

Deliberate Steps toward a Nondefended Learning Conversation.

Recognizing the need for a Nondefended Learning Conversation and then appropriately planning and initiating it may seem like a confusing process at first. In fact there are clear and deliberate steps to take.

1. Noticing Defended situations and energy.

The first step is to recognize situations in which defended behaviors or energies are affecting us. I may recognize that a situation or interaction is uncomfortable. The way in which something is happening may make me hesitant to speak, or even fearful about talking with another person involved. This strong or even subtle hesitancy is usually a clue to a nice or pastoral defended response.

Alternately, I may notice a desire to correct or straighten the other person out. The felt clues of this may range from an angry response, a felt intent to protect the 'right' outcome, all the way to a benign felt desire to help. Noticing this energy within myself can be a clue that strong defended energy is at work. Noticing these energies or temptations both in myself and others is a vital first step.

2. Taking a long compassionate look.

The next step is to notice my feelings or situation in a compassionate and unhurried way. "Unhurried" here doesn't have to mean I take the day off and go stroll in the garden. In practice, it may simply mean that I draw a deep breath and notice before responding. Yet the sense of being unhurried is vital. If my inner sense of urgency gets going I will probably be unable to notice contemplatively what's happening in the moment.

"In the moment," this noticing may simply be nonjudgmentally observing what I observe. For example, "Jim, I'm aware that the issue you've just raised is both important and complex, and that nine minutes left in the meeting doesn't feel like an appropriate amount of time to begin to deal with it." This is the mindfulness skill of being able to 'describe the weather' or to observe without judgment what is most apparent. Doing this openly, compassionately and without judgment hidden within allows us to take real time contemplative looks.

After the fact or when more time is available, looking compassionately at all parties involved and at what they may or may not know is a part of this contemplative look. Choosing to look without being biased by my own hoped-for or feared outcomes may allow me to see more of what is happening. This is where

the ladder of inference can be a powerful contemplative tool. Recognizing my own assumptions about the situation, my role and the roles of others in it may help me better recognize what is happening.

3. Holding all parties nonviolently.

Taking time to intentionally hold each person involved nonviolently, can feel like a challenging step. Sometimes we imagine this means we can't be angry at another's behavior and choices. In fact it doesn't. Honoring and acknowledging the anger we feel is sometimes a part of holding ourselves nonviolently. What nonviolence means is that we cannot allow our words and choices to be blindly driven by our anger.

Pausing to look nonviolently, may require me to take time to look at my strong emotion, listen to its message and step back enough from it to respond freely. This free nonviolent response must consider what is the common good in the situation. Common good here may not refer specifically to an outcome, but may point to the way in which we engage one another. We may be a long way from solving a problem, yet the qualities with which we engage one another may be very important. Reflecting on this common good may help inform what nonviolent engagement looks like at this moment in the situation.

4. Preparing to engage in Nondefended fashion.

Taking time to reflect on what you may or may not know in common, and what your assumptions are is a way to prepare to engage another. Considering what the good of the relationship and the organization or community requires is a way to approach the conversation from a learning stance.

This may be where you practice revealing your assumptions (not conclusions) and checking them out for the common good you each share. This common good may be the organization being successful, resolving something as fairly as possible, or something else of this sort.

This may be a place to script out your opening comments, or to actually practice what you want to say with a friend. This practice is in the service of effective engagement. It's also a moment in which to check out your motives as you approach the other.

Are you attempting to change, fix, or otherwise manipulate the other? It's not that you can't hope someone makes different choices or behaves differently, but you must be transparent about it. Let them know what you assume would be more effective and why you assume it. Check to see if they share that assumption.

5. Dying to outcomes.

A last moment of preparation involves 'dying' to the outcome of the conversation. It's mindfully recognizing what you hope to have happen and what you fear could happen, and making your peace with both of them so that they don't unconsciously distract or control you. This allows you to engage the other with less defended energy or anxiety. It also often helps to bring anxieties to a greater level of reality. When they move in us unchecked, we often heap more importance and danger on conversations than they usually warrant.

Preparing a Nondefended Learning Conversation

1. Notice

Notice your response to a situation that stirs defended energy or feelings in you.

Pay attention and ask "What did I need to defend?" or "What was I afraid of?"

2. Take a long loving look.

Pause to look compassionately at the situation and all of its participants.

Use the LifeFrame to see more of what may be at work.

3. Hold all parties nonviolently.

Take time to hold all sides nonviolently.

Process the emotion and the anxiety through until you can see the common good and what possible nonviolent outcomes could be.

4. Prepare your Nondefended Learning engagement.

Prepare the actual words you would use. Practice them.

Test to be sure that you don't have a hidden agenda that distorts your effort.

5. Die to the outcomes.

Notice your hopes and your fears.

Sit with these and consciously make your peace with them.

Allow yourself to make your peace with both failure and success, so that those hopes and fears don't distort your effort.