

Foreword

As a child, I can remember my mother telling me, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” When my older brother teased me, when other kids crowded in line in front of me, when my teachers disciplined me without warrant, I learned to “turn the other cheek,” to hold my feelings inside, and to say nothing. I actually felt I was gaining an “inner strength” to withhold my thoughts, my emotions, and my words.

In my early professional life, these behavioral patterns sustained me. Educators are noted for avoiding conflict, for not rocking the boat or ruffling feathers, for holding personal relationships above organizational goals, and for striving to be perceived as “nice guys.” While I might be bristling inside because of detecting an inequity in practice or finding an inconsistency between what was being advocated and my personal value system, if I couldn’t say something nice, I’d say nothing at all.

Over the years, however, I began to develop a clearer set of values. Through writing, coaching, and consulting, I realized the power of words, that I had something to say and that others would often listen. Do I think, therefore, that I’m now an effective communicator? No, but I’m continually learning, and I’m trying to improve. I wish I had had this book much earlier in my career. If I had only had known then . . .! What I learned through the hard knocks experienced from my well-intentioned but inept, stumbling, often alienating, sometimes disastrous verbal communications could have been accelerated.

In this book, *Having Hard Conversations*, Jennifer Abrams has brought her insights, wealth of experience, relevant examples, and powerful recommendations for taking charge of your language, to realize the power of your communication skills, and to use your language competencies to improve student learning, to create and sustain trust, and to achieve the professional and organizational goals to which we aspire.

From this valuable book, we learn that language and cognition are closely entwined—like either side of a coin, they are inseparable—that words have power, and that through dialogue, we can mediate another person’s thought processes by mindfully selecting language with care and intention and thus transform another person’s perceptions and behavior. This book helps us better understand differentiation—that language patterns are interpreted differently depending on gender, culture, generation, and style.

I realize now that my mother's early admonitions, while well intentioned, were incomplete. Rather than saying nothing at all, I have learned that there are language tools that I can use that, while they might not be "nice," are neither alienating, divisive, nor conflictive. Rather they are growth-producing, empowering, and educationally sound. I don't have to hold it inside; instead I can choose more powerful language with the intention of helping others build trust, solve problems, enhance self-esteem, and generate curiosity.

Lawrence Peter said, "Speak when you're angry—and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret." And so we must learn to "observe" ourselves as discrepancies produce internal tensions between what we know or feel and what we experience in relationships with others. As we get better at managing our impulses, we realize that we can have an "internal dialogue" with ourselves about whether this is the best time and place to say something, to consider the consequences, to review the database for supporting our claims, and to have a clear vision of our expectations. We learn that we can assert our values clearly in such a way that others could hardly disagree. We can learn to listen and paraphrase first to more fully understand the other person's perceptions of a situation. We find that empathizing produces bonds of enduring trust and that asking a question is often more engaging and productive than giving answers, making value judgments, or stating authoritative proclamations. We find ways to seek permission before offering advice and to report data rather than giving opinions or making generalizations. In this process we come to realize that, while there are always exceptions, most other people are rational, positively intentioned and only temporarily have they lost access to their own resourcefulness.

Do not expect to become masterful in conducting hard conversations immediately. It takes practice, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, feedback from others, and a commitment to constant improvement. It requires an alertness to situations that demand skillful listening, perceptual flexibility, and careful attention to language selection. This book offers a plethora of examples as well as strategies for self-improvement. It provides samples of language that can be analyzed, studied, and practiced. To begin, you must become aware of the effects of your current language patterns on others. (Sometimes we are not even aware that the language we use may be hurtful, demeaning, or disenfranchising to others.) You must consciously and deliberately plan for using new and more effective language tools and to enjoy the results. You must gather observational data and be open to feedback from others about the effects you are having. And you must make a commitment to a lifelong journey of constantly improving your skills. In time and with practice, these new language patterns can become more spontaneous and intuitive.

Everyone in an organization together would profit from studying, discussing, and practicing the contents of this book. David Perkins (2002) suggests that an organization functions and grows through conversations and the quality of those conversations determines how smart your organization

is. Building the communicative competencies of members of a learning organization should be paramount for any leader. How well do we listen to one another? Can we disagree gracefully? Can we take another's point of view? How well do we value each other's style differences? Each faculty meeting, supervisory encounter, parent conference, faculty room chitchat, or problem-solving conversation can provide an opportunity to practice, reflect on, and get smarter at using our language in a professional, compassionate, and positive way.

There is another theme woven throughout the tapestry of thoughts and teachings in this book. Jennifer Abrams is very aware of recent descriptions of effective teaching behaviors and classroom conditions that maximize learning, how neuroscientific research is amplifying our understanding of how humans learn, and of the rapid changes overtaking our world community. She is also keenly aware of our simultaneous complacency with educational policies being thrust upon us by some educators, legislators, and parents who are perceptually bound by outmoded traditions, out-of-date laws, past practices, obsolete policies, political expediency, and antiquated metaphors. They believe that if we can just do more of what we are presently doing—extend the school year, mandate “high stakes” testing, “toughen” teacher certification standards, hold schools more accountable—everything will improve.

What disturbs Jennifer Abrams is that, as educators, we know better. We are aware of the negative consequences of such policies on students' natural curiosity, enthusiasm for learning, and internal motivation. We are sensitive to the effects on teacher morale, creativity, and productiveness. While it may appear that we lack the fortitude and determination to speak up, actually we lack the power of language tools with which to effectively speak up. This book, therefore, is intended to serve as a wake-up call to help initiate change, to validate the enhancement of the intellect as a legitimate goal of education, to invite critical assessment of emerging school practices for their contributions to the development of all children's full potential, and to foster the application of creative thought to designing curriculum and instruction suitable for students today to function effectively throughout the 21st and into the 22nd centuries. Educators as individuals and as a profession cannot simply sit by and say nothing at all. Our children's, our country's, and perhaps our global society's futures are at stake.

“Saying nothing at all” robs individuals and groups of opportunities for continuous dialogue and learning. And as educators, continuous learning is what we are all about.

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