

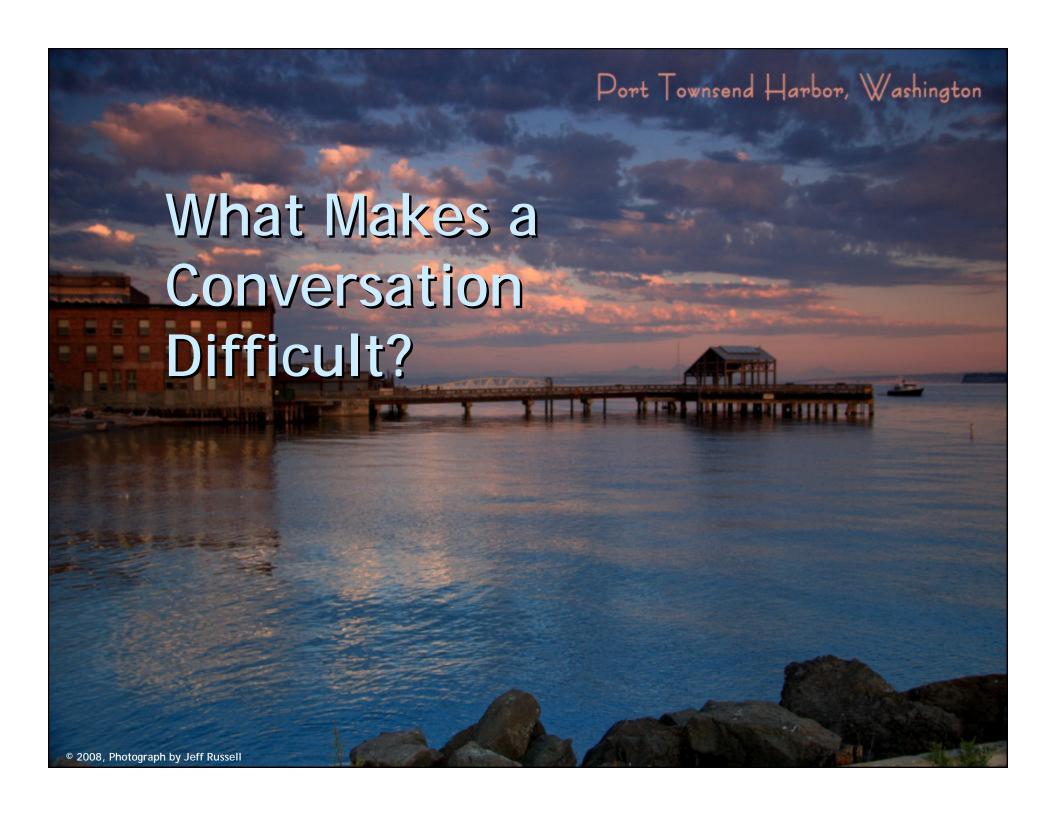
### Sauk County Personnel Association

# Surviving a *Difficult*Conversation

Telling the Truth to People Who May Not Want to Hear it!

With Jeff Russell Russell Consulting, Inc.





### A Definition . . .

A difficult conversation is a situation in which at least two parties are engaged where (a) there are differing opinions, perceptions, and needs/wants, (b) feelings and emotions run strong, and (c) the consequences or stakes for us are significant.

### A Difficult Conversation

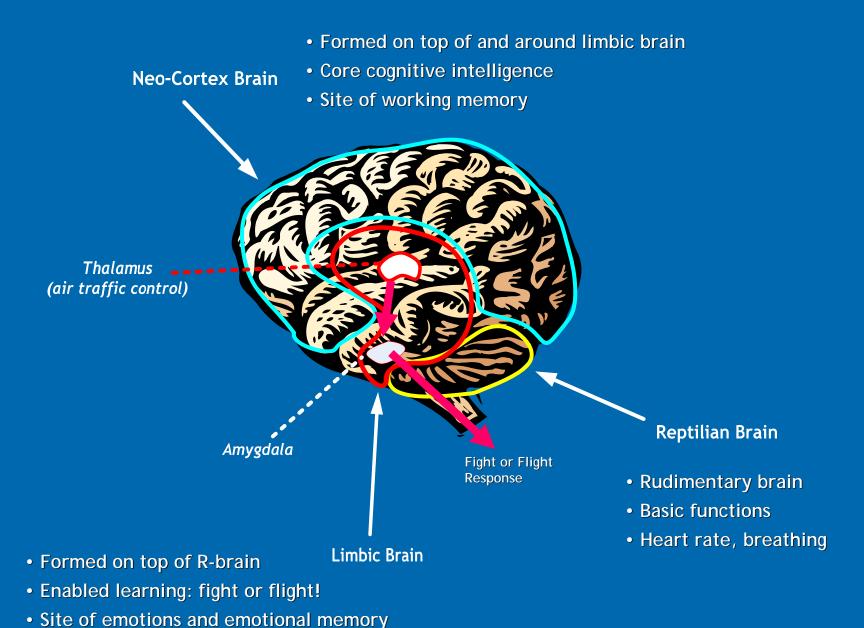
- No safety (no one able or willing to tell the truth).
- > Emotions define the conversation.
- No listening, no dialogue.
- Both going for a "win" (forcing the other to "lose").
- Each side playing a role: victim, villain, helpless martyr, etc.

