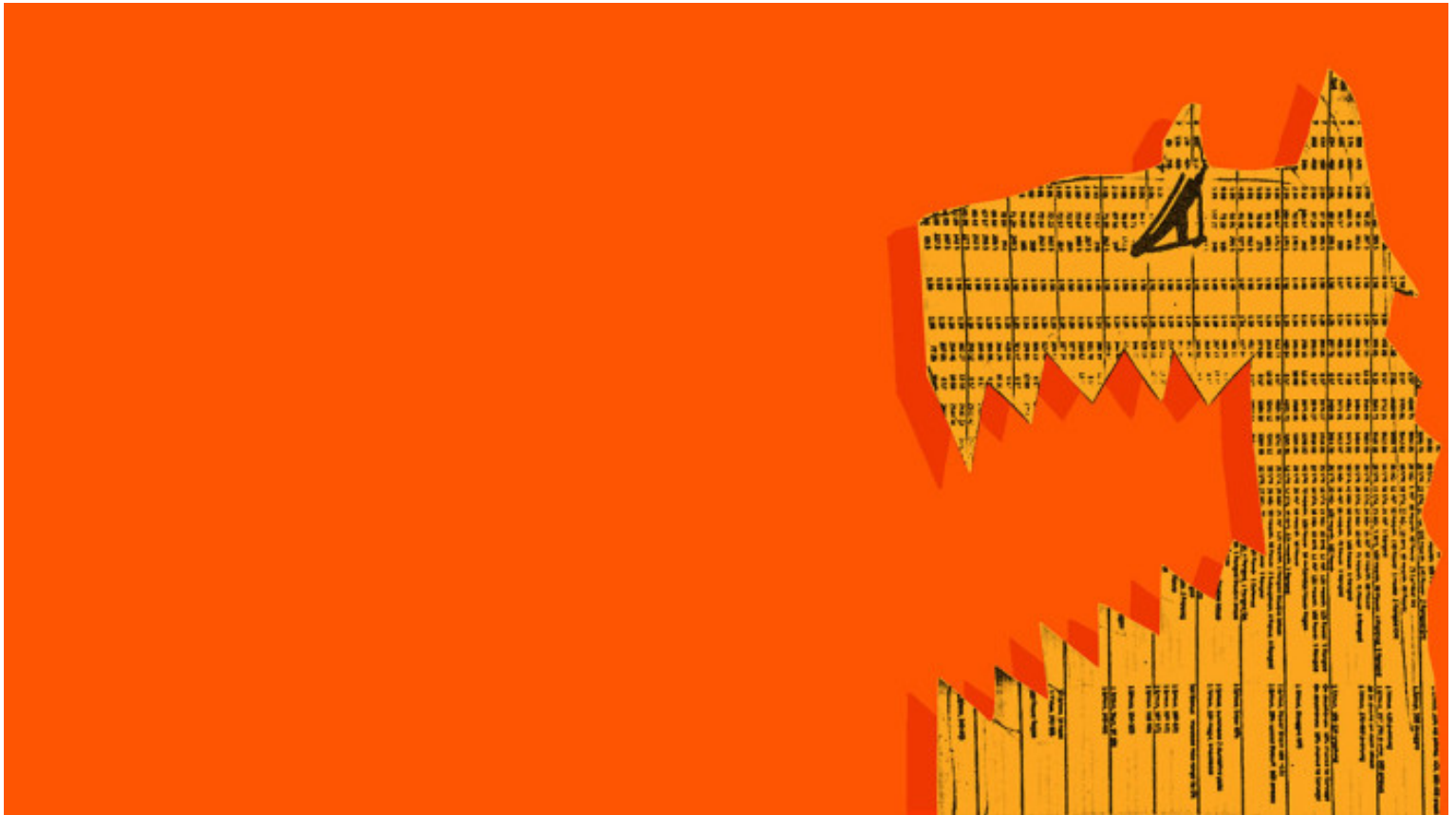


CONFLICT

What to Do If a Conversation Is Turning Loud and Aggressive

by Joseph Grenny

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HBR STAFF

“Come on, folks – act like investors. What questions do you have?” chided Mel, the CEO of a financial services firm, in a meeting with 50 of his fellow senior managers. The firm was contemplating a management buyout from their parent company, and the stakes were huge, as each of the individuals present would personally underwrite the deal. But the potential upside made mouths water as they considered the untapped market potential that had been neglected by the current owners, for whom the business unit was a side line.

