The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Dialogue
Applying Covey's habits to difficult conversations
~ By Tammy Lenski, Ed.D

Stephen Covey's seven habits of highly effective people have become classic pieces of leadership and management wisdom. The habits are applicable to having successful conflict conversations, both at home and at work. Here's how to use them next time you find yourself in a tense situation or conflict:

**Habit 1: Be Proactive**

Covey said that proactive people take initiative and “work on the things they can do something about.” In conflict, too many people mistakenly assume that they have no real hope of changing the relationship they have with the other person, whether that's a co-worker, neighbour, ex-spouse, or former friend. When you make that assumption, you postpone or avoid the important conversation that could change matters.

When you act proactively in a conflict situation, you step up to the difficult conversation rather than avoiding it. Avoidance of important conversation usually allows frustration to fester and the divide to widen. Proactive people engage the important conversations in their lives.

**Habit 2: Begin with the End in Mind**

Beginning with the end in mind means having clarity about your destination before you proceed. In difficult conversations, you want to have a “big picture” image of success before you start the conversation. It’s worth advance thought before simply plunging in.

The end you want to visualise shouldn't be one in which the other person “sees the light,” changes their opinion, or does things your way. Worthwhile ends include preserving the relationship, minimising the debris of ongoing conflict, preventing loss of morale in the workplace, encouraging workplace dialogue, and the like.

**Habit 3: Put First Things First**

Putting first things first means attending to your priorities before you attend to lesser matters. In difficult conversations, you want to focus on the most important topics and avoid getting side-tracked by less important matters, pet peeves, and minor annoyances. Get clear on the heart of the matter for you both and keep that front and centre in your conversation.
Habit 4: Think Win/Win

This is basic conflict management 101. If you enter your most important conversations with the intent to win at the other person’s expense, then you risk prolonged and entrenched conflict and greater harm to the relationship. The win/win approach invites you to consider the conversation as a joint exploration into what could work for both of you. While this kind of conversation takes longer to accomplish, you’ll usually save emotional energy and time in the long run.

Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood

In difficult conversations, you may be tempted to spend your energy telling. Telling the other person what they did wrong, what the impact was on you, what you’d like them to do differently. While some of this may be important for them to hear in order to understand the impact of the situation on you, it is a mistake to begin there. And it’s a costly mistake if both of you try to begin there, since the resulting “telling tug of war” will make the conversation messier than it need be.

Instead, try entering your difficult conversations with genuine curiosity. Make it your first priority to understand the other person’s perspective, even if you don’t agree to it. Real attention to understanding is likely to yield new information that can help you resolve the problem.

Habit 6: Synergize

Synergy is the interaction of individuals for greater combined effect than any one person would have on their own. Truly effective conflict management is all about synergy. Different values, opinions, and perspectives, when viewed as opportunity instead of a problem, allow families and organisations to build on their joint strengths and minimise the individual weaknesses.

In difficult conversations, valuing synergy means that you no longer ask, “How can I make that person different or better,” and instead ask, “How can the two of us bring our best to this problem?”

Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw

For Covey, this is the habit that makes all the other habits possible. Sharpening the saw is the act of self-renewal, learning, and personal growth. In dialogue terms, sharpening the saw means practicing your habits in low-stakes situations so that they’re more accessible to you when you need them most. It means learning how to manage yourself well in difficult moments, whether you learn this by attending training, working with a coach, or reading on your own. When you stretch yourself and practice when the stakes are low, you help your mind respond better in those trying moments.

Dr. Tammy Lenski teaches individuals and groups how to untangle disagreements and build dynamic personal and professional partnerships by engaging conflict effectively. In successful private practice since 1997, Tammy has taught mediation and conflict resolution to hundreds of bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral students; trained workplace teams throughout the United States; coached executives, senior teams and couples in the art of effective conflict resolution; and mediated complex business, probate and workplace disputes in organisations large and small.