

Better Conversations

COURSE HANDBOOK

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Master version and further information

The Master of this document together with other supporting information is available at <https://betterconversations.foundation/l/masters>.

This handbook is intended to support participants on a Better Conversations course. If you are reading this outside of a course, we hope you find it useful and will consider attending a course!

If you have questions or concerns regarding this material, how to use it, please contact our help desk here <https://betterconversations.foundation/l/support>

Introduction

What to Expect

This course comes to you from a dedicated team of trainers and facilitators who have your best interests at heart: to learn and experience the power of better connections at work and home through Better Conversations. We want to make sure the five sessions you experience with us are of a high calibre.

Here's some things to expect:

- Clear and easy to understand content.
- No slides! We will be using flip charts to capture and support your learning we have learnt that this creates better engagement and allows us to adjust the sessions to your needs. This Course Manual is designed to help you revise the content and capture your learnings.
- A sequence of models and exercises that will build on one another, so that by the end, you'll have new skills and awareness of how to have Better Conversations.
- Exercises that allow you to learn and practice both as a whole group and in smaller groups (in breakout rooms).
- Time for reflection on your learning at the end of each session.
- Fieldwork (like homework, only more enjoyable) between sessions to explore and practice the skills.
- A way to be in touch with us and your fellow learners between sessions should you have questions, want to share your insights or need support.
- We may record for our course development purposes; we will always check the group give consent to do this. Discussion in breakout rooms remain private and are not recorded.

What's Expected of You

This course has been developed to support experiential learning. We keep the theory light-touch and focus on practising skills and reflecting on your experiences. We invite you to:

- Participate and share some of your own experiences related to the course content; we trust that you will share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Be seen and heard during each module – just like you would in a room based course.
- Respect each other's experiences and the need for confidential and safe discussions.
- Keep what you share relevant and of an appropriate amount of information for the exercises we will be using to train the skills.
- Ask questions if you don't understand.
- Let us know if you have any time constraints or other needs that might affect your ability to participate and learn.

Zoom Orientation

If you aren't used to using Zoom, here are some tips:

- If you are unable to download the Zoom app to your computer, you can use Zoom through a web browser.
- Check your **audio** and **video** setup 10–15 minutes before the call. Zoom lets you join a test meeting to allow you to do this before you need to join a meeting. We advise you use headphones and find a quiet place to join the call from.
- Familiarise yourself with the **Zoom controls** as they appear on your device.
- You can **mute** yourself when not speaking. We might mute you when we're training the models or listening to another participant if we think that there may be some background noise through your audio.
- **Pin** the Zoom window for the facilitator if it is helpful.
- Try the **Gallery** and **Speaker** views – see what view you like the best.
- Try the **Chat** function – we will sometimes use this to collect information from everyone. You can also use it ask questions or share insights.

More information can be found on the Zoom support pages at <https://support.zoom.us/>

Safe Practice and Confidentiality

We've found that sometimes people can be very enthusiastic in the use of the tools we teach and, at this introductory stage, we'd like to gently caution you. Better Conversations can happen just with the shift in noticing, so start there.

We'll give you straightforward but powerful concepts and tools which will help you have Better Conversations. As you develop new skills using the models and approaches, it is important not to impose your new skills, questions and listening skills on your conversational partners in a way that is too far from what they are used to. We'll teach you ways to practice these skills with a light touch.

We ask that you keep what you see and hear in this course to yourself. Please keep other people's stories, contributions and situations within the group.

Intended Learning Outcomes

We have designed this course to:

- Increase your awareness of your own state and how this can affect your conversations.
- Support you to notice and get curious about your conversational partner's state.
- Develop your listening, questioning and curiosity skills.
- Build on your existing conversational approaches and experiences.
- Help you determine your own outcomes for Better Conversations and how to achieve them.

We will run five modules in this course:

- 1. State** – how do your thoughts and feelings affect your conversations?
- 2. Assumptions** – what are you making up when you are in a conversation?
- 3. Context** – how do you make sense of it all?
- 4. Listening with Curiosity** – how can you influence a conversation?
- 5. Feedback** – how to communicate your context?