### Why Do We Self-Destruct?

- 1. Our fight or flight response.
- 2. We're not <u>prepared</u> (Where did THAT come from?).
- 3. We don't know what we want.
- 4. We don't have the skills.
- 5. We fear a loss of control (and control is everything!).
- 6. We're embarrassed or feel vulnerable.



### Our Three Brains . . .



### An Amygdala Hijack!!

When your "fight or flight" response kicks in . . . Your heart races and blood pressure increases, you sweat profusely, have an uneasy feeling in the "gut," clench your jaw, twitching, tapping foot, cold hands and feet extremities as the brain rushes blood *away* from your cerebral cortex and *toward* the muscles needed for fighting or fleeing . . .

This robs your brain of vital oxygen . . . which, in turn leads to:

- Emotions overwhelming your thinking and actions
- You are thinking and acting against your own will!
- You are unable to accurately read others' emotions
- You are unable to find the right words . . . (stumbling, stuttering when you try to speak)
- You are unable to focus your thinking or actions



- What actions can we take to calm our own Amygdala?
- What actions can we take to help calm others' Amygdala?

### Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

- ➤ Feeling Threatened We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person's intentions and goals are aimed at frustrating or preventing us from achieving what we want in a given situation.
- Feeling a Loss of Control We may feel unsafe if another person is taking control of our situation, circumstances, fate or future.

### Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

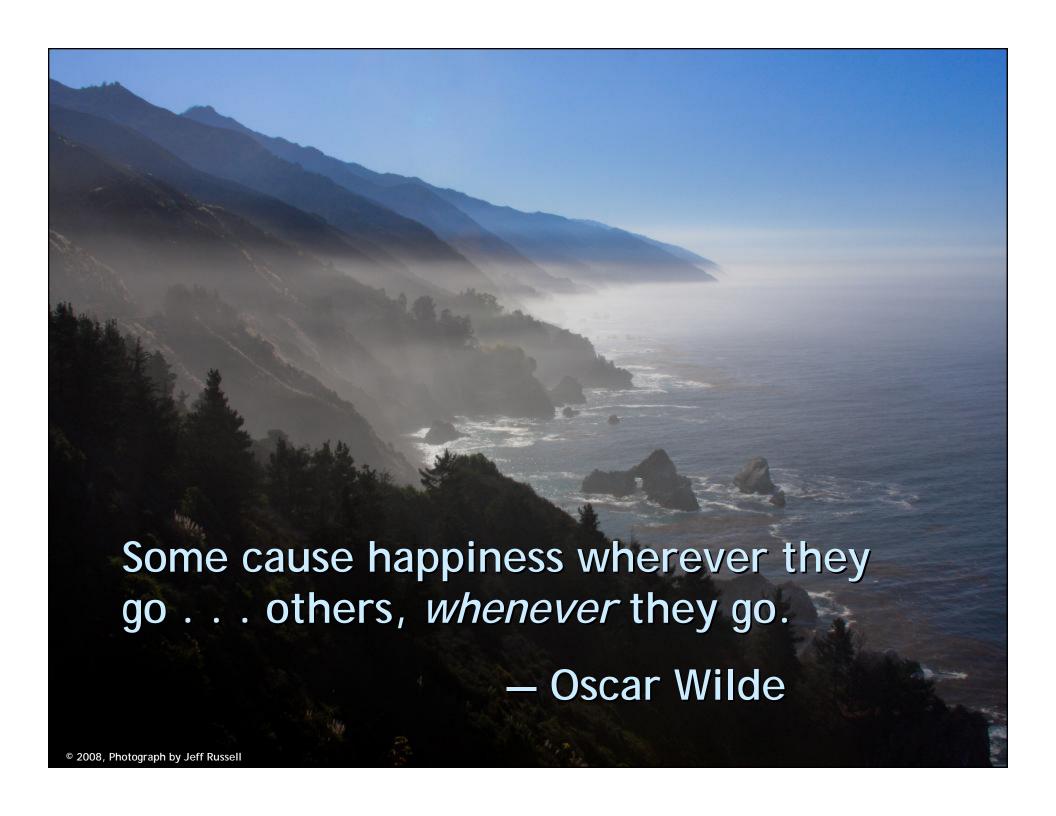
- Feeling Exposed or <u>Vulnerable</u> We may feel unsafe if we believe that some perceived personal weakness, vulnerability, mistake, or failing will be revealed or exposed by the other person.
- Feeling Disrespected We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person is dismissive and disrespectful of our ideas, opinions, performance, contributions, effort, and so forth.

