



Failure to Communicate: How to avoid the misguided 'take it, take it, have a cow' conflict resolution strategy

If you've ever been felled at the knees by an excruciating conversation or had the wind knocked out of you by a tough conflict, do yourself a favour & learn from Holly Weeks. Her book, *Failure to Communicate: how conversations go wrong & what you can do to right them*, is a fascinating take on tough conflict – how to navigate it without losing your cool ... & if you do lose your cool, how to get it back.



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While other conflict resolution books are aimed at preventing 'soft' difficult conversations, Week's book pulls no punches (pardon the pun) & highlights what to do when lying, lack of reason, bullying & strong emotions are in play.

Weeks, a Harvard professor, says there's 6 types of tough conversations: *'I have bad news for you, You're challenging my power, I can't go there, You win/I lose, What's going on here? & I'm being attacked.'* What's more, she claims, after extensive research, that *'tough conversations fall apart in recognizable ways.'* (Do I hear a big exclamation of relief that there's some predictability in that?)

Those 3 ways include having a combat mentality with defined winners & losers, having *'heavy emotional loads,'* &/or when it's hard to read what's happening including the other party's intentions. *'Tough conversations are complex, however fervently we want them to be simple.'* While we desperately seek simplicity, as H.L. Mencken said *'for every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat & wrong.'*

Those 3 ways of conversations falling apart are matched by 3 misguided attempts to save them: oversimplifying, thinking we can win, & believing we aren't at fault (insert graphic image of innocent angel here).

Things get even further off track when: we try to contain the conflict & avoid confrontation at all costs, our emotions get in the way & we 'leak' the conflict, we swing from extreme to extreme (we try to contain & then we burst) or as Weeks calls it *'take it, take it, have a cow,'* we stick to our one, single standby reaction (thinking one size fits all conflict) or we resist building our skills.

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In order to transform stormy seas to calmer waters we need to focus both on being strategic (thinking) & tactics (handling our emotions). One of the filters for success is realizing the need for being unilateral. In other words, in tough, damaging conflict we can't rely on the other party. We have to come up with strategies & tactics *'on our own, without reacting to your counterpart & accepting that you can't control what he or she does or thinks.'*

When we feel like we're being blindsided, Weeks urges us to resist the battlefield metaphor (with it's accompanying swamps, pitfalls, dead ends & win/lose mentality) & replace it with a parkour metaphor. Parkour is the art & sport of moving *'from one place to another, negotiating the obstacles in between. The discipline uses no equipment and is non-competitive.'*

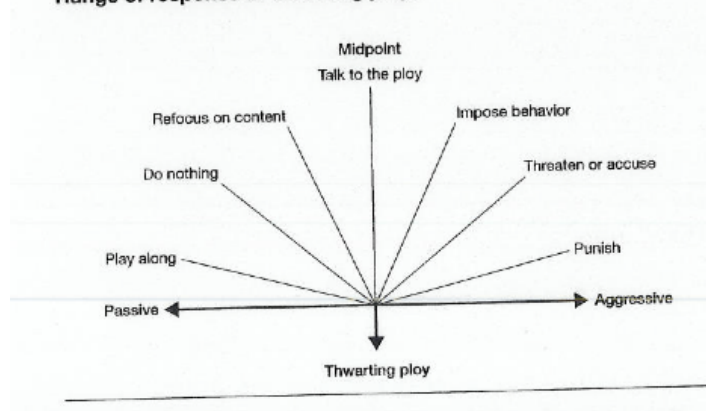
One of the many great things about Weeks' book is its plethora of strategies & tactics, based on extensive research for how to navigate the quicksand of conflict. (her case studies are worth the read alone) Here is an overview:

- **Respect** – 3 types of respect are critical says Weeks – respect for yourself, the other party & for the problem & landscape. Forget vicious circles, *'together, respect & self-respect make a virtuous circle.'* Weeks is quick to point out that self-respect is an entirely different beast than self-righteousness. Why respect for the other party? *'Regardless of what our counterparts are doing in a conversation, respect for them is in our interest because disrespect takes such a toll on reputations & relationships. Respect for our counterparts is a strong advantage to us. It's not a gift to them & it's not contingent on their respecting us in return.'* Also, *'respecting the other's perspective doesn't mean you agree with it.'*
- **Seeking balance / moving in from the poles** – Weeks advocates *'moving in from the poles'*. Take a satellite view, see the big picture & you'll have more options than you think. (see figure for an example)

By seeking balance *'it's easier to recover from a mistake if you start from neutral ground. Think of a folding fan – when it's closed, the ends are all we see; when we open it up, there's a lot more inside. We want to put ourselves in positions to work out difficult conversations rather than have them happen to us. It's the difference between diving & falling into the*

FIGURE 9-1

Range of response to thwarting ploys



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water. There is skill, on the one hand & on the other hand, there's an accident, one that hurts a lot.'

- **Power** – Weeks says when we are 'one down' (in a subordinate position) we feel threatened by power & we try to control our self. Conversely when we are 'one up' (we are in a position of authority) we feel threats to our power & try to control others.
- **Mock interview** – part of our strategy when preparing for hard conversations should be doing a mock interview, where we honestly answer the following 3 questions (for our purposes, no one else's): what is our preferred outcome?, what do we want our working relationship to be? (with the party we're in conflict with) & what interferences are there? (what's conflicting/interfering). We tend to think of conflict as a one off event but it doesn't have to be. Time out(s) to think, strategize & regroup are perfectly fine.
- **The big 3 emotions** – beware the 3 most 'popular' emotions when in conflict → fear, anger & embarrassment. Consider what your 'emotional history' is. Where are your roots pointing when it comes to the big 3?
- **Thwarting ploys** – I love this phrase. It sounds like it comes out of a children's fairy tale where the dastardly devil, while rubbing her hands together, with a sly smile & a crooked grin, whispers 'I'm going to do a thwarting ploy on you my pretty!' Weeks calls strategies that are meant to undermine, sabotage & otherwise sideline us, by the party we're in conflict with, thwarting ploys. She says we can *immunize* ourselves against them by mock interviewing ourselves & being aware of the big 3. Changing tacks by having more than one strategy at our disposal also helps (as opposed to using the same strategy for every conflict you come across).

How do we know if the other person is using a thwarting ploy? Simple. We can't know, so the better question is 'are we vulnerable to the ploy?' Our first response, says Weeks, should be an *innocent offensive*, because it may be true (the person may not know they are truly being offensive) & what's more, by not making any assumptions on our part & reacting with big guns blazing, we won't escalate the situation.

- **'Blueprint for speaking well in tough moments'** – Weeks' blueprint is threefold – make sure the content you're communicating is crystal clear (no room for wishy washy here), ensure your tone is neutral & use what she calls *temperate phrasing*. 'People react to provocative phrasing regardless of the content.'

As conflict is one of the big 3 you can't avoid in life (death & taxes being the other 2), if you need to strategize your way out of some difficult conversations & want to expand your con res strategy beyond 'take it, take it, have a cow' check out Week's book. It's like a milk & honey salve to the most challenging conflicts.

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Lee-Anne Ragan, MEd, BSW, ITC, is President of Rock.Paper.Scissors Inc. (RPS), an internationally renowned, award winning corporate training & entertainment company.

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