When Conversations Get Derailed

Recognizing & Navigating Distortions, Defensiveness & Communication Traps

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Have you ever started a conversation about one thing, only to find yourself discussing something completely different?

Perhaps you expressed a concern and found yourself defending your character. Maybe you asked for something different and were accused of wanting to control the other person. Or you attempted to address a specific behavior and suddenly found yourself revisiting everything you've done wrong over the past several years.

What happened to the original conversation?

Conversations can become challenging when we move away from what someone is actually communicating and begin responding to our interpretations, assumptions, emotional reactions, or unrelated experiences.

Sometimes these shifts are intentional. Other times they are automatic responses to feeling criticized, misunderstood, threatened, overwhelmed, or emotionally uncomfortable.

Regardless of the intention, the impact can be similar. The original concern gets lost, emotional intensity increases, and the opportunity to understand one another decreases.

The goal of this resource is to build awareness of common conversational patterns that interfere with productive communication and identify ways to navigate them differently.

The objective is not to become better at arguing. It is to become more capable of having a conversation.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE FEEL THREATENED?

When we experience a conversation as emotionally threatening, our attention can shift from understanding the other person to protecting ourselves.

We may begin preparing a response, defending our intentions, identifying inconsistencies, gathering evidence, or looking for ways to demonstrate that the other person's perspective is inaccurate.

Instead of listening to understand, we start listening to respond.

Our internal dialogue may sound something like:

- That's not fair.
- That's not what happened.
- They're making me out to be the bad person.
- What about everything they've done?
- I need them to understand that I'm not wrong.
- If I acknowledge their concern, they'll think I'm accepting all the blame.

These reactions can influence what we hear, how we interpret it, and how we respond.

We may find ourselves having two very different conversations:

- The conversation the other person is attempting to have.
- The conversation we're having internally in response to what we think they're communicating.

Building awareness of this distinction creates an opportunity to respond differently.

COMMON CONVERSATIONAL TRAPS

The following concepts describe different ways conversations can become distorted, redirected, or unproductive.

Some are logical fallacies. Others are cognitive distortions, defensive responses, or interpersonal communication patterns.

The purpose of understanding them is not to label the other person. It is to recognize what's happening within the interaction including how we may be contributing to it.

The Straw Man Argument | Responding to Something That Wasn't Said

A straw man argument occurs when someone's original statement is misrepresented, exaggerated, or oversimplified, and the response is directed toward that altered version rather than the original message.

Example:

- Person A: "I'd like us to spend more intentional time together."
- Person B: "So you don't want me to have friends or do anything without you?"

The original request was about creating more intentional time together. The response reframed it as an attempt to restrict the other person's independence.

The conversation can quickly shift toward defending something that was never requested.

Consider responding:

- "That's different from what I'm trying to communicate."
- "I'm not asking you to give up those things. I'm asking if we can create more intentional time together."
- "Can we return to what I originally shared?"

Whataboutism | Redirecting Accountability

Whataboutism occurs when someone responds to a concern by introducing a different concern about the other person, rather than addressing what was initially raised.

Example:

- Person A: "I felt frustrated when you didn't follow through on what we agreed to."
- Person B: "What about last week when you forgot to do what you said you would?"

Both concerns may be legitimate. However, introducing the second concern as a response to the first can prevent either from being adequately addressed.

Consider responding:

- "I'm open to discussing that, too. Can we finish exploring this concern first?"
- "It sounds like we both have something we want to address."
- "How about we make space for both conversations without combining them?"

The Red Herring | Moving Away From the Topic

A red herring introduces information or a concern that distracts from the original topic.

Unlike whataboutism, the new information doesn't necessarily involve the other person's behavior. It simply moves the conversation in a different direction.

Example:

- Person A: "Can we talk about how we're managing our household expenses?"
- Person B: "I don't understand why we're talking about this when we haven't even decided where we're going on vacation."

The vacation may deserve attention, but it doesn't necessarily address the concern about household expenses.