### Steps to Finding Safety

- 1. Recognize the signs.
- 2. Stop the Amygdala Hijack!
- 3. Step out of the of the conversation. Ask yourself:
  - Identify what you really want/need and what you don't want/need in this situation. Think of the wants/don't wants for yourself, for the other person, and for the relationship.
  - Identify what you need to do right now to achieve your wants/needs, communicate your don't wants/needs, and create safety for the other person.
  - What can I learn from the other person right now?

### Steps to Safety

- 4. Step back into the conversation.
  - a) Offer a genuine apology Identify what you may be doing that has contributed to the problem and then apologize. Demonstrate a real change of heart.
  - b) Tell the person what you don't want to see happen: to feel as though you are not respecting their opinions/ideas or to mistrust your intentions and purposes
  - c) Tell the person what you <u>do</u> want to see happen for yourself, the other person, for your relationship
- 5. Verify that safety has been restored.



### Unilateral Control Mindset — A Losing Proposition

### Unilateral Control Mindset **Governing Values and Assumptions Enacting Behaviors** Consequences Achieve your I am right, those who Withhold information from others Poor communication and goals disagree with me are that may cause me embarrassment limited understanding. wrong. or expose a vulnerability. Win, don't lose Root causes of Don't test assumptions, inferences, Only I have a complete challenges/difficulties and judgments about others. Minimize the understanding of the facts. are unexplored. expression or Keep reasoning and intentions generation of There is only one right Erosion in working private. answer-and it is mine. negative feelings relationships. Don't inquire into others' reasoning Act rationally Being open to another's Lower levels of trust. and intentions. perspective raises the Decide and act unilaterally. Indifference to Higher interpersonal possibility that I may be others conflict. wrong-which I can't Be blind to inconsistencies in your entertain. own behavior. Limited compassion. I have pure motives, those Be blind to the effects of your Less than optimal results who disagree with me do decisions and actions on others. (e.g., productivity and not. Suppress feelings. performance). My feelings are justified. Prevent others from being hurt by Shallow conversations. covering up, withholding information, and "easing in" to Self-fulfilling, selfdifficult or sensitive issues. sealing processes. Don't question deeply held beliefs Limited or no learning. and behavioral patterns.

### Mutual Learning Mindset — A Winning Approach

### **Mutual Learning Mindset Governing Values and Assumptions Enacting Behaviors** Consequences I have something to learn Share all relevant information. Valid information • Better communication from others in this and understanding. Free and Identify and test assumptions and relationship. informed choice inferences. Root causes of I have information, challenges/difficulties knowledge, and experience Internal Suspend judgment. are identified. that I bring to this commitment to relationship — and so does Share your reasoning and intent and Stronger working the choice inquire into others' reasoning, the other person. relationships. Transparency intentions, perspective, knowledge, People make free and and experience. Greater trust. informed choices when they **Empathy** receive all relevant Listen for understanding. Lower interpersonal information. conflict. Focus on interests not positions. There are many right Greater compassion. answers to any problem or Develop shared meaning — of key challenge. words, concepts, ideas, events, Better results (e.g., decisions, and actions. productivity and Giving up control increases performance). a person's influence. Share decision making and action Empathy is a bridge to planning. Deeper and more understanding. meaningful See the parts, understand the conversations. Differences provide whole. opportunities for insight and Mutual learning. learning. Use critical reflection to examine deeply held beliefs and behavioral People are doing their best patterns. to act with integrity-given their circumstances.

### Governing Values . . .

- Valid Information All relevant information is shared so that everyone understands what they need to know.
- Free and Informed Choice People make their independent decisions based upon valid information, not pressure.
- Internal Commitment to Decisions Individuals take responsibility for the decisions that they participate in.
- Transparency Individuals feel comfortable with open, honest, and direct communication with no "hidden agendas" or undiscussables.
- Empathy Individuals have compassion for others and differing viewpoints and a genuine interest in understanding another's perspective.

### The Enacting Behaviors

- 1. Share all relevant information.
- Identify and test assumptions and inferences.
- 3. Suspend judgment.
- 4. Share your <u>reasoning and intent</u> and inquire into others' reasoning, intentions, perspective, knowledge, and experience.
- 5. Listen for understanding.

