



# **Getting Out Of Your Own Way**

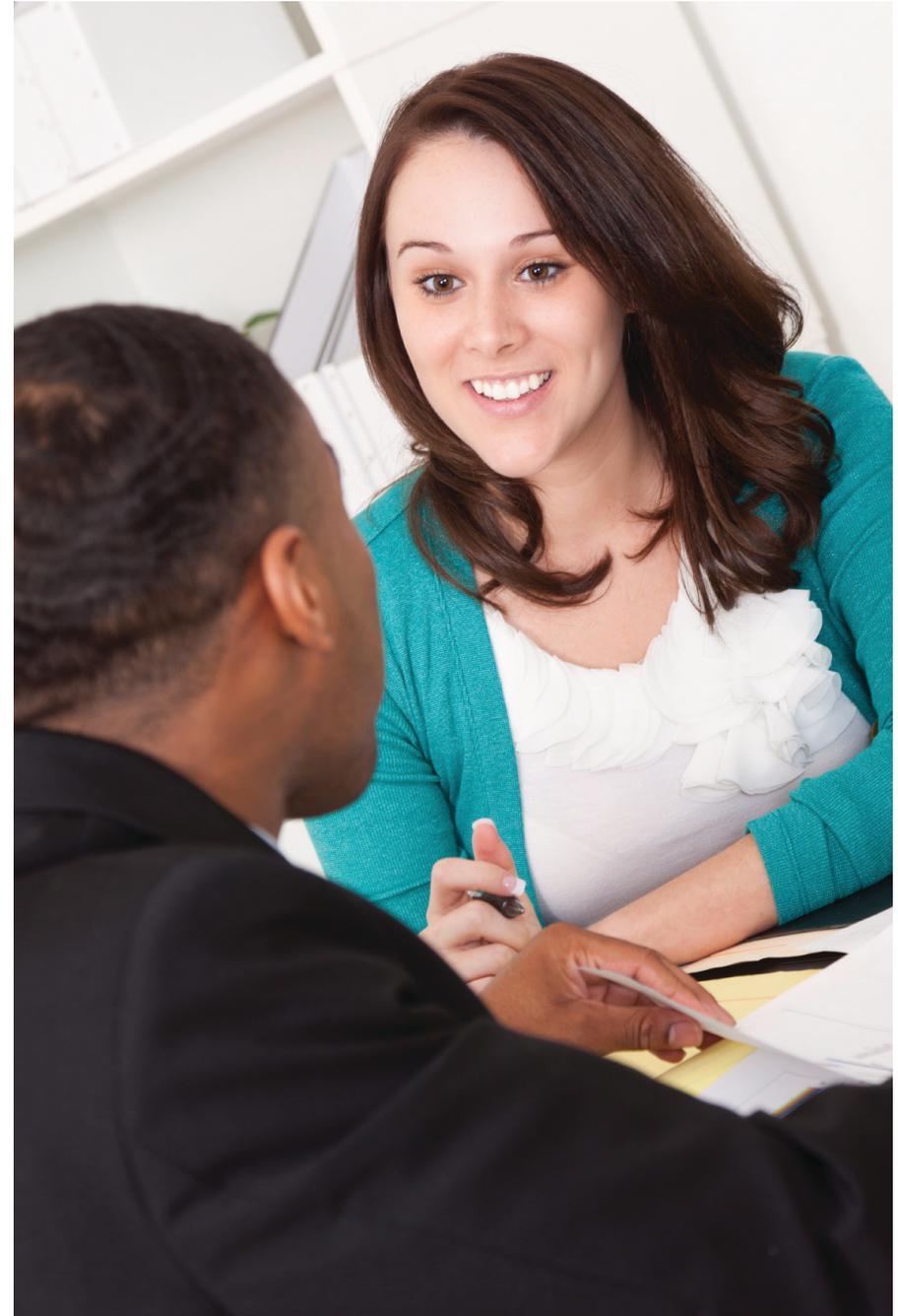
**A Guide for Leaders**

## BEING THE BEST LEADER YOU CAN BE

To build productive relationships that foster and sustain high performance, it's essential to be consistently professional in your conversations. The first step is to become aware of habits and behaviors that may get in the way of your effectiveness with other people. This guide is based on coaching we've done with executives over the years to help them do just that. It includes tips and strategies to help you:

- Keep interpersonal and conversational dynamics and as positive as possible
- “Flex” from your work style to reduce tension when necessary
- Manage your emotions and reactions to keep defensiveness low
- Increase your awareness of habits that can become barriers to communication
- Listen more intentionally to deepen your understanding of others' needs and goals
- Handle defensiveness in others so that the issues underlying conflict can be resolved.