Each session follows a similar format:

- Welcome and check in
- Time for questions and reflections on learning
- Introducing the topic
- Group exploration and practice in the whole group and in pairs/threes
- Debrief and learning reflections
- Suggested fieldwork and close

Support Between Sessions

Please use contact us at help@betterconversations.foundation if you have any questions or need support.

Your learning outcomes

We invite you to consider your learning outcome(s) in Module 1 by reflecting on the following question:

What kind of conversations would you like to be better after this course?

Please this space to represent your learning outcome(s) in whatever way you'd like to

1 State – how do your thoughts and feelings affect your conversations?

State underpins our conversations. When we refer to state, we mean the thoughts and feelings that are always present in the mind. These thoughts and feelings coexist and are interdependent. They cannot be separated.

We use an inverted Traffic Light Model to describe how your mental, emotional and physiological processes affect your thoughts, feelings and actions. The traffic lights are inverted to indicate deliberate thinking and reasoning happen at the uppermost level (green). All levels are important in keeping us safe and well. No state is ‘better’ than another state, although some states are more helpful to us in the situations we encounter in modern life.

GREEN State – good to go

In green state, you are feeling good and connected with yourself, others and are engaged with the environment you are in. All your psychological, emotional, social and physiological needs are being met. In this state you can access the best learning and problem-solving parts of your brain.

Ways to know you are in a green state include being:

- Being curious and creative
- Thinking logically and rationally
- Communicating clearly and calmly
- Taking responsibility for your own actions
- Showing compassion towards yourself and others
- Feeling connected and collaborative



This is the best state in which to be having all kinds of conversations from the most loving and appreciative, through to the most difficult and challenging ones.

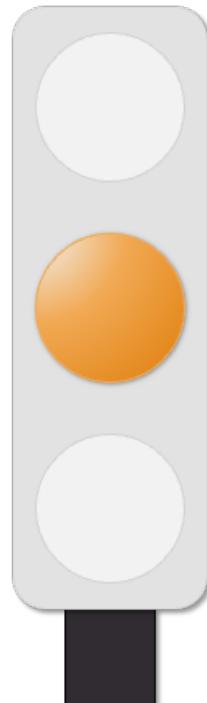
AMBER State – proceed with caution

Here you might be feeling a bit disrupted, unsure and have a sense of “not ok-ness” in your system. Some of your psychological, emotional, social and physiological needs are not being met.

Amber state is mainly about your relationship with others, your social status and how you connect and empathise with others. It is very much about your psychological and emotional safety. Here you can still think and ask questions, though your questions may be more self-oriented and cautious.

Common indications of an amber state include:

- Asking yourself questions e.g. What are the rules here? Is it going to be ok if I....?, Where do I fit in? Do I fit in?
- Feelings of discomfort in a group or setting
- Not saying anything or talking too much
- Caring about the social hierarchy



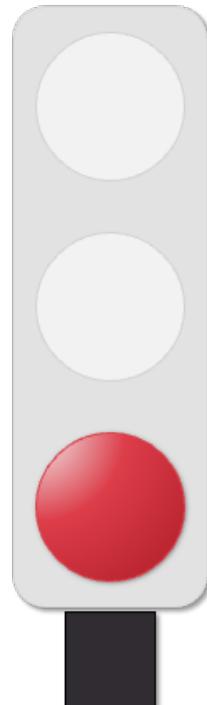
Conversations happening from amber state can go either way depending on if they go more towards having your needs met (green state) or not, in which case you might find yourself more in the red state.

RED state – stop, and take a break

In the red state you're not ok and are feeling unsafe psychologically, emotionally, socially and/or physiologically. Emotions like anger, fear and sadness are heightened and can feel overwhelming.

Your body's internal monitoring systems might be signalling you need rest, need food, need water, are in pain or need to take a bio break. You might experience a desire to fight, flee or freeze in response to these feelings. You can think of a red state as your body's way of alerting you to something that needs your attention.

Sometimes when under extreme threat, your body may seem to take over and react to keep you or someone else safe. At other times we can find ourselves reacting to what people say or do without thinking because our perception is that we are under threat, although we may not be in any physical danger.