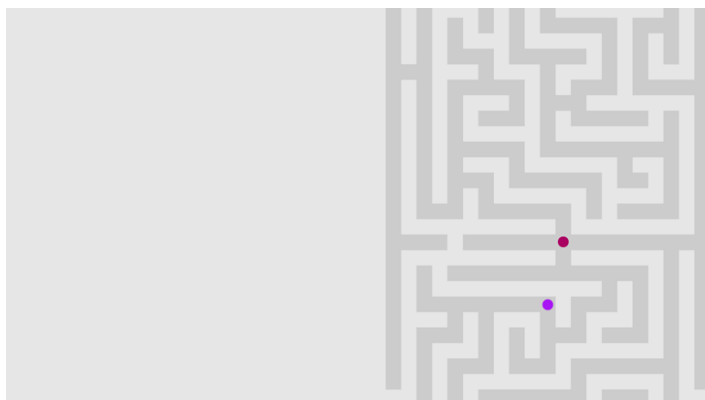
Most of the execs lobbed softballs at Mel. They seemed ready to take the bet. Caleb, on the other hand, had a concern. Hours earlier he had pored over documents and noticed a glaring omission in the financial projections. He knew Mel was head over heels in love with the transaction and hoping for a quick consensus. Caleb also had a rocky history with Mel, often finding himself on opposite sides of issues. In spite of the possibility of a misunderstanding, he couldn't let such a profound concern go unaddressed.

So Caleb raised his hand and said, "You've *omitted* one serious liability." Mel locked his eyes on Caleb. Caleb continued, "We have more than 250 employment agreements with significant severance payouts. If even 10% of those executives leave in the first year of this transaction, we will fall far short of our EBITDA target."

A purple coloring crawled up Mel's face from neck to hairline. He slammed his fist on the table and screamed at Caleb, "You're not a team player! Get the hell out of the room!" Everyone froze, stunned.

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Everyone has witnessed – or coauthored – a conversation meltdown like this one. Some start with pyrotechnics. Others smolder for a while but build to what seems like the point of no return. And yet in most of these circumstances the negative chemistry is more fragile than it seems. For those playing a role it feels as though the conversation moves inexorably toward a cataclysmic conclusion. But the truth is that there are few paths to Armageddon – and many possibilities for interrupting the downward trajectory.

If the participants are reasonably psychologically healthy, destructive conflict will only continue as long as both parties continue to act as

though the other person is a threat to his or her needs. Any substantial interruption of this process will return you to rationality.

Consider Mel and Caleb. It's unlikely that Mel resents Caleb for helping him spot important risks to his own interests. Rather, Mel mistakenly believes Caleb doesn't share his interests or is attempting to publicly humiliate him. For Caleb's part, Mel's screaming might cause him to conclude that Mel has a hidden agenda or is simply out to get Caleb. In fact, based on later understanding, neither was true. And yet both people are acting in ways that confirm the others' fears – Caleb by phrasing his concern in a dangerously accusatory way (“You’ve *omitted*..”) and Mel by his explosive reaction.

In the heat of the moment there are a number of ways to interrupt the meltdown. Conversational disaster is far more reversible than it feels when temperatures rise. The basic principle behind any intervention is to interrupt the dance of death. The goal is to slow participants from generating new evidence to confirm mutual fears. Or even better, to engage them in generating disconfirming evidence – evidence that their fears are misplaced.

