

How to avoid conflict in challenging conversations and reach positive outcomes

As the Operational Lead for the Police Scotland Negotiation Unit, I had responsibility for a large team of negotiators across the country. The Unit would respond to hundreds of incidents annually. The types of incidents the negotiators deployed to were diverse; from engaging with people in crisis, to crimes involving kidnap and abduction.

On reviewing the circumstances of each engagement, I noted that certain teams appeared to resolve incidents more quickly than others and upon further investigation, I found there was a common theme. In incidents where negotiators tried to rush the process, the negotiations took longer to resolve, whereas teams that proceeded more slowly resolved the incidents quicker. The reasons for this included the higher performing teams focussing on applying a recognised structure to build trust, increase influence, and create collaboration.

This recognised structure is known as the Behaviour Bridge. The FBI introduced a similar model many years ago and is still used today by elite negotiation units across the globe as a strategy to assist in reaching positive outcomes.

The first step is Introduction. We all form an opinion when we meet people for the first time. This is where the primeval part of our brain kicks in. We all inevitably fall into 'fight, flight or make friends' mode. We subconsciously think 'is this person likely to prevent me getting what I want? should I just get out of here? or are they likely to be an ally?'

The key is to tailor your approach to make a good first impression. That could simply be turning up on time to a meeting or letting the other person do most of the talking and don't make it all about you.

The second step is Empathy. We all understand what the definition of empathy may be but what does it mean in a discussion? In my experience, the other party is likely to be thinking two things – 'how can you help me get what I want?' and 'can you see things from my perspective?' Taking the time to prepare and consider appropriate answers to these questions will ensure you establish empathy quickly.

The third step is Rapport, often defined as 'harmony and accord'. How can you fast track rapport? My advice is to look for early opportunities to problem solve together. Discuss challenges, see it from the other side's perspective, and work collaboratively on a solution.



Then create Trust. It's unlikely that a resolution can be reached unless there's some form of trust. So how can you build trust quickly? People like patterns of behaviour. We like consistency and predictability. Being consistent in your demeanour and tone builds trust. Be honest - telling your counterpart what the next steps are likely to be and delivering on them is a great way to create a trusting environment.

Next comes Influence. It is time to bring your demands to the table. The key to success is always articulate your position first, then your concession. For example, "if you do this, then we can give you that". In my experience, if you highlight the concession first, that's all the other party will focus on.

The common mistake for those involved in negotiations is to force their demands too early. Pushing your demands before you've established empathy, rapport and trust only prolongs the discussion and damages any chance of co-operation.

The final step is Behavioural Change. Negotiations break down on many occasions because the other party no longer feels listened to or valued. Successful influencers understand that it's not about being clever or forceful; it's

about convincing the other party that they have control, feel valued and have been listened to.

The Behaviour Bridge is a tried and tested strategy to establish strong working relationships and create a culture where people will want to work with you to resolve issues or confrontation.

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