



Dear Friend,

## Striking a Nerve

It's amazing when you do something that seems on point for you, and then you get a response that is far beyond expectation.

Well, that was the case with the January edition of *EA Insights* and its article, "[Difficult Conversations: How to Have Them.](#)" Talk about opening the floodgates! Reader comments came in by email, over the phone, and in person. (In fact, a couple of folks even pulled my coattail after church with word that last month's messages were right on time!) And, in those exchanges, readers shared insight (pardon the pun) about people and interactions that you have been avoiding for far too long because of a discomfort over opening yourself and/or your relationships up to frank discussions about expectations, boundaries, follow-through, and a host of other sensitive topics.

In this month's *EA Insights*, we turn the tables. Instead of examining the conversation from the speaker's perspective, we step into the shoes of the recipient of the news. (And, at one time or another, we all find ourselves in each of these roles.) With hope, you will find this edition equally enlightening and useful, as you seek not only to be understood but also to understand and move forward.

All the best,

*June*

June Melvin Mickens  
Executive Advantage, LLC

## Difficult Conversations: How to Receive Them

June Melvin Mickens, J.D.  
Executive Advantage, LLC



Picture this scene. You walk into the room. Waiting for you is your spouse, boss, parent, child, friend, or co-worker. And the first thing that's said is, "I need to talk with you for a minute."

If you're like me, just reading those words makes your skin begin to tingle and sends your mind immediately into overdrive.

*"Oh, my goodness, what happened?"  
"What did I do?"  
"What didn't I do?"  
"What went wrong?"  
"Am I in trouble?"  
"What's next?"*

Before you know it, you've actually stopped listening, or you've frozen, or you've started planning excuses, or you've defaulted to whatever your normal response happens to be. But, you've just come face-to-face with a difficult conversation. Now, how do you handle it?

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## "Quotes"

*"No one ever lost his job by listening too much."  
~Calvin Coolidge*

*"To listen -- first shut up!"  
~Sterling G. Ellsworth*

*"The reason so few men can carry on a sensible and agreeable conversation is that there is hardly one but thinks more of what he himself intends to say than of what is being said to him by others. Sometimes even the cleverest and politest man only feigns attention, while we can see by his eyes that his mind has gone back to polish up his own remarks."  
~François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld*

*"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your*

Let me offer six tips that may help you to be more successful on the receiving end of a difficult conversation.

**Stop talking.** I can't tell you how many times I heard my grandmother tell me that God gave me two ears and one mouth for a reason. It meant that I was supposed to be listening at least twice as much as I was talking. Well, Grandma was on to something!

If you're talking, it's impossible to hear what someone is trying to tell you, especially on a touchy subject. Seriously, if you don't believe me, try a little experiment. Ask for a volunteer to talk to you for 1 minute, while you're talking at the same time. Then, at the end of the minute, try to give the speaker a summary of what he or she said. If you're honest, you'll admit that you can't talk *and* listen at the same time. You can do one, or the other, but you can't do both.

So, if you want to successfully deal with difficult conversations that come your way, step 1 is to stop talking. Only then can you begin to hear what's being said to you.

**Avoid the temptation to plan responses prematurely.** Okay, so you're not talking...audibly, that is. Yeah, but you sure are talking on the inside. In fact, the internal chatter going on probably could clog satellites world-wide.

To make any conversation productive, even a difficult one, we've already concluded that it's important to listen. However, that means really listen, not just on the outside. Just as you can't hear while speaking aloud, the same is true for speaking internally.

So, avoid the temptation. Don't sit listening on the outside, but planning what you're going to say as soon as you get the floor. If necessary (and if you're prepared), jot just a word to remind you of any key points. But, do it quickly, and shift right back into attentive listening mode so that you are truly able to hear what is being said.

**Seek to understand.** I used to get the biggest kick out of my mother and son when he was a toddler. He loved to talk, and she loved to listen. But, there were times when she didn't have a clue what he was saying. She would nod and smile, sometimes ask him to repeat as she listened for clues, but sometimes she just turned to me with a pleading look that begged, "*Translation, please!*"

Well, in the face of difficult conversations, the last thing you want is to leave with confusion. In the event that you don't understand what is being said, the context, the impact, or any critical aspect of the conversation, then when the time is right, ask for clarity. Honestly seek to understand the content of the discussion.

**Drop the defensiveness.** A defensive posture or response is a sure-fire way to move a discussion into the counterproductive category. A defense mechanism may show itself as anger, sarcasm, feigned misunderstanding, deflection (such as, recounting every one of the speaker's errors), or a long list of excuses. Whatever your defense of choice, don't fall prey to it. Allowing defensiveness to take over prevents you from grappling with what's really before you.

**Look for truth nuggets.** So, you may not *always* mess up. It may not be true that you *never* follow through. However, is there some truth to what is being said to you?

As honestly as possible, step back and assess what is being shared. You'll usually recognize one of two categories of truth expressed:

**Actual truth** -- This is just plain fact. ("Yes, the deadline for the assignment was Tuesday, and I did not submit my part until Thursday.")

**Perceived truth** -- This is a point that may not be "truth" to you, but it is interpreted as truth by the speaker. ("Because you submitted your assignment late, you don't care about this team.")

Listening for, and acknowledging, both types of truth is important. First, doing so tells the other person that you are hearing what is being said to you. Second, it helps you to acknowledge a fact or perception that may be impeding a relationship and/or hindering your ability to move forward.

**Consider what you do with what you just heard.** Now, quite frankly, the ball is in your court. Consider the appropriate action to take based on what you've heard. Whether immediately, or after taking a little time to think, the final step is to determine what's next. It may be that an apology is in order. It may be that you need to begin working to clear up a misperception. It may be that a course correction is needed. It may be simply that this is information that you note and then store away for future reference in a similar situation. Whatever the approach, just make a conscious decision about if, and/or how, you will use what comes your way. Then, act on it!

*temper or your self-confidence."*

~Robert Frost

*"Take time to deliberate; but when the time for action arrives, stop thinking and go in."*

~Andrew Jackson

*"When you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening ... to the feeling of what is being conveyed."*

~J. (Jiddu)

Krishnamurti

*"Contempt is the weapon of the weak and a defense against one's own despised and unwanted feelings."*

~Alice Duer Miller

*"You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time."*

~M. Scott Peck

*"Learn to listen. Opportunity could be knocking at your door very softly."*

~Proverb

*"Action is the foundational key to all success."*

~Anthony (Tony) Robbins

*"In order to really understand, we need to listen, not reply."*

*We need to listen long and attentively. In order to help anybody to open his heart we have to give him time, asking only a few questions, as carefully as possible in order to help him better explain his experience."*

~Paul Tournier

*"Be prepared to listen; listen to be prepared."*

~Unknown