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# Managing The Difficult Business Conversation

by B. DEAN BAUM

**R**ecently I reviewed a synopsis of a program put on by Harvard, MIT and Tufts. It reminded me of some principles we all should remember when confronted with difficult situations in business and selling.

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## Viewpoint

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It is not so much the subject matter that makes many conversations difficult but how we think about it.

A story that was recently related to me makes this point: A man took a favorite car of his to be repaired after the side was dented in a collision with a deer. The technician who got the job was new and he took great care to make sure the job was done to perfection and that everything was to the highest standards. The man came in to collect his car, looked at it, and went ballistic. "This is terrible. This will not do. I am very upset. Look at that door; it does not even close correctly! Look at the paint; it does not match! I demand to see your supervisor right now!" The technician replied, "Well, I'll get my supervisor, sir, but you should know that this is not the side I fixed."

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## Identifying the Real Issue?

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Many times the real issue in a difficult conversa-

tion is not the matter that is discussed. A top salesman I once knew would ask that question, "What is the real issue?" if he felt it was not being discussed.

Often we deal with sales situations that perplex us. We know that we should apparently get this order but can't get to first base. What is the real issue? Are we dealing with the right person? Are there hidden issues others have raised that we are not aware of? Why is the person really resisting our overtures? Until we know that, we will not move forward.

Be curious, but open. Help customers to appreciate that you are there to assist them, not to fight them. A properly thought out or phrased question is a great tool.

Once you determine what the real issue is, you must deal with it. Often it is a simple misunderstanding. Were the specifications wrong? We can change that, no problem. Sometimes it is more complex. Does it require a factory visit? Is something misunderstood?

Once a major customer of mine called out of the blue and demanded we look at a failure in our product. I took quick action and flew a technician in to examine the issue. Turned out that our product was in spec after all. While they were at it they looked at the previous vendor and found he had a much more serious issue and we came out looking good. Face the issues head on; it's the only way. Don't duck the issue. You'll "get soaked" if you do.

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## Managing the Interaction

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This takes experience. Often a knee-jerk reaction

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to a bad intro is to strike back with a like reaction. Does not work! I remember one time I came into a motel late and they did not apparently have all our reservations straight. I must have reacted negatively because I well remember the very courteous reply of the nice desk clerk, "Are we having a bad day?" Oops. Made me stop and think and say, "Thanks!"

Courtesy in the face of someone having a bad day often saves the day. After all, you do not know what kind of day he or she might have had. Maybe it was a "real bummer!"

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### Reframing

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Can we redirect the conversation to the real issue or to a positive direction? How? Often we can simply say: "I understand." People want their viewpoint to be acknowledged. Then we can move on to the real issues or the solution.

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### Listening

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It is often said that we do not do that enough. It is imperative. How can we listen? Close our mouth and let the other person talk. Take notes. Ask questions.

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### Simple Socializing

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One great salesman once pointed out that we do not have to jump right into the subject of our visit or meeting right away. Show interest first in the person or persons you are meeting with. Get them to not only tell you their names but a little about who they are, how long they have been with the company, etc. The fewer people in a meeting, the easier this is. If a meeting is coming to order and people are still drifting in, that is an excellent time to get them to talk about themselves.

A well-known disc jockey was once heard remarking that businesspeople have lost their sense of humor. Let's help them get it back. Humor is one thing that helps break the ice.

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### Will Not Listen

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In some cases we meet someone who simply re-

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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fuses to listen to us at all. Thankfully, this is very rare. But, what if we meet that difficult situation. What to do? Can you ask him why? Many times this will make the meeting move forward. Can you tell him one reason why he should listen? That didn't work? Sometimes we must move on to other key people in the account. I remember one time I contacted an engineering manager and he indicated they did not use my product. I knew different! I left him, without upsetting him, and went to the newest member of his group. That new man was very anxious to do a good job. He got a quote from me and, what do you know, the engineering manager was suddenly talking to me. In fact, he became not only my best customer at the time but a good friend.

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### Good Tactics/Bad Tactics

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It is unfortunate, but some negotiators try to get you to admit you are in the wrong by keeping on an aggressive tack and springing questions like "Right?" If we are not wrong then it would be in error and in no one's best interest to say we are wrong when we are not. However, there are clear cases where we are wrong. In that event we should own up to it and do what is right and move on. When that is done then we can rightly expect a relationship to continue if we have done what is required.

One customer once told me, "It is not that mistakes are made but how you handle them that makes the difference."

Good Selling.

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