

The Importance of Tact and Diplomacy

(Or Open Your Ears Fat-Head and Quit
Making Such an Ass of Yourself)



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By Wayne Wheeler, MD

Introduction

After reading this short piece on tact and diplomacy, it is not likely that you will be ready to settle the Jewish- Palestinian dispute, the English-Irish dispute or even the long-standing Canadian-American dispute over who owns certain fishing rights off the Grand Banks. Nor does it imply that you should quit your day job and become a labor-management negotiator.

Hopefully, however, contained in the following narrative will be one or two pearls that will help you in your day-to-day negotiations, confrontations and discussions where you have a purpose and objectiveS to the conversation.

Have a goal

And that leads to Suggestion Number One: Have a goal or purpose that is well thought out before entering into a difficult conversation. Why would you bother to talk with someone where you believe tact and diplomacy would be useful or needed if you did not have something to accomplish? Or maybe you just enjoy insulting people and being insulted. The goal may not be as lofty as world peace. It might be simply to get an employee for whom you are responsible to arrive at work on time, or to convince someone of the correctness of your position in a dispute or disagreement, but have a purpose. Have a goal.

A physician friend of mine was recently upset with me over a clinical issue. It wasn't that the care plan which I had chosen was clearly wrong, but this friend and I did share responsibility for the patient and he most obviously felt he should have been better informed of the plan before he got involved in the care of the patient. (The situation was far more complex than this abbreviated summary). This friend chose a phone call from me about a second patient to inform me of his dissatisfaction with my care plan for the first patient and to advise me that he would "never again trust my judgment." This in spite of the fact that we had worked together successfully on a number of matters in the past and by his own admission, he had never been disappointed with my efforts before. I had to wonder, as he was, with considerable emotion relaying this information to me, if he had a purpose to his conversation or if he was simply utilizing the opportunity to emote and spread his anger, fear, and frustration about this case to anyone who would listen. Had it struck me at a

different time and place, it would have been quite easy to respond in kind, become aggressively defensive and perhaps even put a fatal strain on the relationship.

Perhaps he did have a purpose. Perhaps he wished to make me a better clinician, or perhaps he wanted to improve patient care by preventing a future "lapse" in judgment, or perhaps he only wanted to commiserate on what was a difficult and problematic case. Regardless of what his motivation might have been, it was lost to me by the manner in which it was conveyed.

Don't react

Which brings me to a Second Suggestion: if you have a purpose in such a conversation, it will usually be better served if you choose – and you always have choices – not to return tit for tat in the conversation. In this conversation, I chose to apologize for my part in creating his feeling of betrayal and misinformation, to remain very calm and to make a suggestion that the matter be discussed at length at some future date. While this did not solve the issue, it did allow for the preservation and hopefully strengthening of a relationship which had been and would continue to be useful and meaningful to both sides.

I did make a call the next day and try to arrange for a time in the immediate future for the more appropriate discussion of the issues. Which brings me to Suggestion Number Three: Talk and act in a way that conveys the message that the relationship is important in and of itself. Seldom do situations that require tact and diplomacy occur in a vacuum. They are almost always found in the setting of an

on-going relationship. Consequently, make a commitment to that relationship and nurture it with reliability and follow through when situations arise which threaten it.

This might be an appropriate point to add a fourth suggestion: predictability and consistency are important attributes in relationships that require tact and diplomacy. A nurse friend of mine whom I will call Cathy (primarily because that is her name) related to me the following in a discussion of the lessons she had learned over the years about this topic. Now before sharing that, I might mention that I have known Cathy for nearly 20 years and while a paradigm of tact she is not, the improvements that have occurred over the years in her dealing with difficult problems and difficult people have been wonderful. Anyway, Cathy related to me that in her early days as an Assistant Nurse Manager in an extremely busy emergency department on the night shift, her fellow workers knew what kind of shift they were going to have by whether or not she presented wearing make-up or not. I guess one could say she possessed great predictability even if not consistency. This Jeckyll-and-Hyde nature of her behavior made it very difficult for her to deal with certain situations that required the tactful and diplomatic touch. Over the years, she has learned to be less volatile and her ability to deal with these situations has markedly increased.

