



## *the relational space*

# TRANSFORM CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS:

## THE POWER OF RELATIONAL CAPACITY IN ACTION

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Welcome to the last in this series of articles exploring the transformative power of relational capacity.

Today I hope you'll join me in taking a slightly different approach. First I'd like to offer you a story, to show you how it looks and feels when the eight principles and the individual practices of relational capacity are embodied in an organisation. Afterwards I'll break the story down into a few clear steps you can adopt immediately. They will provide you with a process for beginning to transform the relational space of your organisation and harness the power of the relational paradigm.

### ***Relational capacity in action***

A professional services firm had asked for my help with a partner they described as 'challenging'. Only

moments into my first conversation with her, I could understand why.

She talked without pausing for a breath, venting her frustrations with the leadership team and how the organisation was run. She hardly looked at me, gesticulated wildly, and used language laced with absolutes such as 'right', 'always' and 'never' to offload her thoughts and emotions. She was in a survival state, stuck in ingrained narrative patterns. She seemed almost unaware of my presence.

I knew engaging with her narratives themselves would be futile: we'd be led into a battle of 'right vs wrong', 'good vs bad', 'them vs me'. So instead I moved my attention to what was happening in myself. I engaged in whole body listening to become fully aware of my internal experiences in that moment, from emotions to sensations to thoughts.

## ***“By embodying the eight principles and engaging in the practices of relational capacity, I’d opened up a moment where the right conversation could occur”***

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Emotionally I was experiencing slight panic. How was that panic showing up in my sensations? A racing heart, butterflies in my stomach, a mild nausea. At the same time, my thoughts were seeking a way I could help this person move towards a healthier, functional, more relationally healthy state. I asked myself my go-to question in this kind of situation: ‘What’s the one thing that needs to happen before anything else can happen?’

I knew the first step was to bring her into the here and now. This is crucial when a person is in a protect-and-fight survival mode and has fallen into the groove of familiar narratives (in her case, ‘nobody takes me seriously, but I’m going to keep talking in the hope of somehow being heard’). So, bringing myself into balance with a deep breath in and out through the nose, I gently broke her flow by asking, ‘Would it be okay if I asked a question?’

***“At that moment we had uncovered her real emotional need: to be told she wasn’t crazy, and to feel she was being heard”***

She was stopped in her tracks. Initially her response was a slightly irritable ‘Of course.’ But then I thanked her warmly and enquired, ‘What is it you really need from me in this conversation?’ It was as if a switch had been flipped. There was a moment’s silence as she looked to the side, a deep sigh left her body and she sat very still.

‘I don’t really know,’ she said first. Then after some reflection she continued. ‘Well, I guess I want you to tell me I’m not crazy. Every time I try to tell someone my experience here they roll their eyes and tell me I’m exaggerating.’

At that moment we had uncovered her real emotional need: to be told she wasn’t crazy, and to feel she was being heard. By embodying the eight principles and engaging in the practices of relational capacity, I’d opened-up a moment where the right conversation could occur. In it we could communicate what was happening for us both, attend to the relational space between us, and explore what we were actually able to do together to improve her situation. We could empower her to make the contribution she wanted to make.

She was now able to communicate clearly what she hoped the leadership team would understand about her thinking, needs and vulnerabilities. Before long we were working together to understand how she had come to be perceived as challenging. She began to see how she had contributed to the ‘stand-off’ that had set in. She could understand how her survival state was clashing with those of other members of the leadership team, and how by learning to self-regulate she could avoid that state, doing her part to co-create relational spaces where more effective conversations could occur.

## *“I was guiding the two of us on a path towards building a co-regulated, relationally healthy space where we could meet and communicate effectively”*

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Towards the end of the conversation, I took the time to summarise her key points as I had heard them, finishing with a very simple question: ‘Did I get you?’ After another deep exhale she said, ‘Yes, absolutely – I actually can’t believe you got all that.’

A reflective quietness had settled in the space that couldn’t have been more different to the frantic atmosphere of only an hour earlier. My final question to her was: ‘What’s the one thing that landed for you in this conversation above all else?’ After a pause for reflection she responded: ‘Well, as hard as this is to admit, I can see now I’m part of the problem, and I really want to fix it.’