Some ways to know you're in a red state are:

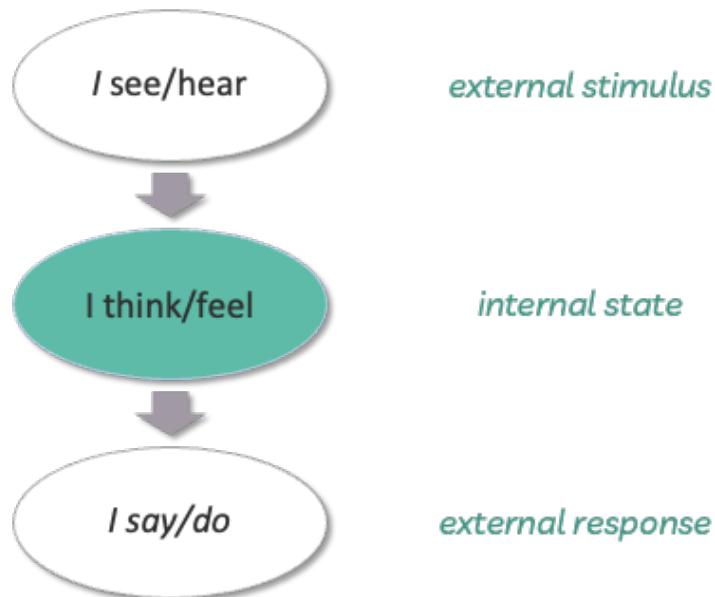
- Wanting to run away or leave
- Speaking with a different tone and pitch (e.g. shouting) or maybe not saying anything at all
- Feeling stuck or frozen – like a rabbit in the headlights
- Feeling your heart beating faster, your jaw or muscles tightening, your stomach churning
- Your breathing changing (deeper, shallower or holding it in)
- Feeling hot or cold suddenly

It is not a good time to start or continue a conversation when you know you are in a red state (or heading towards red).

Notes:

2 Assumptions – what are you making up?

When we are conversing with someone, it is possible to describe what is happening to us in three steps: I see and hear what the other person is saying or doing, I will think and feel something based on that, and then I say and/or do something in response.



This model can be described as a stimulus-response model. Whilst there is much more complexity in the way our brain and our body processes information, this simple model can help us frame what happens in a conversation. The state model we considered in the previous section forms the middle of this stimulus-response model.

Next, we will use this model to understand what happens in each step so we can improve our conversational skills.

2.1 What we see and hear

Typically, we use sight and sound to have a conversation. We can think of this as data into our system. Someone observing the situation will likely pick up the same sights and sounds, *if they are noticing and paying attention to the same things that we are*. Misunderstandings and conflict can arise when each person is noticing or paying attention to different things, or one person has information the other person doesn't have.

One way to understand what you are paying attention to is to ask “**What am I seeing or hearing that tells me what's happening?**”

Of course, we are not restricted to sight and sound — any of our senses (including taste, smell and touch) can provide us with evidence about the outside world. Sight and sound are the usual senses we use in a conversation with someone else.

2.2 What we think and feel

We can process what is going on around us rapidly and respond instinctively (before we even realise what has happened). This is a skill we have evolved to support our survival as individuals and as a species. We may not be aware of how our thoughts and feelings drive our responses. Sometimes the instinctive or habitual reaction is not the most helpful response – for us or for the other person.