Be a “black hole”

Parents who were not totally satisfied with the local school system often visited my friend, the school superintendent. Some were hurt, some angry and some became downright abusive. He related to me one time that when a parent of a student would come to his office and become loud, abusive and animated he would tolerate it for a while. After what he viewed as an appropriate time, he would interrupt the conversation in a calm, quiet voice with words to the effect: “Excuse me, there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding here. I thought you came to my office to ask me to do something for you. The way you are acting is not making me want to do anything at all to help you. Would you like to stop and start over?” He assured me that at that point most of the parents became noticeably calmer, provided a much less passionate presentation of the problem and often could hear what he could and could not do to make the situation better for them. Now this illustrates a variety of things about dealing with difficult people and controlling a situation to get results, but it also illustrates Suggestion Number Five: Be a “black hole” of emotion when dealing with a volatile situation. Tact and diplomacy only work when the guns are not “locked and loaded.” Both parties to a discussion must be able to hear what the other side has to say and to reflect on the content of the

message if meaningful progress toward a mutual agreement or goal is to be accomplished. If one side or the other has interjected so much emotional noise that no messages can get in, no messages other than the passion can get out either.

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Now, one of the unfortunate myths about tact and diplomacy is that they are the same as “wishy washiness.” As the “bull-in-the-china shop” negotiator states it, “I don’t have the time and patience for that stuff, I just tell it like it is.” But does he or she really do that, or is that simply another myth? Does blunt or direct talk really “tell it like it is” or is that just the excuse for lack of care in language and word choice and a way of pummeling someone with words? As the announcer on Saturday Night Live used to say in a skit with Jane Curtin, “Jane, you unmitigated slut” when he was “telling it like it is.” I would suggest that attention to the reception that particular words and word choices are likely to have is essential to achieving the desired outcome to a conversation. Tact and diplomacy are in many ways the grease that smoothes the friction of daily encounters and provides the time for people of different view points to move closer to common ground and understanding.

Choose the nice way

Suggestion Number Six: If there are nice ways of saying something and not-so-nice ways, use the “nice” way. What is accomplished when the words chosen become verbal blows to the solar plexus? How much is really accomplished that way? Lenny Bruce, a 1960s stand-up comic, used to this idea in his monologue. He would use three phrases with the same denotation or literal meaning with quite different connotations. Example, “I think things over carefully, you stall around, and he is simply a procrastinator.” “I borrow without permission, you pilfer, he steals.” You get the idea. Of course Lenny also did another bit with words he called “Cleans and Dirties.” “Donkey,” “nail,” and “sack” are “cleans.” Words do matter. Why not chose the words that will get the results you want rather than those that may become mere barriers to agreement.

This is not to say that the diplomat is not truthful. On many occasions the telling of the truth in an understandable and

acceptable manner is the essence of tact and diplomacy. But the perception that the diplomat dances around the truth and dresses it up such that it is unrecognizable is a common misconception. In addition to truth, and here comes Suggestion Seven: clarity of communication is an important aspect of tact and diplomacy.

The use of words that are ambiguous or are unlikely to be understood by all participants in a conversation may be a wonderful way to “put something over” on someone, but if the goal of the conversation is to achieve some understanding or end, such use can have little place. If the participants to a conversation or negotiation do not develop a common understanding of the conversation, the purpose can not have been accomplished.

Now, let’s suppose that you do have some particularly difficult conversation with an individual or group of individuals. To be successful, you first have to decide what success will be and how it will be determined. Success may be that no one jumps up from the table and begins beating the dickens out of you, or it may be that you have loftier goals in mind. Perhaps even an agreement will result with longer-range goals and objectives than merely just to have a meeting. I believe a little time thinking about the situation and the individuals involved can have enormous benefit. Let’s suppose, for example, that you want to get someone you supervise to demonstrate more enthusiasm and energy on the job. Words like “sluggard,” “lazy,” “slothful,” “slovenly,” might not be the best word choice to achieve your goals. Most of us would react to words of that sort in a hostile and defensive fashion and once the hostility and defensiveness emerge communication, real communication, stops.

Take it at face value

And another thing to consider: most of us at one time or another are “black-and-white” thinkers. A co-worker who is apparently not making a fair contribution to an effort may in fact “not be trying” or “doesn’t care,” but this may only be one possible interpretation of the situation. When we are in our “black-and-white” mode, it becomes extremely difficult to see or accept any alternative explanation of the “facts” than the one we have chosen. Which brings us to Suggestion Eight: in order to be tactful and diplomatic, enter into every conversation with an open mind and a willingness to at least listen to alternative explanations of the facts. A friend of mine is a clinical psychologist who is one of those rare wise people whom you only get to meet once in a great while. I once heard him talking about raising children. He said: “Never say ‘No’ to a child.” Say, to even the most outrageous

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request, “Yes, unless there is some reason you should not.” The child says, “Dad, I really want to go out tonight and stay out well past my bedtime with some of the most nefarious people in the city. May I?” The answer is not “No, absolutely not”. The answer might well be “Well son, I really want you to have a good time and a great life. But we have agreed that you won’t go out until your homework is all done and this is a school night. So even though I want you to be able to do the things you want to do, I don’t see how you can go out tonight:” Well maybe that is not the best example, but the message is clear. Tact and diplomacy demand that you give reasonable attention to the ideas of all in the conversation rather than bring too many preconceived conclusions to the discussion. And wonder of wonders, occasionally it turns out that our preconceived conclusions are wrong. Think of the embarrassment we have escaped by not forcing them on the conversation.