### The Enacting Behaviors

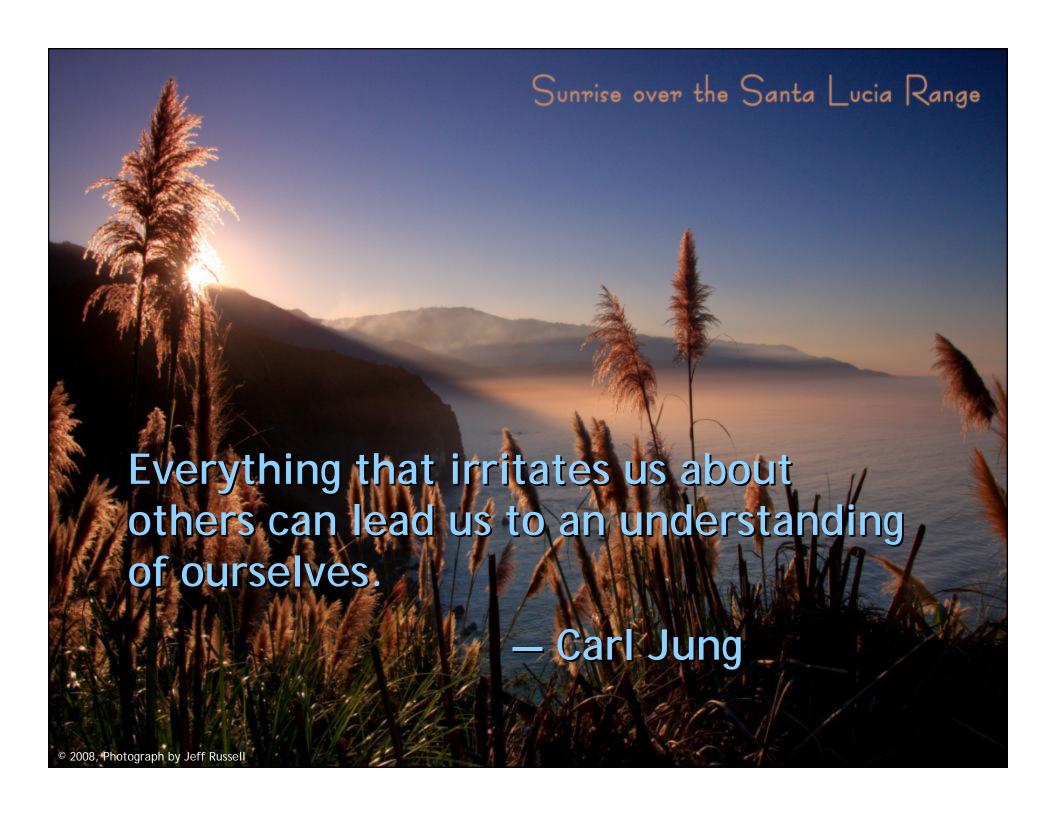
- 6. Focus on interests, not positions.
- Develop shared meaning of key words, concepts, ideas, etc.
- 8. Share decision making and action planning.
- 9. See the parts, understand the whole.
- 10. Use <u>critical reflection</u> to examine deeply held beliefs, and behavioral patterns.

## Why Do We Use the Unilateral Control Mindset?

- 1. Our fight or flight response.
- 2. It's what we learned from our parents, siblings (for survival), school yard encounters . . .
- 3. We don't have good role models.
- 4. We don't have the skills.
- 5. We didn't know that there was an alternative!

### Creating/Sustaining Dialogue

### Diagnosis and Planning Steps **Creating/Sustaining Dialogue Steps** Invite dialogue. Describe your **Explain** Decide if, when, and view of the facts and invite your **Tools** how to have the others to confirm or modify your reasoning difficult conversation. understanding of the facts. Mutual and Address safety issues intent. Learning Identify what you Mindset really want to Tentatively share your inferences Explore happen and what and test for different perspectives. Creating the Governing vou don't. Invite them to tell their story. other **Values** Address safety issues person's Identify your reasoning Enacting assumptions and Seek and affirm mutual and **Behaviors** 2 judgments. How do understanding, respect, and intent. these assumptions interests. Ladder of affect your thinking? Address safety issues Inference Mutually design "next Observe behavior. steps."



Samish Bay Sunrise, Washington

Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask, "Where have I gone wrong?" Then a voice says to me . . .

... "This is going to take more than one night!"

Charles M. Schulz
Charlie Brown in "Peanuts"
American Cartoonist
b. 1922, d. 2000

California Headlands, South of San Francisco

### Thank you!

Thanks for attending this SCPA session!

Good luck with your *difficult conversation*!

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