Consider responding:

- "That's another conversation worth having."
- "Help me understand how that relates to what we're discussing."
- "Can we stay with this topic for now?"

Moving the Goalposts | Changing What's Considered Good Enough

Moving the goalposts occurs when the criteria for success, resolution, or accountability change after someone has addressed the original expectation.

Example:

- Person A: "I've been making an effort to communicate when I'll be home late, like we discussed."
- Person B: "You shouldn't have to communicate that you're going to be late. You should just be home earlier."

The original expectation was communication. The new expectation is arriving home earlier.

Both expectations can be discussed, but they are different expectations.

When expectations repeatedly change without acknowledgment or agreement, someone may begin to feel that their efforts are never sufficient.

Consider responding:

- "I thought our agreement was about communicating when I'd be late. Has that expectation changed?"
- "What would good enough look like for both of us?"
- "Can we clarify what we're actually agreeing to?"

Changing expectations is not inherently problematic. Relationships evolve. The challenge occurs when expectations change without being made visible, communicated, or mutually understood.

False Dichotomy | Either This or That

A false dichotomy occurs when a situation is presented as having only two possible options, even though additional possibilities exist.

Example:

- "If you really cared about me, you'd cancel your plans."

The implication is that someone must choose between caring about their partner and maintaining their individual plans. Both may be possible.

Consider responding:

- "Can both things be important?"
- "Are there other options we're not considering?"
- "How might we make room for both of our needs?"

Practicing both/and thinking creates opportunities that either/or thinking may eliminate.

6. Ad Hominem | Attacking the Person Instead of Addressing the Concern

An ad hominem response shifts attention from someone's message, reasoning, or concern to their character or personal qualities.

Example:

- Person A: "I don't think the way we're dividing responsibilities is working."
- Person B: "That's because you're selfish."

The conversation moves from exploring shared responsibilities to defending someone's character.

Labels can become like bumper stickers. Once attached to someone, they can influence how we interpret everything else that person says or does.

Consider responding:

- "I'd like to focus on the behavior or concern rather than labeling one another."
- "What specifically am I doing that you're experiencing as problematic?"
- "Can we talk about what's happening rather than who we think the other person is?"

Mind Reading | Assigning Intent Without Clarification

Mind reading occurs when we assume we know what someone else is thinking, feeling, or intending without adequately exploring their perspective.

Example:

- "You didn't invite me because you didn't want me there."

The absence of an invitation may be an observable event. The reason assigned to it is an interpretation. Our interpretations may be accurate, partially accurate, or inaccurate.

Consider responding:

- "What led you to that interpretation?"
- "Can I share what was happening for me?"
- "I'd rather we explore my intentions than assume what they were."

An important consideration is that intention and impact can be different.

Someone can have an intention that is different from the impact of their behavior. Understanding one does not require dismissing the other.

Overgeneralization | Turning an Experience Into an Absolute

Overgeneralization occurs when a specific experience, or collection of experiences, is translated into an absolute statement.

Examples:

- "You never listen."

- "You're always defensive."
- "Everything has to be about you."
- "You don't care about anyone but yourself."

These statements may communicate genuine frustration. However, their absolute nature can make it difficult to understand the specific concern.

The other person may begin identifying exceptions rather than listening to the experience being communicated.

Consider responding:

- "Can you help me understand a specific example?"
- "When do you experience me that way?"
- "I'd like to understand the pattern you're noticing."

The goal is not to debate the accuracy of the words *always* and *never*. It is to understand the experiences contributing to those words.

Emotional Reasoning | When a Feeling Becomes a Conclusion

Emotional reasoning occurs when we treat what we're feeling as sufficient evidence that our interpretation of a situation is accurate.

Example:

- "I feel unimportant to you, so clearly I'm not important to you."

The feeling of being unimportant is a real and meaningful emotional experience. However, the conclusion about the other person's feelings or intentions requires further exploration.

Consider responding:

- "I want to understand what's contributing to that feeling."
- "Can we explore what happened and the meaning it had for you?"
- "I hear that you're feeling disconnected. I'd like to understand what connection would look like for you."