### *A 6-step relational process you can use today*

Now I’d like to break the conversation down into six manageable, easily implemented interventions. These will provide you with a process you can begin to use immediately.

I was guiding the two of us on a path towards building a co-regulated, relationally healthy space where we could meet and communicate effectively. It’s a path you can follow yourself in any similar conversation by adopting these six steps.

### *Step 1: Reflect and Regulate*

What you need to know: The person had entered ‘transmit’ mode, which is a survival state. When faced with this kind of state, engaging with the content of what’s being shared is unlikely to help. Instead, shift your focus to what is happening in the moment: for you, for the other, and in the relational space.

### *“We know from attachment theory that emotional attunement is crucial for healthy relational spaces”*

Any attempt to challenge the thinking of someone in a survival state will only reinforce that state. Even offering advice will prompt them to defend, attack or withdraw. To make an open and collaborative conversation possible, first use **whole body listening** (explored in the [previous article](#)) to attune to the emotions, bodily sensations and thoughts you are experiencing in the moment.

We know from attachment theory that emotional attunement is crucial for healthy relational spaces. Your increased presence and focus on the relational space will allow you to attune to the emotional cues of the other, understand their needs, and foster psychological safety.

## *“Offering respect and deference to the person’s needs and desires, asking permission shifts the conversation by inviting them to join you in the here and now, initiating dialogue rather than monologue”*

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What you can do: Shift your attention from the content of what is being said to what is happening, not only in the other but in you and the relational space as well. And regulate yourself! The most effective way to do this is through **whole body listening**. Use a breathing technique – I find nose breathing very effective – to lower your heart-rate and get more oxygen to your brain and the rest of your body. This will regulate your own system in preparation for co-regulation, significantly increasing your capacity for presence, reflection, curiosity and the rest of the eight principles. This is the route to improved understanding and connection.

### **Step 2: Ask Permission**

What you need to know: Seeking permission is key and represents a pivotal moment in the encounter. Offering respect and deference to the person’s needs and desires, it shifts the conversation by inviting them to join you in the here and now, initiating dialogue rather than monologue. It demonstrates your intention to engage in a genuine conversation rather than imposing an agenda. This sets the stage for a constructive, collaborative encounter.

*“Your role is to support regulation and to help the person out of their survival state”*

When we view my story through the lens of polyvagal theory and attachment theory, we can see the person had entered a survival state in part because the conversation seemed confrontational or threatening. Asking permission establishes a non-coercive dynamic, acknowledging you respect the autonomy of the other and offering a safety cue to reassure them a safe and non-threatening relational space is being fostered.

What you can do: Find a moment when the person pauses for breath, and in a warm, friendly tone ask **‘Would it be ok if I asked a question?’** Look directly at the person with soft, kind eyes. Regulate your breathing, relax your body and keep movement to a minimum. Any loud, fast, or erratic movements will contribute to the survival response. Your role is to support regulation and to help the person out of their survival state.

### **Step 3: Clarify**

What you need to know: Clarifying the need of the other is a simple but powerful tool, shifting the focus of attention from what is being said (the narrative groove in which the person is stuck) to the underlying need influencing how they are showing up.

A clarifying question reduces the perception of threat and supports the regulation of the autonomic nervous system. This is a crucial step in co-regulation. It will help you identify the person’s attachment style, giving you valuable information about what is getting them stuck in the first place.

***“When a person feels heard and understood they are more open to being vulnerable in an appropriate way, allowing them to perceive their contribution to a problem”***

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What you can do: In a warm voice ask **‘What do you need from me in this conversation?’** Again ensure you regulate your breathing, relax your body and keep movement to a minimum as a way to bring about co-regulation.

### **Step 4: Mirror**

What you need to know: When a person is in a survival state, any attempt to offer advice or change their thinking can intensify their defensive reactions. By contrast, mirroring allows you to reflect back what they have said without judgement or interpretation. It can be employed at any point in a conversation, and will be useful whenever you feel a shift in you, the other or the relational space, so you continue to have the right, effective conversation.

Mirroring ensures you fully understand what the other is saying without adding your own thinking or views. When you mirror someone’s words and emotions without judgement, you signal to them you are attuned to their experience and reduce their perception of threat. This can help regulate their autonomic nervous system and bring about a shift from a survival state to one of engagement. You are letting them know you are not attempting to change their experience, but rather validating it. (This doesn’t mean you are agreeing with them: validating is not agreeing.)

