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CARSON ARIAS/UNSPLASH

On March 30, 2017, Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams stood in front of crowd of over 1,000 angry citizens. [McAdams had recently floated the idea of situating a new homeless resource center in Draper](#), a city 20 miles south of Salt Lake City, Utah. What began as an orderly public meeting soon degenerated into chaotic shouts, curses, and political threats as one Draper resident after another told the mayor emphatically that this would not happen in their backyard.

As volume increased and value declined, McAdams stood up. He was greeted by boos, hisses, and invective. Residents competed noisily for his attention in a way that guaranteed no one would be

heard. In one remarkable moment, McAdams drew close enough to a microphone that his voice penetrated the din. Wearing a kindly and serene expression, he uttered a simple, sincere statement that brought remarkable and immediate quiet: “This is your meeting. If you want to yell and shout, you are welcome to do that all night long. I will listen as long as you want.”

I’ve spent thirty years watching this happen — but have rarely seen the effect with such immediacy as happened that night in Draper.

It can be surprisingly easy to bring order to a chaotic meeting — and to turn conflict back into conversation — if you know how. Perhaps you don’t have an angry mob yelling at your meeting but there are lots of crises that managers face when a meeting goes off the rails. Here are some examples:

- **Mutual monologue.** The conflict is more apparent than real. People are struggling to be heard, repeating points with increasing intensity. You’re scratching your head trying to understand what all the excitement is about.
- **Battle of the silos.** Team members are fighting for resources or authority to advance their parochial interests.
- **Hidden agenda.** The stated conversation is different from the real conversation. For example, we’re discussing the location of an office and it appears personal commute distances are driving the decision.
- **Pandemonium.** The problem isn’t so much presence of conflict as lack of order. The discussion shifts from topic to topic with no resolution. The result is lots of heat but very little light. It always falls to the manager to impose order.
- **Wounded warrior.** The discussion has left someone feeling personally hurt. They are now lashing out opportunistically to salve their ego.

These are only a few of a much longer list of group productivity killers. Regardless of what’s happening in your specific meeting, *the principal cause of most conflicts is a struggle for validation*. This means that most conflict is not intractable because the root cause is not irreconcilable differences, but a basic unmet need.

Take Chris and Alan, for example. Chris is trying to staff projects. Alan is focused on staff development plans. Alan needs to pull employees off projects to attend trainings. Chris is frustrated because their absence interrupts project work. When overlapping and divergent interests (as exist in every team) are combined with communication that invalidates someone’s needs, the result is almost always escalating conflict and personal animus. For example, in a meeting where Alan is trying to get team input and support for an ambitious development effort, Chris takes pot shots at the fuzzy nature of the training objectives.

A naïve observer might conclude that the conflict is about competing goals or personal friction. It isn’t. The problem is that an unskilled manager is abetting invalidating communication. The solution is as straightforward as the problem: offer and deliver agitated participants a trustworthy process —

one they can trust will allow them to be heard. Here are four steps for turning conflict into conversation:

1. **Interrupt the chaos.** All emotions have a tempo. Calm emotions like happiness and connection are slow and deliberate. Emotions of arousal like hostility and defensiveness are fast and confused. Pulse quickens, thoughts race, and words fly. One of the best ways to change the emotion of a group is to change its tempo. As you attempt to intervene, decelerate your pace of speech. You may need to raise your voice a decibel or two to be heard above the rumble. But once you've attracted attention, lower your voice and speed. For example, you might say slowly and calmly, "Hey team, let me take a moment to point out something I'm noticing."
2. **Shift to process.** Call attention to what is happening in a matter-of-fact way. This helps in three ways: First, you give egos and tempers a chance to cool by changing the subject of discussion from the immediate *problem* to the problem-solving *process*. Second, you help the group soften their judgements of one another by giving them a unifying common enemy: the ineffective process. And third, you advance team maturity by inviting all to take responsibility for inventing a more effective process. Be careful not to shame anyone for their role in the confusion. Lay out what appears to be happening, without assigning blame, and the consequences of continuation on the current path. Once you've described the obvious, ask the group to confirm your observation. This is a critical psychological step. When they explicitly acknowledge the process problem, they become committed to supporting the solution. For example, you might continue with, "We've been at this conversation for about 25 minutes now. In my view we are repeating a lot of the same arguments, but getting nowhere. I suspect we could go another three hours and be in the same place. Do others see this the same way?"
3. **Propose a structure.** Offer a process that ensures all will be heard and slows the pace in order to quell the emotions. Then ask for commitment to it. For example, you might say, "Carmine, I don't think we're giving you a chance to lay out your arguments for the office remodel. How about if we hear you out first. The rest of us will attempt to restate your arguments until you feel we understand them to your satisfaction. Kam, then I suggest we do the same with your view of why we should put it off for three more years. Will that work?"
4. **Honor the agreement.** Odds are that even with the new structure, lingering emotions will incite a few attempts to breach the boundaries. When this happens, you need not become punitive. All you have to do is point out the discrepancy, and ask if they want to continue with their commitment. For example, "Kam, you are beginning to explain why remodeling now is a bad idea. I think our agreement was to allow Carmine to continue until she has been well heard. Do you want to continue with that process or propose something different?" Given that the team bought into the structure, Kam is likely to conform to the healthier structure - or the others in the room will encourage him to.

This is exactly what Ben McAdams when he approached the podium during the public meeting about the homeless resource center. He remained calm and patient while the crowd erupted into jeers and shouts. When he sensed a slight lull, he **interrupted** the chaos and **shifted** their attention **to process** with his statement, "This is your meeting. If you want to yell and shout you are welcome to do that

all night long, I will listen as long as you want.” Then sensing that they might be ready for his response, he **proposed a structure**: “If and when you’d like to hear what I have to say, I’ll take my turn. But not until it is quiet. I won’t yell to be heard.”

The crowd quieted down and he began to speak. Soon a man from the audience came on stage and stood intimidatingly close to Mayor McAdams. Rather than fight for control, McAdams simply **honored the agreement**. Facing the audience, the mayor said, “It appears someone wants the microphone, I’ll sit down and wait my turn unless you direct otherwise.” As the mayor gave way to the new arrival the audience yelled for the man to sit down and let the mayor speak. After a few uninterrupted minutes the mayor said something many took exception to with shouts and profanity. He once again honored the agreement by sitting down until their fury was dispelled by an even larger group who yelled at them to let the mayor finish.

In spite of the fact that the majority of those present adamantly disagreed with the mayor, their fury dissipated when offered a trustworthy process. They were capable of subordinating their immediate demands when they had confidence they would be truly heard.

While there are times when foes are so entrenched in their positions that simple interventions like this will be inadequate, for the vast majority of workplace group tiffs, this works. Next time conflict starts to boil up in your meeting, try focusing on the process rather than the content, and chances are that you’ll be able to defuse the anger and frustration long enough to move forward.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an [innovator in corporate training and leadership development](#).