Here are five things that can halt, and sometimes reverse, a conversation meltdown.

Own your part. Simply stop the conversation and take responsibility for your part in its decline. This must be done authentically and not manipulatively. If you don't like something you have done, stop and acknowledge it. But be sure this isn't just a ploy to provoke the same from the other person. If *you* are taking the conversation in a direction *you* don't want, pause and change that. Own up to what you've done and apologize for compromising your values. For example, “I'm getting loud and aggressive. I'm sorry. I don't want this to be a competition.”

Offer safety. People lose control when they feel threatened. Simply generating psychological safety for the other person can help him or her take a breath and return to the conversation. One of the best ways to do that is to simply make a unilateral commitment to finding a mutually beneficial solution. You may not yet know what the solution is, but the fact that you demonstrate a resolve to protect not only your own but the other person's interests can persuade him or her that you are not a threat. “Let me be very clear – I have some needs I want to be sure are addressed. But I know you do, too. I am just as committed to ensuring this works for you as I am for me.”

Point out the default future. Discontinue the conversation and draw attention to where the conversation is taking both of you – the *default future* of the conversation – the place it will end if it continues on the current path. Sometimes avoiding mutually assured destruction can become a binding motivation. If people have a “why” to take the higher road, they’re often more willing to endure the “how” of getting there. If you can help them see the inevitable negative consequences of continuing the current pattern, they might be willing to subordinate the need to punish or save face in the interest of a higher value. Don’t assess blame, simply point out the obvious. For example, “I don’t like where this is going. I’m guessing you don’t either. We’re headed toward litigation here. Something that will hurt the project, sever relationships, and cost us both a fortune. Can we try a different tack?”

Talk about rules. Anarchy promotes incivility. If you’re involved in a risky conversation and don’t establish explicit agreements for *how* you’ll talk, there will be nothing to keep unintentional provocations from escalating into open conflict. Rage builds when parties perceive that others oppose their goals and no superstructure of conversational agreements exists to contain it. You can often stop the downward spiral by stepping out of the topic at hand and inviting a discussion about the rules of engagement. Even those who feel threatened by your views will readily agree to reasonable ground rules for airing those views. A shift in this direction might sound like, “Can we take a timeout? I don’t think this is working. Perhaps we could discuss some ground rules for this negotiation before we move further ahead.”

Change the pace. Emotions have a cadence. A fast-moving conversation reinforces feelings of panic or threat. Slowing it down can change the feeling. You can change the feeling by pausing before you speak. You can slow your comments or quiet your voice. Sometimes, a mutually agreed-upon timeout can change the pace of a conversation. Similarly, agreeing to take turns in the conversation can change the pace and, therefore, the temperature.

Refocus on agreement. When people feel threatened, they tend to focus exclusively on areas of disagreement. It’s remarkable to see parties who agree on 90% of an issue obsess over and even magnify the 10% they disagree about. You can profoundly change the tone of a conversation by stopping this pathological divisiveness and saying something like, “Can I pause for a moment and point out what we both agree on?” Then deliberately, slowly and sincerely you can enumerate common interests, beliefs or histories.

In Caleb's case, he had several options in the heat of the moment:

He could have owned his part. "I'm sorry. That was an unfair way to phrase it. I am not accusing you or anyone of intentional omission."

He could have offered safety by pointing out common interests. "I think this deal has great value. I want to pursue it as well if it can work. I just want what you were inviting – a full airing of the potential risks."

He could have refocused on areas of agreement, pointing out the many parts of the deal he thought were meritorious.

Instead, Caleb left the room. He and Mel parted enemies. The issue Caleb raised was not fully addressed and the deal ended up a disaster.

Disaster is far less inevitable than it often feels in the heat of the moment. There are myriad ways of interrupting the grip of fear that brings out the worst in all of us. If you try some of these small interventions, you're far more likely to clear up the conflict that threatens results and relationships.



Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an innovator in corporate training and leadership development.

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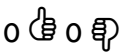
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