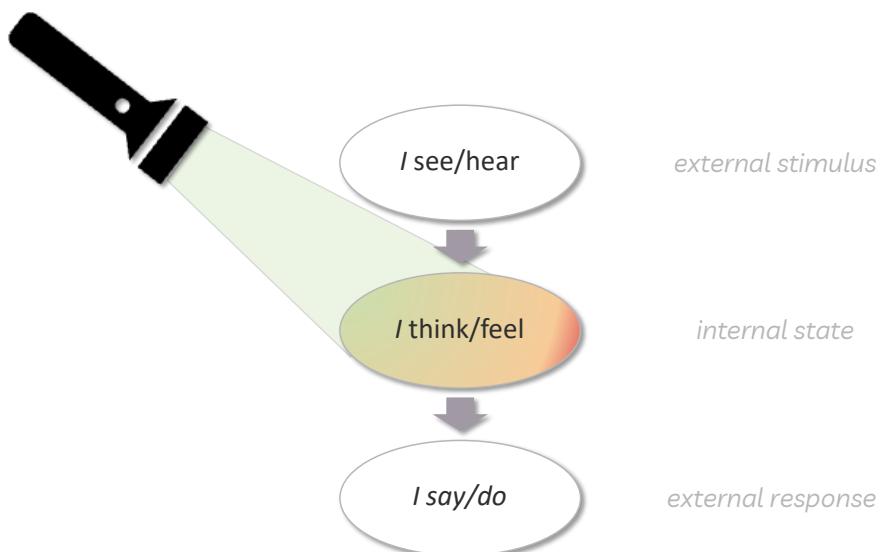
Some things that influence our thoughts or feelings are:

- What we notice and pay attention to. The brain is selective in processing ‘data’ that our five senses pick up and it is constantly receiving ‘data’ from our bodies that tell us our physiological state. We are only conscious of some of this data.
- Our way of making meaning of things, including how we represent our situation, the language we use and the way we might paraphrase what other people say into our own words;
- The assumptions we have about ourselves, someone else or the situation;
- How we reason or explain something. For example, how we perceive cause and effect or the stories and scenarios we construct for ourselves; and
- How we make inferences about things, including how we judge things in light of the beliefs and values that are important to us.

Our current physiological needs will also impact the way we think and feel. For example, feeling hungry or tired, or in pain can affect how we think and feel about things.

Our emotions, such as anger, sadness, or joy are ways we encode physiological signals and sensations from our body. Each of us feels these emotions differently. We may have different feelings to someone else, even though we are experiencing the same situation.

You may experience the effect of what's happening in the conversation as a change in your state – a new thought or feeling can emerge and you find you switch from green to red, say. Sometimes the impact is to change the intensity of your state – you might feel more or less happy, for example.



Questions that can shed light on what is happening in this internal step are:

- **What am I assuming here?**
- **What am I making up?**
- **What am I feeling right now?**

We will cover some more ways of understanding what's happening in the next section, when we look at *context*.

We advise you not to ask your conversational partner these questions, as it may come across as critical or aggressive. Remember, the skill here is understanding what's going on for you.

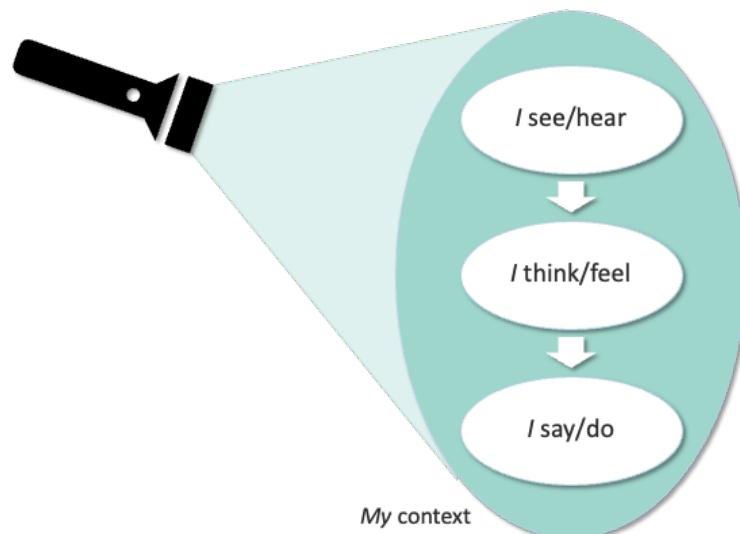
2.3 What we say and do

The last step in this sequence is behavioural. After rapid internal processing, we decide to say and/or do (or not say/do) something. This is our external reaction or response and can be observed by someone else.

Notes:

3 Context – how do you make sense of it all?

We can ‘zoom out’ with the torch on the stimulus-response model to consider how the context or situation that we are in affects our conversations.