Feelings provide information. They are worth exploring, but they don't necessarily provide the entire picture.

Tu Quoque | You Do It, Too

Tu quoque, sometimes referred to as an appeal to hypocrisy, occurs when someone dismisses a concern or criticism because the person expressing it has engaged in similar behavior.

Example:

- Person A: "I'd appreciate it if you didn't interrupt me while I'm talking."
- Person B: "You interrupt me all the time, so you have no room to talk."

The other person's behavior may be relevant to the broader pattern, but it does not invalidate the original concern.

Both people can contribute to a challenging interaction. Both can also have legitimate concerns about it.

Consider responding:

- "I may contribute to that pattern, too."
- "Can we agree that it's something worth working on for both of us?"
- "My contribution doesn't mean we shouldn't explore yours."

Mutual accountability is different from using someone else's behavior to avoid our own accountability.

Tone Policing | When the Delivery Overshadows the Message

Tone policing occurs when the way someone communicates becomes the primary focus and is used to dismiss or avoid the substance of what they're communicating.

Example:

- Person A: "I'm really frustrated that we keep having this conversation and nothing changes."
- Person B: "I'm not listening to you when you're talking like that."

How we communicate matters. Tone, volume, word choice, and nonverbal behavior can influence another person's ability to remain engaged.

However, a challenging delivery does not automatically invalidate the underlying concern.

Consider responding:

- "I'm willing to work on how I'm communicating. I also want to make sure we address what I'm communicating."
- "Would it be helpful to take some time and return to the conversation?"
- "Can we acknowledge both the delivery and the concern?"

There is a difference between dismissing someone's message because of their tone and establishing a reasonable boundary around disrespectful, intimidating, or abusive communication.

Both the content and the delivery deserve attention.

Kitchen Sinking | Bringing Everything Into the Conversation

Kitchen sinking occurs when a conversation about a specific concern expands to include multiple previous disagreements, frustrations, and unresolved experiences.

Example:

- A conversation about being late for dinner turns into a discussion about household responsibilities, finances, last year's vacation, communication with extended family, and something that happened five years ago.

The original concern becomes one of many concerns.

As the conversation expands, the emotional and cognitive load increases. Both people may become less capable of listening, processing information, and responding productively.

Consider responding:

- "It sounds like there are several things we need to discuss."
- "Which of these concerns would be most helpful to address first?"
- "Can we make a note of the other topics and create time for them separately?"

One conversation does not have to solve every problem in the relationship.

DARVO | Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender

DARVO describes a pattern that may occur when someone is confronted about harmful behavior.

The person denies or minimizes the behavior, attacks the credibility or character of the person raising the concern, and reverses the roles so that they present themselves as the person being harmed.

Example:

- Person A: "You shared something private about me after I asked you not to."
- Person B: "That never happened the way you're describing it. You're always making things up to make me look bad. I'm the one who has to put up with your accusations."

The original concern about a violated boundary becomes a conversation about the alleged wrongdoing of the person raising it. DARVO is particularly important to recognize in contexts involving abuse, coercion, and repeated avoidance of accountability.

However, a disagreement about what happened, an individual defensive response, or someone expressing their own experience of being hurt does not automatically constitute DARVO.

Consider responding, when it is safe to do so:

- "I'm willing to discuss your experience separately. Right now, I'm addressing what happened."

- "I'm not going to continue a conversation that involves attacking my character."
- "I want to return to the specific behavior and its impact."

When this pattern is persistent or occurs alongside intimidation, coercion, or abuse, communication strategies alone may not be sufficient. Individual professional support, boundaries, and attention to safety may be more appropriate.

ADDITIONAL PATTERNS TO BE AWARE OF

Not every challenging interaction fits neatly into one of the previous categories.

The following patterns can also interfere with understanding and resolution.