Pick one of these categories each week as a focus. Review the relevant “skill sheet” each morning that week to heighten your awareness. When you've made noticeable improvement, add other skill sheets into the mix. Small improvements over time can help you refine and develop your strengths in significant ways.

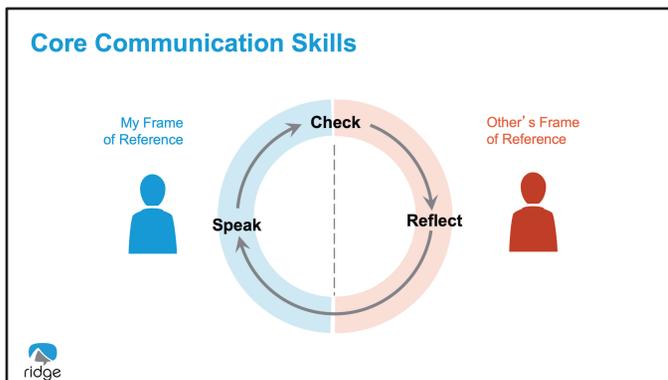


# KEEPING DYNAMICS POSITIVE

Most people focus on the content of a conversation - the words that are spoken. But the conversation's dynamics - how people feel about the interaction before and during the interaction - often influence the outcomes of the conversation as well as the health of the relationship, for better and for worse.

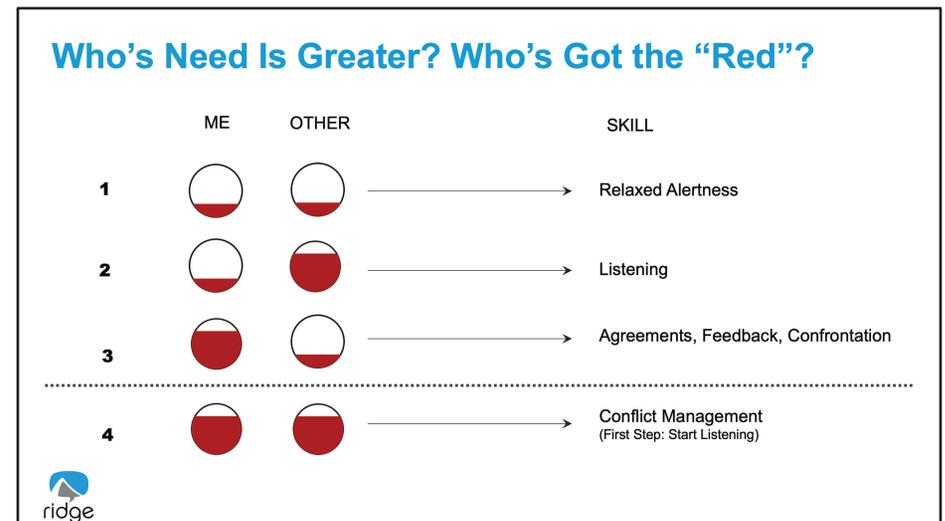
To the extent that you are oblivious to or don't care about dynamics, you will alienate people. By watching people's behavior (eye contact, body posture, facial expressions, tone of voice) as you and they communicate, you can tell if the dynamics are positive or negative. Adjust your behavior accordingly. For example, if they appear emotional, tense, or closed to ideas, stop talking and start listening until the tension eases.

A rule of thumb for good interpersonal process is to create a balance: speak a little (40 seconds or less), check in to get the other person's reaction, listen while they take their turn, and repeat. The cycle looks like this:



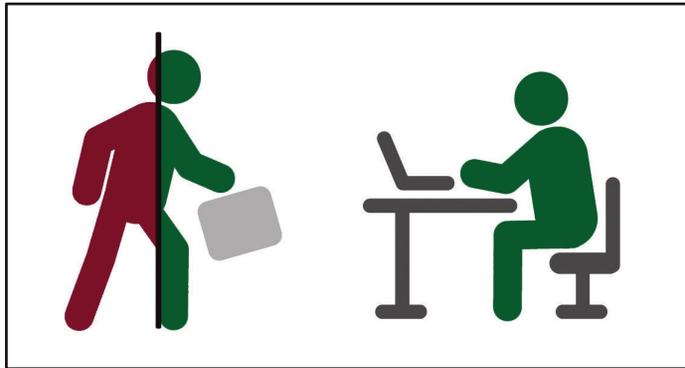
To understand when it's appropriate to lead with speaking or listening, a good question to ask yourself before and during important conversations is, "Who's need is greater - who's got the 'Red'?"