But what do we mean by context? The word comes from the Latin ‘contextus’, meaning “to weave together.” The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as follows:

context (noun): the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it.

Understanding context helps us understand how we make sense of the world around us. We will make assumptions based on the context we have to fill in gaps in our knowledge. Our brains process sensory data and signals from our bodies differently, depending on the context we are in. That’s why people can come up with different interpretations, hold different memories and have different feelings when they are in the same situation. Our experiences are unique to us.

Context is complex. To better understand what context is, and how it might affect our conversations, we can chunk it down into six different kinds of context:

1. **Historical:** what has happened in the past, or what happens regularly in similar situations
2. **Psychological:** our emotional state, what we want from the conversation (intention), motivation, and other mental processes.
3. **Social:** the relationships between people
4. **Cultural:** people's values and beliefs
5. **Environmental:** people's location and surroundings
6. **Temporal:** the time-related aspects, including what time of day, the schedule, the sequence of conversations

These areas overlap and aren't mutually exclusive categories.

What we sometimes forget is that we carry our own context with us into a conversation, as does the person we are talking to. If there is a shared purpose, shared language or shared experiences, the conversation will be easier to have because we have that shared context with other people.

It is impossible to know all of the context that we or the other person brings to the conversation. That's because some of it is not observable to us, and we may not be fully aware of some of our own context.

This means, not only do we need to be aware of our own thoughts and feelings, values, beliefs etc., we also need to have some awareness of what's going on for the other person. Listening and asking questions helps us do this.

We also need to be aware that we can make inaccurate assumptions both when we don't have enough information *and* when we have a lot of information about the person and their context. It helps to check what you know (or think you know) to understand whether your assumptions are helpful and how accurate they are.

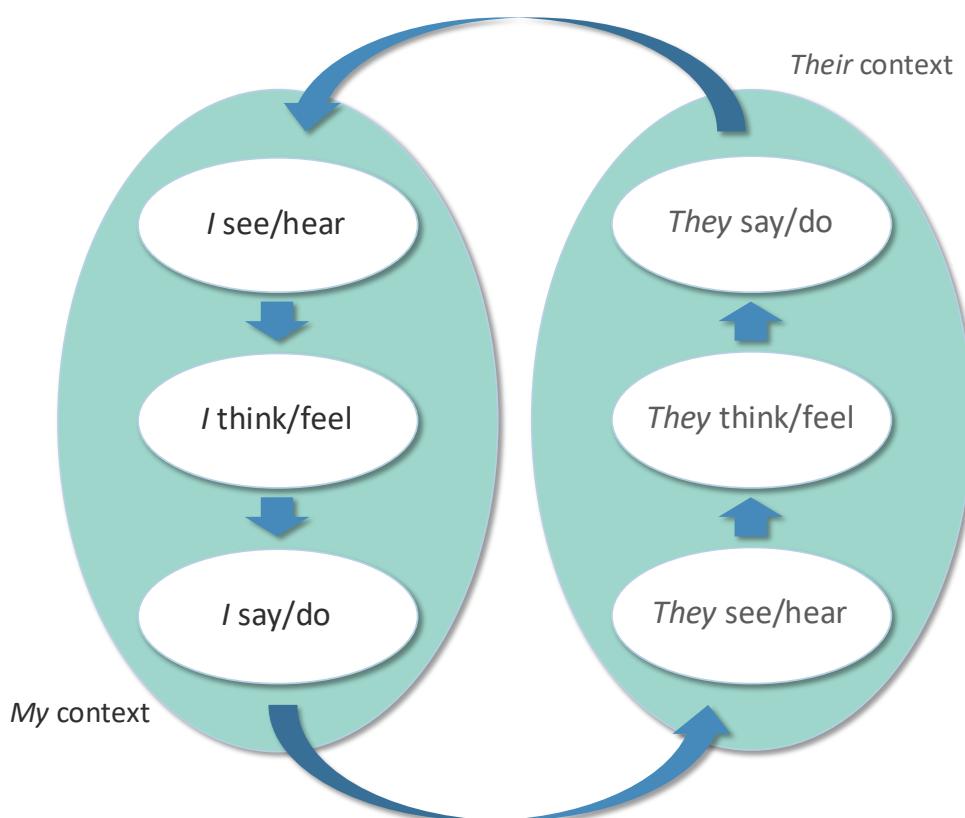
Notes:

4 Listening with Curiosity – how can you influence a conversation?

In this section, we will extend the stimulus-response model to look at what happens in a conversation between two people.