- **Selective Attention**: Focusing on one word, phrase, or detail while overlooking the broader message someone is attempting to communicate.
- **Minimization**: Reducing the perceived significance of another person's experience. E.g., *"It wasn't that big of a deal."*
- **Invalidation**: Dismissing or discrediting another person's emotional experience rather than attempting to understand it. E.g., *"You have no reason to feel that way."*
- **Scorekeeping**: Using previous contributions, sacrifices, or mistakes as a running tally to determine who is more justified in the present conversation.
- **Cross-Examination**: Asking a series of questions primarily to expose inconsistencies, challenge credibility, or prove someone wrong rather than understand their experience.
- **Confirmation Bias**: Paying greater attention to information that reinforces what we already believe about someone while overlooking information that challenges that belief.
- **The Appeal to Intent**: Using our intentions to dismiss the impact of our behavior. E.g., *"I didn't mean to hurt you, so you shouldn't be upset."*
- **The Appeal to Impact**: Assuming that because a behavior had a particular emotional impact, the other person must have intended that impact. E.g., *"You hurt me, so you must have been trying to hurt me."* Intention and impact both provide information. Neither automatically invalidates the other.

WHAT CONVERSATION ARE WE ACTUALLY HAVING?

When conversations become challenging, it can be helpful to identify what we're responding to.

Are we responding to:

- What the other person actually said?
- What we think they meant?
- How their message made us feel?

- What we anticipate they might say next?
- Something that happened in the past?
- A belief we've developed about them?
- A concern we haven't had an opportunity to communicate?

These are different things.

Consider the following interaction:

- **What was said:** "I'd like us to spend more time together."
- **What was heard:** "You don't spend enough time with me."
- **What was interpreted:** "Nothing I do is ever good enough."
- **What was felt:** Frustration, inadequacy, or defensiveness.
- **What was communicated in response:** "You're never satisfied."

The response is no longer directed toward the original request. It is directed toward the meaning assigned to the request and the emotional experience associated with that meaning.

Both people may leave the conversation feeling misunderstood. The opportunity is to slow the interaction down enough to make these different components visible.

STRATEGIES | GETTING THE CONVERSATION BACK ON TRACK

Clarify the Original Message

Restate what you're attempting to communicate without expanding the argument or introducing additional concerns.

- *"Let me try communicating that differently."*
- *"What I'm trying to explore is..."*

Check for Understanding

Before responding to someone's message, check whether you've accurately understood it.

- *"What I'm hearing you say is... Am I understanding you correctly?"*
- *"Is that what you meant, or is that my interpretation?"*

Identify the Shift

When the conversation moves away from its original purpose, make the shift visible without accusing the other person.

- *"I notice we're talking about something different now."*
- *"I think we've moved away from the original concern."*

Make Room for Multiple Concerns

Acknowledging another person's concern does not require abandoning your own.

- *"It sounds like there are two conversations worth having."*
- *"Can we create space for both?"*

Separate Behavior from Character

Describe observable behaviors and experiences rather than assigning labels.

- Instead of: *"You're inconsiderate."*
- Consider: *"When our plans changed and I didn't hear from you, I felt frustrated."*

Specificity creates a greater opportunity for understanding and behavioral change.

Separate Understanding from Agreement

Understanding another person's perspective does not require agreeing with it.

- We can acknowledge an experience, explore its meaning, and recognize its impact without adopting every interpretation or conclusion associated with it.

Use Examples to Build Understanding

Specific examples can help make an experience visible.

- The goal is not to build a case against the other person. It is to provide enough information to understand what is being communicated.

Practice the Do-Over

When you recognize that your response contributed to the conversation becoming derailed, give yourself an opportunity to try again.

- *"I think I responded to what I thought you meant rather than what you actually said. Can I try that again?"*
- *"I noticed I became defensive. I'd like to return to what you were sharing."*

Establish Guardrails

Consider creating shared agreements for challenging conversations.

- Address one concern at a time.
- Allow each person an opportunity to communicate.
- Clarify before responding.
- Avoid character attacks and labels.
- Identify when emotional intensity is interfering with understanding.
- Agree on when to return to an unfinished conversation.

