

# **Increasing Positivity during Conflict; Using COIN**

---



## COIN; *An outline for productive conversations*

The COIN acronym provides an outline for courageous conversations preparing the way for change not only in the moment but also in the future. While clunky at the outset, when practiced regularly, it provides a frame that impacts the way we approach difficult conversations even when this outline is not strictly followed. It is a skill drill that teaches us to be reflective rather than reactive, uses “I” language and slows the conversation down. Once that happens, we have a better chance at unfolding what is emerging in our partnerships rather than locking those across from us in roles out of which it might be difficult to escape from!

It begins with setting the **Context**, continues with discussing **Observations** and **Impact**, and concludes with a request for what’s **Next** – what will be done differently in the future.

- **Context** puts the event or behavior in a time frame and setting so that it can be remembered. Where and when did this occur?
- **Observation** describes the actions and behavior that were witnessed, without evaluation or interpretation of the intent.
- **Impact** speaks to the reason for concern. Describe in a neutral way the impact on you, other people, the work, the organization.
- **Next** – a request for change. Establish agreements and understandings about what will be different in the future.

### Preparing for a COIN Conversation

- Look at the big picture of the situation. Why is a COIN conversation called for? What’s at stake for the organization, and for the people involved?
- Take a moment to get in touch with respect and curiosity. What is it that you appreciate about the colleagues involved? What are you curious about?
- Make a request for the conversation, and be respectful and open to influence.
- Be willing to schedule the conversation for a time that is good for both of you.

### Context

- Remind the other person of the circumstances, time and place of the events you want to discuss.
- Be collaborative and curious – ask them what they remember. These conversations always go better when both parties actively participate.
- If they remember it differently than you do, be open to influence – everybody is right ... partially!

## Observation

- In neutral language, describe what you observed.
- Use self-management to omit interpretations of the other person's behavior. Assuming good intentions can help!
- Ask your colleague to tell you what they observed.
- Be open to influence – they may have some information that is new to you!

## Impact

- Here's where you talk about why it all matters. Share about the impact you experienced and be curious about your colleague's experience.
- Above all this is the place to speak from "I" and to be vulnerable rather than critical.
- Look at the big picture – what was the impact on the project, on the department, on the organization? How does that impact travel through the system?
- Be clear that it is your view rather than "everybody on the team says" which simply is co-opting others to help make your argument

## Next

- Talk about why it is important to change things for the future.
- If you want your colleague to change their behavior, make a direct request. What is it that you want the other person to do differently?

Make sure to do a few rounds in which your partner uses COIN to respond to you in this conversation. Pursue a solution that works for both of you, and that gives you confidence in creating the desired impact. Design it together, be receptive to counter-offers, and create agreements. If applicable, design how you will close the loop to create accountability and the building of trust on both said through achieving this change together.

## Example

**Here is an example of notes made by a manager in preparation for a COIN conversation, with reminders to self in brackets, to help make it a two-way conversation:**

- **Context:** *"In our meeting yesterday, our purpose was to plan the roll-out of the new procedural manual. After 9 months of work, the team was eager to start implementing the product of so much effort (including yours)*
- **Observation:** *"What I noticed yesterday is that you brought up, several times, one item the committee had decided not to include in the manual; you said several times it should have been included.*
- **Impact:** *"Your comments had the impact of reopening that previous discussion and taking about 20 minutes away from the time we needed to spend on implementation. It also created some confusion about whether the manual was actually finalized, when in fact, it is.*
- **Next:** *"I have a couple of requests so that we can operate more smoothly: In the future, please fully state your point of view early on in planning processes. And if something is still niggling*

*you, please request that you and I discuss this together before we enter the final meeting with the whole team.*

#### RESPONSE

**Context:** *"I notice that when you talk to me like that I am more open to the conversation.*

**Observation:** *"And, in the meeting yesterday, my observation was that although several other members asked about this as well, you were not willing to enter into conversation"*

**Impact:** *"I felt shut down and dismissed"*

**Next:** *"I can absolutely agree to bring 'my niggle' to you outside the main meeting if that will work better for you. My request is that when that does not happen and I or others continue to have questions, that you either allow the conversation or, use your rank to say 'no, subject closed' instead of ignoring the conversation.*

#### Homework

It takes time and commitment to change culture and patterns of communication. Unless you are willing to commit to the practice of that which is new and a stretch for you, the muscle that you are trying to build towards successful courageous conversations will not grow.

In the coming week, have at least two conversations where you practice the COIN outline with a peer, supervisee, or supervisor.

Choose a different skill each week from the above list to practice during the next 2 months.

#### Invitation

Once you have practiced this a few times, discuss your discoveries with the colleagues you have done this with, your coach or a trusted friend. Focus these discussions around what you are learning about yourself, what are the new communication styles that you want to build, what are the new or latent qualities in you that you want to develop in order to have more positivity in your relationships and to make friends with difficult conversations as your friend in becoming more resilient at work as well as at home.