

A Model for Covenantal Conversations

Here is a seven-part approach to use when preparing for and then having a covenantal conversation.

During the conversation, each party speaks to each of the parts and listens compassionately to the other person as they do the same.

Intention. If I am going to talk to a person about the disagreement we're having, what is my intention? Is it to get even or make her/him feel bad? Damage his/her self-esteem? Make sure I win? Is it to vent and not resolve anything? If so, I better think again. Disagreement only gets resolved if my intention is good for the other person and me. An example of good intention would be to improve the relationship, or work things out so we can move forward, or do what's best for the church. Start the conversation with my intention.

Facts. What happened that raised the disagreement? If there had been a video camera in the corner recording the events that took place, what would it show? Facts are not my interpretations of what happened; those are different. Facts are also separate from my emotions. Often we confuse facts, interpretations and emotions. So separate out the facts.

Emotions. Disagreement raises emotion – usually hurt, embarrassment, anger or other emotions that aren't necessarily nice to feel. If I try to resolve disagreement without getting real about my feelings, the feelings will seep out into the conversation and jumble it up. I shouldn't stuff my feelings; they are real. But I should journal about them and get to a point where I can calmly say, "I'm hurt", or "I'm angry" instead of acting out those emotions and confusing the situation further.

Interpretations. What am I interpreting about the situation? What assumptions am I making? What stories am I making up? For instance, if someone yells at me, I may interpret that he/she doesn't like me or respect me. That may not be a fact. The truth may be that that person is having a hard day and taking it out on me. So think through the interpretations and don't lump them into facts by saying, "You yell at me and obviously don't respect me." That will only beg for more argument.

Ownership. What am I doing in this situation to add to the disagreement? This is the time to look in the mirror, own up to what I'm doing, and apologize for it. Disagreement gets resolved a lot faster if each person can apologize for the specific thing they've done wrong. That doesn't mean I take all the blame, but it does require that I do the spiritual work of assessing my own behavior. It also takes the other person off the defensive. Maybe it is that in the past I have created a triangle, gotten frozen in my opinions, given in, or just left. It may even be something small like, "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come to you to talk about this." Whatever it is, own it and name it.

Request. Most disagreement goes unresolved because no one makes a request for change. We vent and "get it off our chests," but never ask the other person to do something differently or to not repeat a certain action. An example of a request is, "Next time you get upset with me, could you come to me and talk it through instead of yelling?" And let's not forget, the other person will likely have a request for you. This step may be like a brainstorming session between people to consider options, discover common needs, decide on some first steps.

Agreement. Requests are null and void without agreement. The other person needs to respond with a "yes", "no" or "may I think about it?" If you can't agree, at least agree to revisit the topic and use the model again.

Note: Ideally, all parties have a chance to use these steps to prepare, but if not, be sure to be patient and allow the other person to express themselves. Be ready to listen with empathy. Rebuilding covenant is a process. You may need to have more than one conversation using this model in order to re-make your promise to walk together in love and loyalty.