Structure can provide scaffolding for conversations that are otherwise difficult to navigate.

Recognize When to Disengage

Not every conversation can be made productive in the moment. When an interaction becomes repetitive, increasingly hostile, or emotionally overwhelming, it may be more useful to temporarily disengage.

- *"I don't think we're having the conversation we intended to have. I'd like to return to it when we're both more capable of doing so."*

When appropriate and safe, identify a time to return to the discussion. This helps distinguish a productive pause from avoidance.

PRACTICING CURIOSITY | SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Socratic questioning is a process of exploring beliefs, assumptions, reasoning, and alternative perspectives through thoughtful questions.

In relationships, the purpose is to cultivate understanding rather than expose flaws in someone's thinking.

Questions can become another form of argumentation when they're used to corner someone, establish superiority, or force agreement.

Consider not only the question you're asking but what you're hoping to accomplish by asking it.

Clarifying the Message

- Can you help me understand what you mean?
- What would be an example of that?
- What's the most important part of what you're trying to communicate?

Exploring Assumptions

- What are we assuming about one another?
- What information might we be missing?
- Are we responding to what happened or what we think it means?

Exploring Experiences & Evidence

- What experiences have contributed to that perspective?
- When have you experienced something different?
- What have we observed, and what have we interpreted?

Considering Other Perspectives

- Is there another way we could understand this?
- Could both of our experiences be valid?

- What might this interaction look like from the other person's perspective?

Exploring Impact & Consequences

- How is this interaction impacting each of us?
- What happens when we continue responding this way?
- Is our current approach helping us accomplish what we want?

Exploring Alternatives

- What could we do differently?
- What would a more productive conversation look like?
- What would help each of us remain engaged?

Reflecting on the Conversation

- What have we learned about one another?
- What did we understand differently by the end of the conversation?
- What would we like to practice the next time this occurs?

Curiosity creates space for information that may otherwise be overlooked.

ME | WE | US

ME | How Am I Showing Up?

- Notice your own internal responses when conversations become challenging.
- Are you listening to understand, or are you preparing to defend yourself?
- Are you responding to the other person's message or the meaning you've assigned to it?

Consider your contribution to the interaction before focusing exclusively on the other person's contribution.

WE | How Are We Interacting?

- Become curious about the patterns occurring between you.
- What happens when one person expresses a concern? How does the other respond? What happens next?
- Rather than determining who started the pattern, explore how each person's response may be reinforcing it.

Make the invisible components of the conversation visible.

US | What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

- Identify the shared purpose of the conversation.

- Are we trying to understand one another, resolve a concern, make a decision, repair an interaction, or establish an agreement?
- Having a shared purpose provides a neutral reference point when the conversation begins to move in a different direction.

We can return to the question: *Is the way we're having this conversation helping us accomplish what we're trying to accomplish?*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Which conversational traps do I recognize in my interactions with others?

- Which patterns am I more likely to engage in when I feel criticized, misunderstood, or emotionally activated?
- How often am I responding to what someone actually said versus what I think they meant?
- What happens within me when someone communicates a perspective that differs from mine?
- Am I capable of acknowledging another person's experience without immediately defending, explaining, or introducing my own concern?
- What could I practice doing differently when I notice a conversation becoming derailed?
- What shared guardrails might help us navigate challenging conversations more productively?

A FINAL THOUGHT

Learning about conversational traps can create an unintended trap of its own. We may become more capable of identifying what the other person is doing wrong without becoming more aware of how we're showing up.

Telling someone they're using a straw man argument, engaging in whataboutism, or being defensive does not necessarily contribute to a more productive conversation.

The terminology is a tool for building awareness. It is not ammunition to use against one another. The opportunity is to notice the pattern, understand what's contributing to it, and practice responding differently.

We don't have to agree on everything to have a productive conversation.

We do need to cultivate the capacity to listen, clarify, tolerate differences, communicate our experiences, and remain curious about one another.

The goal is not to win the conversation. The goal is to have the conversation.