

“Gateways Events: Turning Tense Moments into Productive Conversations”

(Based on the training video of the same name - <http://thiederman.com/product/gateways-to-inclusion>)

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The people who made these statements clearly feel awful:

- “The meeting was so tense after Joe made that crack about people who use wheelchairs. I just didn’t know what to do.”
- “I didn’t mean it “that” way. All I was trying to do was make a joke.”
- “I made a simple mistake; why do people make such a big thing out of stuff like this?”
- “How am I supposed to know what’s okay to say these days and what isn’t; it’s just too complicated.”
- “I was so hurt – it was all I could do not to cry when my manager made that remark about heavy people. I’m healthy. Isn’t that all that matters?”
- “I don’t understand what happened. My colleague suddenly accused me of being homophobic – I wish I knew what I did wrong.”

Do any of them seem familiar? Let’s face it, our diverse workplaces – because they are diverse – can be mine fields of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and even conflict. Believe me, I’ve stepped on more than one of those mines myself! That’s not to mention, by the way, that the rules of political correctness seem to have taken over the world.

Things sure can get tense.

The purpose of this article is to provide you with four skills to convert these uncomfortable moments – or even small explosions - into gateways that will lead to better working relationships, increased understanding, and less tension. That’s why I call these incidences “Gateway Events.” Here are just a few examples:

- You witness an act of bias against a friend, acquaintance, or colleague or hear an inappropriate joke or comment.
- Someone falsely accuses you of bias.
- Someone treats you in a way that appears to reflect a biased attitude.
- You say or do something that inadvertently offends someone.
- You say or do something involving diversity that you immediately regret.

Regardless of the nature of your specific Gateway Event, the first step in resolving it is to manage your emotion.

Skill #1: Manage How You Feel

The Case: Rick – a 26-year-old production assistant - is sitting at his desk alternatively working and texting. His older boss, Harry rushes by, clearly in a mild state of panic, and asks Rick to file something then says snidely, “that is when you have finished texting.” He then mumbles under his breath something about how all young people do is twitter and text.

Rick overhears the comment and, in response, angrily marches into Harry’s office to accuse him of being biased against young people. Harry – who, if he had been approached differently, would have immediately admitted that his comment was disrespectful – is caught off guard and vigorously defends himself.

Judging from Harry's defensive reaction, Rick would have gotten his point across better if he'd managed his emotion before entering into this conversation. Now, nobody is saying Rick doesn't have the right to feel as he does – Harry’s comment was, in fact, disrespectful – what we’re saying is, Rick would have been more successful if he had found a way to keep that emotion out of the equation. Here are some ideas that might have helped Rick do just that.

First, he might have asked himself, ‘What am I really feeling?’ The ability to identify and observe an emotion is a cornerstone of emotional intelligence and greatly increases our ability to function effectively. It isn’t, of course, necessary to exorcise our emotion altogether, just the act of giving it a name has a magical way of bringing the feeling under our control.

Second, accept what you are feeling. This adage may sound a lot like psycho-babble, but, in reality, it is a very important skill. When we fight our emotions, when we pretend they aren’t there or feel bad about them, they can actually become more intense. It is as if our resistance creates an energy off of which the emotion feeds. On the other hand, when we accept what we are feeling without complaint – be it anger or hurt or fear – the odds go up that, paradoxically, that emotion will have less power to influence our decisions and our actions.

Third, walk away for a moment. Go sit someplace quietly or grab a cup of coffee. Even that little bit of a break can work wonders when it comes to achieving productive conversations.

Finally, ask yourself: Does my emotion increase or decrease the chances of my converting this uncomfortable moment into a Gateway Event? Most likely, as in the case of Rick, the answer will be a resounding “No.” That simple act of asking

has a remarkable ability to bring the situation – and the appropriate next steps – into perspective.

Skill #2: Set Productive Goals

The Case, cont.: When Rick’s boss, Harry, had a few minutes to get over his surprise at Rick’s forceful allegation, he said to himself, “I really have to fix what happened between Rick and I. Rick is a good worker; I can’t let this go.” He then asked Rick into his office and apologized.

