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It's not easy to stay cool and engaged when things get heated in meetings, negotiations, or difficult conversations. We've all been there. You might say something that you later regret, or get stuck on one point trying to prove that you're right, ultimately losing sight of the bigger picture. Maybe you've damaged trust in a broader relationship with a colleague, client, vendor, or perhaps your spouse or kids. At times like this, you might wish you could hit that reset button and have a do-over. With so much at stake, how do you keep a heated conversation constructive?

Watch for the tipping point. Know your own cues for when a healthy, lively debate is tipping into a more precarious direction. Only you know what's happening inside of you, signaling that your "fight

or flight” bells are about to go off. The best indicator, according to Amy Gallo, author of *HBR Guide to Managing Conflict at Work*, “is your own physical reaction that you are starting to feel threatened. Your heart rate goes up, your face may turn red, and your breathing becomes more shallow.” As things physiologically get turned up, says Gallo, “the risk is losing access to the rational front cortex of the brain and then it becomes more difficult to be your best self.”

Rick Juneja, SVP for Client Success at Opower, leads a team of 145 people whose role is to deliver software and services to global clients. Juneja says, “When something goes wrong, clients expect us to solve the issue fast, which is not always an easy task. Staying calm is critical.” He encourages his team to track not only their own reactions, but to also “watch for shifts in the other person. You could be heading down an unproductive path if you see the other person shift their weight, cross their arms, or start hurling questions at you. Rather than becoming reactive to that, stay in the driver’s seat.” Gallo concurs, “**Emotional contagion** is very real, so once one person gets heated up, it’s easy to mirror that behavior and before you know it, you have two people swinging punches.”

Focus on something physical to regain perspective. Because reactivity has such a strong physical element, bring focus to the physical self to stay calm. “First and foremost, breathe,” says Gallo. “By taking a few deep breaths, you can stay in your body and stay out of reactive mode.” Use the 4-7-8 breathing technique for quick results, where you breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 7 counts, and exhale for 8. Dr. Andrew Weil, physician and author of many integrative medicine and health books, describes this breathing technique as “a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Use it whenever anything upsetting happens before you react.” You can watch Dr. Weil’s demonstration of how to do this, as well as its additional health benefits, [here](#).

In addition to breathing, literally touch objects around you and notice the sensations. “Put your hand on the table,” says Gallo. “Feel your feet on the ground. Notice where your legs are resting on the chair. The key is not to get stuck in your head.” You can also “zoom out” and notice the art work on the walls or the size of the room — anything to increase the sense of space that may be closing in if you are starting to feel defensive or backed up on your heels.

Getting physically reoriented makes it easier to regain perspective. Remind yourself that the point of the meeting is not to prove who is right or wrong or who is smartest person in the room. Rather, you are there to resolve the budget, get to a fair price, deliver a difficult message with respect, or find a joint solution. Don’t become prey to taking things personally. “Take yourself outside of it all for a moment and shift to being an observer,” says Gallo. “Narrate to yourself what’s going on as if you were watching a baseball game to take stock of what’s happening.” Juneja echoes the point. “The key is to keep it all in perspective. I go into each day expecting that something will go wrong and that there will be a difficult conversation — and my job is about helping to find the best solutions.”

Get to empathy and create bridges. With a more objective viewpoint, you can bring empathy to the conversation. Juneja regularly advises his team, “Let the other person air her grievances. Ensure that she feels heard and gets things off her chest.” Gallo agrees. “What I see happen in conflict is that

someone starts to vent and the other person feels a need to interrupt. Instead, suspend the need to be right and move to a more powerful place of listening.”

Empathy is not about agreement. Nor is it the same as giving in, being passive, or allowing the other person to mistreat you. Recognize as you make more room for emotion that you are actually helping to discharge it. By allowing the other person to vent, you also gain access to other important facts, assumptions, and constraints at play – all critical information for bridging the gap between you and the other person. Below are some illustrative examples of bridges that can lead to more constructive resolution when things get heated:

- **Show that you care:** Again, staying calm doesn’t mean being passive or giving in. In fact, the other person may need to hear via your words and see via your body language that you connect to his sense of urgency or concern for the issue at hand. Dial up your nonverbals for the other person to show that you care. Rather than hearing the other person’s concern as a criticism of you, get on the same side of the table. You can say something like, “I’m equally frustrated by what’s happened here and feel the same sense of urgency on the matter. Based on the facts we both know so far, here’s a possible way we could move forward quickly.”
- **Own your part:** If upon hearing the other person’s viewpoint, you realize you have in fact made a mistake, then own it. Rather than getting defensive, be direct. Say things like: “I owe you an apology for the lapse in communication. I’m only realizing now, based on what you are sharing, the level of confusion this created for you and your team. Let’s talk about how we can move forward from here as well as how we can tighten up the process for next time.”
- **Seek more information:** In situations where the other person shares information you were not previously aware of, show openness to discovering more. Say things like: “I wasn’t aware of that piece of information. I’d like to dig into that a bit more. Or, you could say, Let’s keep this as productive as we can. Let’s both get more information and come back together at 10 a.m. tomorrow morning.”
- **Share more of the “why”:** Use this as an opportunity for greater transparency. Juneja says, “One of the biggest mistakes people make is being afraid to be transparent for fear of revealing too much about how the sausage is made. One of the biggest ways to regain trust is by not being afraid to making yourself vulnerable; it also helps demonstrate to the other person that the decision was rooted in fact.” Say things like: “I now better understand your concerns about the decision that was made. Let me share with you more about the context, constraints, and why we landed where we did.”

- **Communicate respect even in the face of disagreement:** The reality is that we are not always going to agree with our colleagues. However, disagreement does not have to come with disrespect. Communicate your commitment to the relationship and acknowledge how much you value the other person. Say things like: “I have always valued your judgment. In digesting what you have shared, I am finding I just can’t get myself comfortable with that direction. Ultimately, this is coming down to a difference of opinion.”

So, what if your heated exchange has already occurred and you’ve said something you now regret or you got stuck on winning a point and lost sight of the bigger picture? The good news is that even retrospectively, we can still take a deep breath, regain perspective, get to empathy, and create bridges. Go back to the other person and take accountability for things getting more out of hand than you had intended. Directly apologize for losing your cool and restate your commitment to the relationship. While we can’t change what’s already happened, we do always have the choice to reach out, connect with others, and demonstrate a more constructive and committed “Take 2.”

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of [Paravis Partners](#), a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book [The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day](#), and co-author of [Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence](#) with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.