Each person brings their own context to a conversation, and acts within that context. Having good conversations can help us understand each other and helps us create a shared context to help us relate better in the future.

In the diagram below, we add a second stimulus-response process to the right-hand side of our original stimulus-response model. This second process is inverted to be able to represent a simplified conversational loop.



We take our cues (our stimulus) from each other, process that information, add some of our own thoughts and feelings and respond to each other. We have explored how what we sense and how we make sense of it can impact conversations in previous sections.

One reason for a conversation not going well is that one or both participants have misunderstood what the other person means.

Another reason for a conversation not going well is that the participants want different outcomes. Here, their values and beliefs (part of their context) will be affecting the way they think and feel. Misunderstandings and wanting different things can result in conflict between two people.

Due to the assumptions we hold about a person or situation, we may also anticipate having a 'difficult' conversation with them. We might seek to rehearse this conversation or confirm our thinking/feeling with someone else before having the difficult conversation.

Although it is impossible to fully appreciate another person's context, or know their innermost thoughts and feelings, it is possible to discover what is going on for the other person by asking questions which help us to hold our assumptions lightly.

We think of this as creating a 'container' for a better conversation. You might have a different metaphor that works better for you.

4.1 Listening without interruption

"The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking."

Nancy Kline, Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind

Listening without interruption and paying attention to what the other person is saying, doing and experiencing, allows the other person to think well. The quality of your attention on what you are seeing (including non-verbal signals) and what you are hearing can determine the quality and outcome of the conversation.

This type of listening helps improve conversations. It works because the other person has the space to express themselves and think well, and so they are much more likely to be able to manage their own state.

4.2 Listening to accept and to extend your understanding

"While you are listening... you need to separate out what you're actually seeing or hearing from the sense you are making of it. You're distinguishing what is being presented from what is being inferred."

Caitlin Walker, From Contempt to Curiosity

Recognising that *sensemaking* is different to sensing reduces the scope to make unhelpful assumptions, inferences and judgements about the other person. Perhaps surprisingly, when you wholeheartedly focus on what their experience is like for them, you better manage your own state as well.

Listening to accept, and to extend your understanding of what the other person wants to communicate requires you to:

- Pay attention to the words, tone of voice and body language of the other person;
- Remember some of the exact words or phrases, and gestures that describe what it is they are communicating; and
- Suspend judgement of what it is they are communicating.

When you listen like this, you can respond in a way that accepts the other person's thoughts and feelings. Using certain 'assumption-lite' questions helps to develop your understanding of what they are communicating.

Your aim here is to notice the meaning of their words and the non-verbal signals that they are giving. Suspending judgement is essential to be open to the other person's knowledge and experience. Assumption-lite questions allow you to ask for more information to fill in the gaps in your understanding.

4.3 Assumption-lite questions

The questions given below can be used to respond in a curious, assumption-lite way to what someone is saying in a conversation. They can also be used for self-reflection. They are powerful in their reach. We advise you to keep it conversational and only ask

one or two of these questions to ensure that the other person feels heard (and not like they are being interrogated!)

These questions come from the field of Clean Language, pioneered by David Grove.

Questions to check what information someone is paying attention to

- What were/are you seeing or hearing that lets you know that?
- What tells you it's like that?

Questions to check your assumptions and inferences

- When I hear you say that, I imagine/make up/infer..., is that what you mean?
- Can I just check? When ... , I interpret that as

Questions to check impact on state

- What impact did that have on you?
- What's happening for you right now?
- What happened for you just before ... ?

Questions for finding out more about someone's thinking

- What are your thoughts on that?
- Is there anything else about that ...?
- What kind of ... is that?
- Where does that ... come from?

Questions for finding out more about someone's context

- What brings you here?
- What were you doing just before this? What else do you have on today?
- What causes it to be like that? / What caused you to ... ?
- What's important for you right now?