Mirroring sets an open, encouraging tone for the conversation. There is now room for real collaboration, since when we feel validated we are more likely to lean in and work together to find solutions. When a person feels heard and understood they are more open to being vulnerable in an appropriate way, allowing them to perceive their contribution to a problem. Mirroring also slows the conversation down, creating time for each party to make sure they are fully getting what is being said.

***“Mirroring ensures you fully understand what the other is saying without adding your own thinking or views”***

What you can do: Pay close attention to what the person is saying – without any interpretation. Allow the person to speak. When there is a pause, or you feel they have shared a lot and you are beginning to be overwhelmed, say in a warm, regulated manner **‘Okay, so what I’m hearing from you is ... ’**

Ensure you use the other person’s words verbatim where possible. This is not a summary, so the aim is to capture as much as possible of what you heard. In order for you to be able to stay regulated and present you need to be mirroring back regularly throughout the conversation.

*“Reflection is essential if participants are to consolidate and integrate their understandings and experiences of the meeting. It offers each individual clarity on what resonated most during the conversation – for them and for others”*

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### ***Step 5: Summarise***

What you need to know: While mirroring focuses on the details of the content and involves validating and empathising with the other person, summarising condenses and organises key points, ideas and experiences to create a shared understanding of the conversation as a whole. It brings increased focus and clarity, allowing both or all participants to take time for reflection and if necessary to adjust or add something to a summary if it seems there isn't full alignment.

Summarising aids decision-making and problem-solving by presenting a clear and concise picture of the entire conversation.

***“By embracing mutual vulnerability, we reduce the perceived need for defence or attack”***

What you can do: Identify the points from throughout the conversation you deem most important. These should include where you started, the journey of the conversation and where you have landed at the end. Before summarising, ask permission: **‘Would it be ok if we took a minute to recap the conversation?’**

If the other person assents then go ahead with the summary. My rule of thumb is to use no more than six sentences to summarise, and I only include emotions if they were a key focus of the conversation.

### ***Step 6: Reflect***

What you need to know: Reflection is essential if participants are to consolidate and integrate their understandings and experiences of the meeting. It offers each individual clarity on what resonated most during the conversation – for them and for others. This is crucial, since a shared reflective process fosters co-regulation by letting everyone know it is okay to pause to reflect on and even rethink parts of the conversation.

Shared reflection helps everyone understand what is important for each individual person, avoiding the unreliable assumption that we are all experiencing and understanding in the same way. Reflection also offers an opportunity to deepen our understanding of ourselves, the other and the relational space, creating more meaningful and effective interactions.

*“The eight principles are the foundation, the practices are how the principles can be embodied by individuals, and the processes are how the principles and practices can be embedded and integrated into organisations”*

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What you can do: When you come to the end of the conversation, ask permission to take a moment to reflect. For instance, you could say: **‘We need to bring this to a close, so would it be okay if I took a moment to check the one thing that landed for you in our conversation?’** Allow a moment or two for you both to reflect on that question. Again, engage in whole body listening and use breathwork to maintain regulation and presence. Wait for the person to share what’s landed for them, and if they share more than two sentences gently invite them to home in on a single thing by saying, **‘It sounds like the one thing is ... Did I get you?’**

### How to begin to implement these six steps

I hope when you next encounter someone in a ‘transmit’ survival state the steps I have described will be useful! Please don’t be discouraged if you need to implement them one at a time: if you begin with Step 1 alone that’s a great start, and over time you will be able to implement the others as your experience and confidence grows.

### **Relational capacity: it’s all about the 3 Ps**

Processes such as the one I’ve just offered you are the last of the 3 Ps. I hope I’ve shown clearly how the three form an interrelated, organic whole, working together in harmony to build relational capacity. The eight principles are the foundation, the practices are how the principles can be embodied by individuals, and the processes are how the principles and practices can be embedded and integrated into organisations. No single one is enough on its own. Each is crucial for enabling and supporting the others.

The relational paradigm is already here, and you have a golden opportunity to harness its potential. This is what the 3 Ps are all about: building the relational capacity that will give your employees, teams and organisation as a whole the resilience, agility and effectiveness they need to thrive in times of challenge and change.

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