By "Red", we mean the stronger need to be heard. If the other person's has more Red than you, listen. If you have more Red - if you want to get an Agreement or give Feedback for instance - then use the appropriate card in this deck to communicate your needs. And if you both are experiencing Red, start with listening skills to reduce the Red and have a more productive conversation.



# FLEXING

Not everyone is wired the same way. Some people are quiet, some are loud; some are introverts, some are extroverts; some think and decide quickly, others more deliberately; some want to see all the data, others just the headlines; some like small-talk and personal connections, others just want to get down to business. These tendencies can complement each other, but they often result in needless tension and conflict.



Flexing is a way of temporarily adjusting one or two of your preferences to reduce the actual or possible tension in a conversation to get better outcomes.

What you flex on will depend both on the person and the situation. Answer the questions on the other side of this card, to identify behaviors or actions that will help you boost your effectiveness and engagement with each other.

Compared to me, how does this person like to work? Circle one word from each group:

- What is their work/decision-making pace?  
FASTER / SLOWER / SIMILAR
- How much information does this person prefer?  
MORE DATA / LESS / SIMILAR
- How talkative are they? MORE / LESS / SIMILAR
- Are they more people-oriented or task-oriented?  
PEOPLE / TASK / SIMILAR

When conversations have gone well, what made them go well? Identify three behaviors or characteristics. Be specific and objective.

When conversations didn't go well, why didn't they? Identify three behaviors or characteristics. Be specific and objective.

**Based on these responses, what are 2 things to do more of and 2 things to do less of to reduce tension and make the interaction more productive?**

# MANAGING YOUR EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS

Emotional self-management is a challenge for many leaders. It's natural to feel strongly about issues and initiatives; the trick is manage the emotions that can derail productive dialogue. Here are some strategies for managing your emotions and reducing your defensiveness so you don't undermine your interactions and relationships.

- **Focus on being professional** in your conversations, not personal. People want predictability in their interactions with others especially when others (in this case you) have so much relational power. The “skill sheets” in this tool kit can help you stay on an even keel.
- **Know your triggers.** We each have certain issues or people or behaviors (eg, eye roll, a tone of voice, etc.) that can set us off. Identify your Top 3, and come up with an alternative. Complete the following statement: “when I encounter/observe \_\_\_\_\_ (trigger), I will \_\_\_\_\_ (count to 3, breathe deeply, reflect), rather than react.”
- **Prepare for important conversations.** What are your goals? How is the other person likely to respond? How can you communicate in a way to keep the dynamics as constructive as possible? See the “Flexing” skill sheet to help you adapt your approach to keep tension low. Doing a little work in advance will help you maintain your calm and professionalism in the moment.

**Focus on the needs you're trying to meet.** People argue about *solutions*, forgetting about the *needs* underlying them. For instance, if two people are arguing over who gets to use a car, the underlying needs are transportation which can be addressed with ride-sharing, etc. By clearly identifying your own needs and then listening for those of others, you can often find creative options that respond to each others' needs.

**Become a facilitator**, not merely a participant, in your conversations. By choosing to guide the discussion process, you expand your focus beyond your individual objective/point of view in the moment. Use the Core Communication Skills cycle on the Keeping Dynamics Positive skill sheet to keep the conversation balanced and constructive.

**Be aware of physical signals when you start feeling tense or intense.** Some people feel tension in their jaws; other people have a tightening in their chests; etc. When you feel tense, take a few slow deep breaths to regulate and reduce that tension.

## Debrief your important interactions:

- Who was the person?
- Did you get triggered or did the other person?
- What was the tension about?
- What was the outcome of the interaction?
- What was the goal/outcome you wanted?
- If you could do it over, what would you do differently?

# BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

There are certain responses that can create defensiveness in others and damage dynamics when that person has a strong need to be heard. These responses are:

1. My criticism or blame
2. My agreement/disagreement
3. My advice/solutions
4. My logic (e.g., facts, reasons, explanations)
5. My questions
6. My reassurance
7. My similar experience
8. My sympathy (e.g., “I understand.” “I’m sorry.” “I know how you feel.”)