Questions for finding an outcome or in response to a problem

- What would you like to have happen?
- What happens next?/Then what happens?

Notes:

5 Feedback – how to communicate your context

When we interact with people, we need to be able to respond with our own thoughts and express what is important to us. Other people can be an important source of support and learning for us. Seeking their feedback can give us new and useful insights into what's happening around us and what might need to happen next.

Feedback is just another type of conversation where one person is sharing their context with others.

There are ways to improve these types of conversations by focusing on intention, clarity and connection. This applies to any type of feedback or response that communicates your context.

5.1 Intention

As we have learned, it is important to be aware of the similarities and differences in context for us and for the other person in any conversation. It is possible that we may not have paid attention to or sensed something in the same way that the other person has. We might have incorrect assumptions about what's happening.

Our intention in giving feedback and the impact it has on someone are two different things.

- Our **intention** is formed through *our thoughts and feelings* about a situation. It comes from our sensemaking about the world. It guides our behaviour and what we (want to) communicate. It may not be that clear to us.
- The **impact** on the other person is based on what they perceive and their context. Impact is formed in the thoughts and feelings of that person. It may lead to a change in their state. The impact will be *felt*, likely before it is consciously processed as thought.

This is true for the other person too i.e. *their intention* for the conversation may be different to how *we perceive* their behaviour and the impact it has on us.

Intention is not the same as impact. It is worth considering what is motivating you in a conversation, and where that motivation comes from. For example, what underlying values or beliefs are driving you?

5.2 Clarity when giving feedback

We can use a simple sequence of statements to more clearly communicate our context which aligns to the stimulus-response model and the questions in Section 4..

- **What I saw/heard was ...** [be specific]
- **What I inferred from that was ...** [state your thinking and assumptions]
- **The impact on me was ...** [state what you felt]

We are drawing attention to the data we have noticed (the external stimulus) and our state (our thinking and feeling) that has prompted. Notice that the data is the observable part and ideally needs to be something the other person can agree happened (or can be independently verified). The next two statements are about what's happening for us.

The simplicity of this sequence means that it can be used with other feedback models. We can use this to feedback what is working well, or what could be better. What someone could start doing, stop doing or continue to do.

5.3 Clarity when receiving feedback

When someone wants to communicate some feedback to you or another person, you can use the same approach as above, turning it into a sequence of questions:

- **What were you seeing or hearing that lets you know that?**
- **What did you think/infer as a result of that?**
- **What impact did that have on you? How did you feel about that?**

Remember, you are trying to separate out the data (external stimulus) from the thinking/feeling they have about the situation.

5.4 Connection

Possibly most important reason to focus on better conversations is connection, which leads to improved relationships, and in turn, better outcomes.

Connection comes from understanding the other person's context. Understanding context comes from a series of conversations. Frequent, short conversations have more cumulative effect than occasional, longer conversations.

If your intention is to communicate feedback to others, there are some simple strategies that help alongside the skills we cover in this course:

- Making it **timely** so that everyone remembers the context in which the feedback applies and can act on the outcome of the conversation if they choose to.
- Making it '**normal**' by having regular, short conversations that include discussions of what just happened, what's working well and what needs to happen next.
- Making it **relevant**. Connect it to something that is important to the other person and that they have direct influence over. Check in with them about their thoughts on the topic.

If you are receiving feedback, the strategies you can practise are:

- Managing your **state** during the conversation.
- Being aware of your **values, beliefs** and **assumptions** that might influence your responses.
- Keeping an **open** mind and being **curious** about the other person's experiences.

You can use the guidance on Preparing for a Better Conversation in the next section to help you think through how to approach feedback or any conversation that is important to you.

