

Connecting and Disconnecting: What do you mean Calm Down?!

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When someone is visibly stressed, what could be worse than being told to 'calm down'? For me, it is like pouring fuel on a fire.

If you 'ask' the internet why this phrase should generally be avoided, you will be advised that telling someone to 'calm down' can be received as condescending, patronizing or dismissive. And really, have you ever had much success with this approach? Did the person you told to calm down actually calm down? Were they able to take a step back or let things go? My money is on 'no' on both counts.



What is occurring here is that a person who is distressed is in a particular state of mind. By using this phrase, you are trying to pull this person to your 'state of mind', i.e., a calm state. Brené Brown in her book 'Atlas of the Heart'¹ explains that there are 87 different states and unless we are able to talk about them openly and accurately, we will not form deep connections with people around us.

So, when you tell someone to 'calm down', you are not acknowledging or respecting the other person's 'right' to have that feeling. In fact, by asking somebody to 'calm down', you are ignoring the state of mind that person is in. This will result - at best - in no connection and can actually result in disconnection. Connection supports well-being, disconnection undermines it.

Looking at this specific interaction through Edward de Bono's Parallel Thinking methodology we can find a practical approach to avoid this trigger-prompting pitfall. At the core of Parallel Thinking is getting people more or less on the same page when communicating, especially when there are different states of mind, or different perspectives about a given situation.

In order to get on to the same page in any discussion, we need to recognize that there are different 'directions' of thinking that can be employed in problem solving. The de Bono Six Thinking Hats Methodology identifies six directions of thinking for a robust analysis of any issue. Feelings is one of the directions.

The Six Directions of Thinking:



¹<https://brenebrown.com/book/atlas-of-the-heart/>

The foundational principle of this methodology is that everyone involved remains in the same direction of thinking as you move towards solving a problem or making a decision. There are certain principles to be applied in each direction of thinking. For the 'Feelings' direction - the key is to not question the feeling itself; in other words, *don't* judge it. Telling another person to '*calm down*' is a judgment, implying that their feelings are inappropriate. You are trying to bring that person to your calm state of feeling. Yet, perhaps their hair is on fire while yours is not.

The following scenario explains how the 'same direction' principle works to create connection:

Multi-directional Approach

Person 1: *I am so upset that you are late, and we are going to be really late for my best friend's dinner party!*

Person 2: *Calm down! It's a dinner ... nobody from this group really cares if you show up on time, and it not like they are going to serve dinner right away. She's your best friend, so she won't mind.*

In this case Person 2 provides a response that represent other directions of thinking (mostly information - possibly correct and incorrect). The actual direction (feeling) is not being addressed. A chance for showing empathy and building connection bites the dust!

Parallel Thinking Approach

Person 1: *I am so upset that you are late and we are going to be really late for my best friend's dinner party!*

Person 2: (Listening, listening, listening without judgement about why they are feeling this way).

Person 2 can summarize back to the person the feelings that were heard. For example, you can acknowledge the feeling they are expressing to you. This might sound like 'I hear your frustration/anger', or insert the feeling that is being expressed to you. You can acknowledge your role (if any) in giving rise to that feeling. Sit with that for a moment or two, try not to be defensive if you had a role, and do not mount a defense of your actions at this particular moment. Once feelings are acknowledged and affirmed, you can move on to other directions of thinking together as part of your next steps. For example, specifically, what can you do next as a team? This will likely take less time than the argument that is likely to arise when using phrases such as '*calm down*' (and be more effective).

By using the Parallel Approach before moving on to the next part of the discussion, you are applying principles that promote collaborative thinking and connections. Feelings, if not addressed up front, can hinder connections and good decision making. So, when you recognize that someone is feeling a certain way - empathy or curiosity can be powerful connectors - as long as judgement is kept at bay.

Judgment as part of the Parallel Thinking process is important and is used in other directions of thinking, but not when people are expressing their feelings. Just like we say 'avoid judgement' while brainstorming, the same principle of 'avoid judgement' applies when addressing feelings.

The power of Parallel Thinking is that it builds respect and trust over time. The crux of this methodology is to give everyone the opportunity to participate in each direction of thinking and be heard. For example, if one person can only see the negative of a situation, while the other only the positives (i.e., different perspectives), try staying in the same direction of thinking. Agree to look at the positives of the situation together - make your list, then move to looking at the negatives together - make your list.

Working together in this way creates connection even if divergent opinions are present. Time and time again, I have experienced the reinforcing effect that Parallel Thinking has on interpersonal interactions and connections.

If you are a 'calm down' offender, use the approach of staying in the same direction of thinking as the other person and 'walk with them'; acknowledge how they feel. Then you can get to the next steps on what needs to be discussed or done. This approach will help you make and strengthen connections.

Learn More

At ThinkWell Training and Facilitation, we delve into how this small change in approaching issues can have a profound impact on clarity, understanding and decision making. In our Six Thinking Hats Training, as well as our Serious Creativity Training, we show how this can improve both critical thinking and creativity skills for leaders and teams.

If you are interested to learn more, check out the 6-minute explainer video on the [Six Thinking Hats Methodology](#).

For more insights and knowledge about the Six Directions of Thinking, you can pick up Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats book from your local bookstore or library.

Let us know what your learning needs are and how we can help. We are happy to explore training and facilitation options that would fit your team and situation.

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