In this decision to “fix what happened,” Harry was practicing our second skill. He set a clearly-defined goal for his conversation with Rick. In this case that goal was to resolve the hard feelings between the two men.

Think about it for a minute: How can we achieve a goal if we haven’t the foggiest idea what that goal is? It’s impossible.

Now, of course, goals can be positive or negative. If we look back, for example, at Rick’s comment that Harry has a bias against young people, it is likely that his goal when entering Harry’s office was to make Harry feel guilty or, at the least, to embarrass him. It seems to me the conversation would have gone better had Rick’s purpose been to educate, not humiliate.

Setting productive goals is a matter of asking yourself one question and answering it honestly: What do I want to accomplish by entering into the conversation? I’m reminded of what diversity leader Roosevelt Thomas once said, “Dialogue is conversation with a purpose.” Aimless conversation, particularly if the catalyst for that conversation is emotionally charged, will lead nowhere or, worse, will lead somewhere you would rather not go.

Deciding what you want to accomplish is important because how a Gateway Event resolves itself is predicated only in part on the details of the initial action. The ultimate outcome is also influenced by the sequence of decisions that follow. Those decisions, in turn, are dictated by the goals we set for the conversation.

Your specific goal will, of course, be shaped by the nature of the gateway event itself. Here are some examples:

Gateway Event - Someone Has Said or Done Something That Offended You:

When someone has done something we find offensive, it is our task and responsibility to communicate how we feel in a way that will accomplish our goals.

I doubt it, but your goal might be to upset the person or make him/her feel guilty. Let’s admit it, there is a certain pleasure in making people feel guilty. The problem is that “guilt-tripping” is a notoriously poor motivator

of change. A little guilt served up gently might work, but too much can backfire and that backfire inevitably ignites a circle of destruction that spins out of control. That circle looks something like this:

- The circle starts when a statement or act is perceived by someone as offensive.
- The person who feels hurt accuses the offender of bias and then says something with the goal of making her feel guilty.
- The guilt-tripped offender dislikes the accuser for making her feel guilty and, therefore, withdraws and becomes belligerent.
- The accuser perceives this belligerence as still more reason to be offended and redoubles his efforts to make the offender feel guilty.
- The offender (who, by the way, is rapidly taking on the role of victim) again withdraws.
- The accuser perceives this withdrawal as . . . , etc., etc.

Judging from this circle, setting the goals of guilt and revenge clearly are not a good idea. Might these four goals be better options?

Goal: Preserve the dignity of yourself and the other person.

Goal: Help the other person understand how the comment or action has affected you.

Goal: Educate the other person about what he or she has done that is inappropriate.

Goal: Learn what might have motivated the other person to act as he or she did.

Gateway Event - You Have Done Something Offensive and Now Regret It: Of course, our first response to this situation – our first goal – might be to try to make what we have done go away by simply ignoring it. Of course, that’s not going to work. For one thing, it’s impossible. For another, all our efforts to ignore it, make a joke out of it, or just walk away from it are disrespectful and—let’s face it—cowardly. Here are some more productive goals:

Goal: Help the offended parties feel respected.

Goal: Mend the relationship.

Goal: Educate the other person as to how you feel and where your action or word was “coming from.”

Goal: Learn more about why what you said or did was disrespectful and how to avoid the same mistake in the future.

Gateway Event - You Have Been Wrongly Accused of a Disrespectful Action: Let’s say you have said something that was miss-heard or misunderstood and you find yourself accused of being disrespectful or even biased. You really listened to what the other person had to say, really

thought it out, and are convinced that the accusation is wrong. What on earth is your goal then?

This one is a little complicated mostly because there are a couple of unproductive goals that could be tempting. One goal would be to make the accuser feel justified. In other words, to pretend that the accusation was correct and fake an apology (that means, lie). Not only does this goal involve dishonesty, it is also patronizing in that it assumes that the accuser is inflexible, unreasonable, and unable to adjust to what really happened.

Far more respectful goals would include:

Goal: Demonstrate to the accuser that you respect him/her enough to hold him/her to a high standard of judgment by explaining what really happened.