Notes:

6 Preparing for Better Conversations

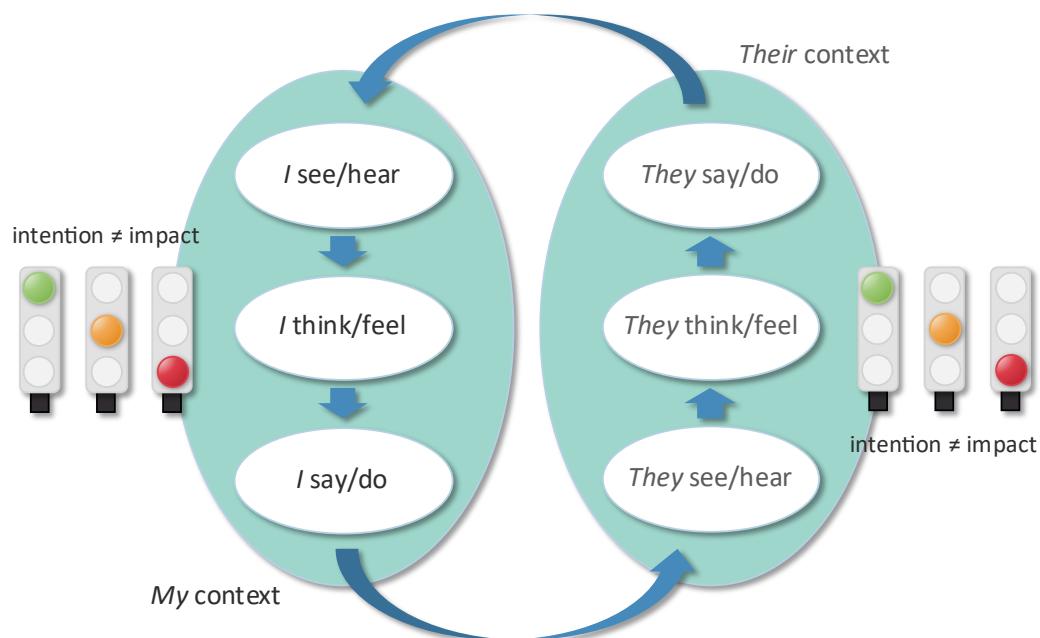
There are three easy steps to preparing for conversations which can be used to prepare for feedback or any conversation that is important to you. Using this approach a few times will help you embed the skills you have learned in the course.

For this conversation to go well, how will you set the context for the conversation? *What is your context/intention and how might you communicate that? What do you know about the other person's context?*

For this conversation to go well, what assumptions will you need to hold lightly? *What assumptions do you hold? What tells you that's true? How can you check these assumptions?*

For this conversation to go well, how will you manage your state before, during and after the conversation? *What support from other people and/or resources will you need to do that?*

7 Better Conversations Field Guide



Questions to check what information someone is paying attention to

- What were/are you seeing or hearing that lets you know that?
- What tells you it's like that?

Questions to check your assumptions and inferences

- When I hear you say that, I imagine/make up/infer..., is that what you mean?
- Can I just check? When ... , I interpret that as ...

Questions to check impact on state

- What impact did that have on you?
- What's happening for you right now?
- What happened for you just before ... ?

Questions for finding out more someone's thinking

- What are your thoughts on that?
- Is there anything else about that ...?
- What kind of ... is that?
- Where does that ... come from?

Questions for finding out more about someone's context

- What brings you here?
- What were you doing just before this? What else do you have on today?
- What causes it to be like that? / What caused you to ... ?
- What's important for you right now?

Questions for finding an outcome or in response to a problem

- What would you like to have happen?
- What happens next?/Then what happens?

Feedback sequence

- What I saw/heard was ... [be specific]
- What I inferred from that was ... [state your thinking and assumptions]
- The impact on me was ... [state what you felt]

8 References and further reading

We've compiled a short list of articles and books that have inspired us and provided source material for this course, that you may find useful:

Adolphs, R. and Anderson, D. (2018) The Neuroscience of Emotion. Princeton University Press.

Christensen, K., 2008, Thought Leader Interview: Chris Argyris. *Rotman Magazine Winter 2008*, pp 10-13.

Devito, J. A. (2022). The Interpersonal Communication Book, Global Edition. Pearson.

Kline, N. (2011). Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind. Octopus.

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Walker, C. (2014). From Contempt to Curiosity: Creating the Conditions for Groups to Collaborate Using Clean Language and Systemic Modelling. Clean Publishing.