Along this same line, little is more destructive to the ability to get to a reasonable and mutually agreeable end than stereotypic thinking. Once we categorize the people with whom we are dealing we close the door to the possibility of new and sometimes creative solutions to the problems we are discussing or reaching the goals we have set. Most of us are sensitive to the subtle clues from others that this type of stereotyping is going on. Suggestion Nine: Entertain the possibility of surprise by setting aside prejudices and stereotypes of others in the conversation.

Take charge

Who of us has not faced with fear a difficult conversation such as informing an employee that he or she needs to look elsewhere for a job. (One might say that is the tactful way of firing someone). Is there a nice way to do that? Well, probably not. But there are ways to have the conversation that many of us believe are better than others. Which brings us to Suggestion Ten: Be in Charge of the Conversation. For example, in the firing situation, clearly you should be in charge of the conversation and control when and where the conversation goes. This can be difficult but not impossible. As has been earlier mentioned, thinking the conversation through, even

to the point of rehearsing the punch line can be very helpful. I like to join down some “talking point,” so that I do not forget to cover certain items in the conversation that later I wished I had said. It further helps if the conversation is the culmination of events rather than something just “out of the blue.”

Which is a lovely segue way into Suggestion Eleven: Avoid “I gotcha’s” if you really want to get to agreement or resolution of a problem. No one likes to be embarrassed and other than perhaps a momentary adrenaline rush as you throw the incriminating evidence on the table in front of the jury, there is really little to be gained by such conduct. It is clearly important that an opportunity be afforded to all sides of the conversation to reveal the facts on which their position relies. It is also clear that knowledge that some of the facts on which others rely are less than solid can be a decided advantage in a negotiation. The surprise revelation of mistaken or hidden knowledge in a public forum usually produces no real gain in understanding and seldom moves toward agreement. Such a revelation can and often does produce a deep-seated resentment and hostility that can destroy the conversation.

One of the fundamental problems that parents face is teaching their children to be polite, tactful and diplomatic while insisting on the truth. A movie called “Liar Liar” released in the late ‘90s captured the problem rather well. The setup was that the lead character not only compulsively told the truth, he told the complete truth. Of course, what was considered “the truth” was almost a stream of consciousness recitation by comedian Jim Carey. The question from a tact and diplomacy point of view is whether “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” is truly the standard which should apply. Of course we should tell the truth. That is the generally accepted standard in western culture, isn’t it? How can any sort of reasonable relationship develop without basing it on the truth? But I would suggest that there are certainly occasions when “the whole truth” or actually “the whole truth as I perceive it” can be quite destructive to a development conversation or relationship. This comes back to the above discussion of black and white thinking versus some shades of gray. And with that build up, perhaps we are ready for Suggestion Twelve: Tell the Truth but don’t feel you have to tell everything you know.

Be careful with humor

Now I believe that laughter is wonderful. I believe a good laugh breaks the tension in a difficult situation and is physiologically good for the laughter. But in the difficult or touchy situation, humor can be a bit dangerous. A failed humorous remark can ruin an otherwise productive conversation. One time in the Emergency Department, I was

caring for a very nice lady who had delivered 10 children. Now in times gone past that would be unremarkable, but by today’s generally prevailing standards that is quite a number. At what I considered the appropriate point in the conversation, I jocularly remarked that she had “quite a bull.” That was met by polite laughter, but it was clear that it was not the humorous remark of the day. A day or so later, the president of the hospital ask me to visit him in his office. He had just received a complaint that I had referred to one of my patients as “a cow.” Clearly the humor was missed. Suggestion Thirteen: Humor can be helpful, but use it with great care.

