

Defusing an Emotionally Charged Conversation with a Colleague

by Ron Friedman

Most people, every now and then you find themselves immersed in a conversation so emotionally charged it seems to have nothing to do with the issues you're supposedly discussing. What do you do when a conversation is spiraling out of control? When you've tried all the patient listening you can muster and the other person still won't budge? How do you get the conversation back on track?

Anthony Suchman (MD, MA, FACP | Founder + Senior Consultant of Relationship Centred health care) recommends using a specific series of relationship-building statements to make the conversations more productive, which are represented in the acronym PEARLS:

- **Partnership:**
 - "I really want to work on this with you."
 - "I bet we can figure this out together."
- **Empathy:**
 - "I can feel your enthusiasm as you talk."
 - "I can hear your concern."
- **Acknowledgement:**
 - "You clearly put a lot of work into this."
 - "You invested in this, and it shows."
- **Respect:**
 - "I've always appreciated your creativity."
 - "There's no doubt you know a lot about this."
- **Legitimation:**
 - "This would be hard for anyone."
 - "Who wouldn't be worried about something like this?"
- **Support:**
 - "I'd like to help you with this."
 - "I want to see you succeed."

Using relationship-building statements can feel unnatural at first, especially when you're not accustomed to complimenting others. I know they did for me when I first started using them in workplace conversations. The key, I've discovered, is to employ them sparingly at first and to only say the ones that genuinely reflect how you feel.

Almost immediately, you'll notice that inserting a well-timed PEARLS statement can dramatically alter the tenor of a conversation, because we have an emotionally-driven brain, which is why restoring confidence in the relationship can be a powerful tool. The reason is simple: anytime you attend to people's psychological need for connection, you have the potential to improve the quality of an exchange.

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