With the exception of criticism and blame, the responses on this list aren’t “bad” in and of themselves. They can become barriers when the other person has a strong need to be heard. These habitual responses all have one thing in common: “My.” Even if you’re intending to be helpful, these responses are from your frame of reference, not the speaker’s.

Interjecting your frame of reference too soon or too often in a conversation can “hijack” the speaker’s turn and cause people to “bail” or “bruise.”

Identify 1-2 habits on this list that are problematic for others. Write them below:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

In conversation, be aware of the impact these habits have on the dynamics. Try to practice reflective listening until the person feels heard - and then respond from your frame of reference.

# REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Reflective Listening is a ready-to-use skill to increase your understanding of problems, of people, of situations, of needs.

To reflect, listen to the person's whole message and then summarize the core of it briefly and in your own words. You don't have to say back every idea—just the key meaning. Seldom should your reflection be more than one sentence.

To get you started with reflecting, use starter words such as:

- You think . . .
- You feel . . .
- You're saying . . .
- Your point of view is . . .

Feelings always take precedence in communication. When someone is emotional, you need to reflect his or her feelings before trying to move into a rational discussion. Filling in the blanks of this statement is a good way to do this:

“You feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”

For example, “You feel upset because you believe I’m singling you out.”

The benefits to you of listening in this way are:

1. You’ll understand before reacting.
2. You’ll get more information and remember what was said.
3. You’ll be perceived as more patient and people centered.

The benefits to the other person are:

1. He or she gets to explore more fully what he or she is talking about and understand it better.
2. He or she will feel valued.
3. He or she will share more candor.

## When Reflective Listening Really Counts

- When the other person has a strong need to talk
- In conflict situations
- In problem-solving situations
- When accurate understanding is essential
- To summarize a conversation.

# HANDLING DEFENSIVENESS IN OTHERS

Defensiveness is an automatic and normal reaction when people feel pushed. Some push back (fight), others shut down (flight). When people are emotionally flooded, logic and efforts to persuade don't work. Here is a small sample of the variety of things that can trigger defensiveness in some people:

- feeling intimidated
- feeling wrong
- feeling that they should change but don't want to
- feeling judged
- feeling distrust of the other person
- feeling bullied.

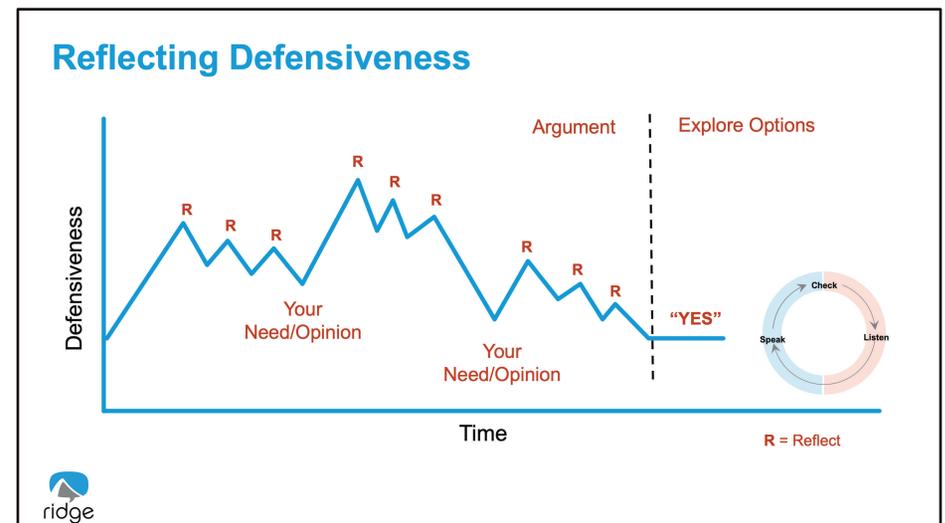
## Typical Defensive Responses

Most of us developed defenses early on in our life and still rely heavily upon some form of that defense. Here is a short list:

- excuses or lying
- arguing back
- denial
- blaming someone else
- silence or crying
- walking away
- acquiescing but not changing.

People want to save face even if the situation involves only you and the other person. Don't paint the other person into a corner. Don't work at proving you're right and the other person is wrong.

The worst thing you can do is to escalate the other person's defensiveness by questioning him or her or arguing logically. The best thing you can do is to reflect the person's defensiveness, thereby causing him or her to feel less tension in the situation.



When tension is down, you can invite the other person to mutually resolve the issue at hand. Defensiveness dissipates in the face of understanding and support; it escalates if the pressure the other feels is continued or increased.