And that leads naturally to a discussion of culture, religion, and ethnicity. It surely doesn’t need to be said that humor at the expense of a group of people is to be discouraged in the situation that calls for tact and diplomacy. That type of “joke” says many things to the audience about the teller. Most such jokes are based on stereotyping a group of people and the problems of stereotypic thinking have already been mentioned. One thing such humor says loud and clear, particularly to a sensitive member of a minority racial, ethnic, or religious group is that if the person speaking will make fun of one group, he or she will make fun of me too. When overwhelmed with the desire to tell such a group stereotype joke, I try to make sure that the group that I am stereotyping is one to which I obviously belong. In my particular case, I tend to tell doctor and lawyer jokes. Well, actually more lawyer jokes because well, no body likes lawyers very much any way and Lord knows they certainly can defend themselves if they choose to. And if truth be told, doctors and lawyers are often pretty funny people when viewed from the outside. This might be worthy of Suggestion Thirteen A: If you are going to tell a joke to break the tension in a meeting, make yourself the brunt of the joke. This tends to make you more of a real person and allows the participants in the conversation to see you in a different light. I must confess that I try to use this in those large meetings when the introductions are being made around the room before the meeting starts. Everyone is intent on presenting themselves in the most favorable possible light and are giving their academic background, the important organization they work for and their entire history which makes them worthy of being at the meeting. I try to come up with a short, snappy one liner. “Hi, I’m Wayne Wheeler, and I was just trying to find someplace for breakfast” or something. In one particular group which I met with over a period of some two years on a monthly basis discussing some particularly contentious governmental rules that the group was suppose to develop, I tried to have a different line each month. It became almost a ritual of the group to see what line

would be used. From comments made, it served its purpose well and others in the group became much more relaxed with each other and hopeful it helped us get to agreement.

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Another problem with humor in the tact and diplomacy arena, however, is that different peoples have differing “funny bones.” In our area, we are blessed with a highly diverse medical staff. We have doctors from all over the world practicing in the same hospital. In trying to take personal advantage of this rich cultural mix by really getting to know these physicians, I have asked many to tell me a joke from their cultural background. This has not produced many stories which I could later use as humor in the western or mixed culture of the United States. One of the reasons perhaps that occurs is that often the story requires some explanation before it can be told and humor explained is humor destroyed. But nonetheless, here goes a story told by a very dear friend from Pakistan. Now, to understand the joke you have to know that in Pakistan, people not from Pakistan are generally referred to as Khak which literally means “foreigner” but is a generic term for anyone not native Pakistani. It seems that this Pakistani was traveling in England. In an encounter with an Englishman, the Englishman said, “Are you a foreigner?” To which the Pakistani replied, “No, I am Pakistani”. Well, maybe it is a little funny, but certainly is no “knee-slapper.”

Know your audience

After the ice is broken, a genuine interested inquiry of some aspect of someone's background is not only flattering, it can lead to useful and important insights into the conversation, negotiation or whatever is under discussion.

But that does bring us to Suggestion Fourteen: Know something about the culture, religion, ethnic background of the people you are with. This is important for a number of reasons. First of all you certainly would not want to inadvertently do or say something that would be terribly offensive to someone. Why would you? But if you are

completely uninformed (see I could have said ignorant which is one of those words rich in emotion and short on content) how will you know what you can say and how it can be said to produce the response that you wish? One way to find out about someone's background is to ask, in a tactful way, something of interest. Even that, however, may need to be done a bit carefully since often people of foreign extraction or minorities do not care to be singled out and the differences highlighted. But after the ice is broken, a genuine interested inquiry of some aspect of someone's background is not only flattering, it can lead to useful and important insights into the conversation, negotiation or whatever is under discussion. Everyone seems to love to talk about himself or herself, in the right setting.

Tying in to the use of ethnic or small group humor, we might also suggest that the content of conversation in situations requiring tact and diplomacy at the outset focus on situations, problems, desired outcomes and not on people. I am also sure that everyone is familiar with the old saw not to discuss politics and religion. But that aside, telling stories about specific other people, even in side bar conversations, conveys the message that others at the meeting could be the next topic. Suggestion Fifteen: Don't gossip and don't say anything that you don't want to be banner headlines in the local newspaper. The only secret that is kept is the one you don't tell. Does that mean that you can never have a confidant, can never tell any one about the foibles of another? Of course not. But in those settings which require tact and diplomacy for the accomplishment of a particular goal, such conversation, in the meeting or as side bar conversation during breaks, sends the wrong message and can be very counter productive. Remember that in such situations everything said or done, from the arrival to the departure has an impact on the outcome of the meeting and if the meeting is important enough to engender concern over the need for tactfulness and diplomacy, it is important enough to pursue success.

Listen to Thumper

Surely fifteen suggestions are enough on this topic. I am sure there are more suggestions like use filler conversation to allow important messages to sink in and telling personal stories can be a useful technique and many more. If you have come away with the impression that to be tactful and diplomatic you have to be some kind of “stuffed shirt,” speaking in guarded phrases of one or at most two word sentences, weighing the effect of each gesture and sentences, then I have certainly failed.

Difficult conversations are, well difficult. Some kindness of presentation, some thoughtfulness of the other

person, some . . .some...tact and diplomacy can help you through them and get you to where you want to be. As Thumper in the movie Bambi said. .“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.” God speed.

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