Goal: Learn more about why the other person reacted the way he or she did.

Goal: Educate the other person about your point-of-view.

Skill #3: Assess Intent Cautiously

The Case: Michelle is chairing a meeting attended by a new team member who has just started work that day. In the process of introducing him around the room, she makes a mistake and says his last name is Rodriguez, not his actual name – Gonzales. After the meeting, she learns that Jack, one of the other people in the room, is going around telling others that her mistake means she has a bias against Mexicans.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation like this? The problem here is that Jack jumped to conclusions about the meaning of Michelle's mistake. He assumed that her error was a result of a bias.

Sure, there are times when comments and behaviors are so blatant that it leaves no doubt that the person has a biased attitude. But usually – like in Michelle's case – it's impossible to know how the person really feels. Most of the time we end up just guessing at what is going on and guessing is a sure fire way to slam the gate shut on a productive conversation.

So, here's our Skill #3 – assess intent cautiously. Give folks like Michelle the benefit of the doubt. Not only is jumping to conclusions disrespectful, but that jump is apt to land you in a place where productive conversation becomes nearly impossible.

If you want to know how someone really feels, don't guess. Respectfully engage them in conversation. You might be surprised at what you learn.

Take Jack, for example. Rather than jump to conclusions about Michelle's attitude, he might have gone to her and had a conversation. He might have said something like: "I was surprised that you messed up Juan's name, can we talk about it?" It would have allowed him to find out how Michelle really felt.

Meanwhile, what can Michelle do in this situation? I hope that is obvious: Go back to Juan and apologize for getting his name wrong. Just that simple act of respect can go a long way toward making things right.

Skill #4: Communicate in a Way that Demonstrates Respect

The Case: Henrietta is in the midst of conducting a training for a small group of male and female managers. As she gives various instructions, she refers to the group as "guys" ("Here, guys, take a look at this handout"). Connie, one of the women in the room, finds the use of the word "guys" in a mixed group offensive and accuses Henrietta of sexism in front of the entire class. In response, Henrietta says, "You've got to be kidding, everybody knows 'guys' is just a general term that has nothing to do with gender."

This situation could have easily been transformed if both parties had practiced the 4th of our skills – communicate in a way that demonstrates respect.

Now, what would respect have looked like in this case? First, Connie might have practiced our skill of assessing intent cautiously and not jumped to the conclusion that Henrietta was sexist just because of the choice of a word. Jumping to conclusions is, you see, one of the most common forms of disrespect found in today's diverse workplaces. Also, she could have approached Henrietta in private rather than embarrass her in front of the group.

Henrietta also has something to learn about how to communicate with respect. Her phrase, "You've got to be kidding" essentially shouted into the room, "Connie has no right to feel the way she does!" Talk about disrespectful! Sure, Connie may be off-base, but she feels what she feels. It's disrespectful to deny her that right. A better choice would have been for Henrietta to say something like, "Thanks so much for telling me how you feel, I really appreciate your speaking up."

Finally, Henrietta might demonstrate further respect by inviting Connie to discuss the situation some more. She could, for example, say, "I'd love to talk to you about it, do you have a few minutes to chat after class?" Or, "I'm really sorry if what I said made you feel uncomfortable. I'd really like to talk about what happened."

Conclusion:

Gateway Events and the conversations that they spark are mini-adventures. Like any adventure, they require a little bit of courage and a lot of skill if they are to be successful. Like most adventures, too, they are so very much worth the effort. In particular, the great thing about Gateway Events is that they give us a chance to educate others about our points-of-view, about how to show respect, and ultimately, about who we are. They also allow us to know each other better and, thereby, reduce the biases that create so many problems in the workplace.

Opening that gateway to conversation – and holding it open – rather than slamming it shut in fear or anger has immeasurable benefits. So, the next time you find yourself in one of these difficult, awkward, or embarrassing situations, remember our four skills and make the commitment to turn tense moments into productive conversations.

The content of this article is based on the training video, [*Gateways to Inclusion: Turning Tense Moments into Productive Conversations*](#). The video is available for preview and purchase at <http://thiederman.com/product/gateways-to-inclusion>.

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