging down into the muck of my soul.

It was another 2 months until she and I had a full day together and I brought it up. She stiffened up but I just barged along and apologized, admitted what I had realized and then we talked – painfully – it was not easy and I won’t pretend we were buddies at the end of that day. But that day we began to build respect, it turned to trust and we learned many things about ourselves by questioning whenever there was tension in our relationship.

Honest conversation is about an honest conversation with yourself first and finding the voice of truth within. Use that third block of the exercise whenever you are stuck, or your group is stuck in a conflict. And be unflinchingly vigilant for the voice of truth, of the creator, so that you can begin a dialogue, a conversation that has the possibility of building trust, and maybe even leading to authentic reconciliation.