

Ethical Persuasion

Phase II: Exploring the Other Person's Viewpoint

Author: Tom Rusk, M.D. with D. Patrick Miller

How often have you thought, "If only I could tell *my* side of the story?"

Telling your side of the story, even when given the chance, is often not easy. Most of us have been stung by the harsh words of others, and perhaps we have done our own share of stinging. These days, you are probably giving more thought to how you express yourself to others, to make your needs known and to resolve problems.

Giving thought to the process, however, usually isn't enough. Good intentions do not magically transform into ideal results. As you learned in Ethical Persuasion Phase I: Exploring the Other Person's Viewpoint (Tom Rusk, 1993), specific Ethical Persuasion (EP) techniques can help you through difficult situations. With EP Phase II tools, you will be able to tell your story.

Before learning the author's useful techniques for explaining *your* viewpoint, let's do a quick review of the main points of Phase I, where you learned the four advantages to listening first (pp. 68-70):

1. *Learn from the other person's presentation of personal thoughts and feelings.* In other words, maybe you don't know the entire story.
2. *Earn the leverage of fairness.* Your patience will likely lead to your fair turn in explaining.
3. *Defuse any negative effects of another person's pent-up feelings.* In so doing, you kindly demonstrate that you are deferring to the other person's feelings of urgency.
4. *Cultivate your patience, openness, and objectivity under stress.* Here, you're deepening your own qualities of good character.

Then, you learned the seven steps to exploring the other person's viewpoint (pp. 70-81):

1. *Establish that your immediate goal is mutual understanding, not problem solving.*
2. *Elicit the other person's thoughts, feelings, and desires about the issue.*
3. *Ask for the other person's help in understanding the issue; try not to defend or disagree.*
4. *Repeat the other person's viewpoint in your own words, to show you understand.*
5. *Ask the other person to correct your understanding; then, restate your new understanding.*
6. *Refer back to your position—very briefly—only to keep the conversation moving.*
7. *Repeat steps 1 through 6 until the other person fully agrees that you understand the issue.*

After patiently listening to the other person and feeling confident that you fully understand the issue, you have earned the right to explain the issue from your perspective. Often, it's helpful to take a break, to reflect and write down the main points you would like to address. If that is not possible, then you may wish to segue into your explanation with a statement that acknowledges the other person's position, such as, "Now that I understand your feelings, . . ." (p. 89).

Author Tom Rusk presents five steps for Phase II: Explaining Your Viewpoint (pp. 89-100):

1. *Ask for a fair hearing in return.* In Phase I, you established that the goal of this exchange is mutual understanding, not problem solving or placing blame. You can gently claim your right to a fair hearing with one of the following opening statements:

- “Now that you’re comfortable in my understanding of *your* feelings, would you be willing to try to understand *my* feelings about the issue?”
- “Now that I’ve listened to and appreciate *your* position and feelings, I’d like to explain *my* position and feelings.”
- “Your explanation may cause me to rethink some aspects of my viewpoint, but I’d like to start explaining how I felt when we began talking about this issue.”
- “I appreciate that you’re upset with me, but is it fair for you to *not* give me a sincere and patient hearing, as I did for you?”

The author gently cautions the EP novice that preparing a script before speaking may be counterproductive for two reasons: after listening to the other person, you may find the script to be obsolete, and referring to the script may diminish perceived authenticity.

Newness to the EP process may cause feelings of awkwardness. Allow for that, and kindly ask the other person to be patient as you wend your way through this unfamiliar territory of EP-aided mutual understanding. Admitting your fears and vulnerability often creates strength because you have already prepared the other person for your sincere effort under difficult conditions. To communicate your initial lack of confidence, you may wish to try one of these opening statements:

- “You’ve done so well in expressing yourself, and I may not be so articulate. If you can be patient with me, I’ll do my best to make myself clear.”
- “My feelings are pretty intense right now, and I may get a little tongue-tied. I’ll ask that you bear with me, as I explain myself and my feelings.”
- “Do you mind if we take a little break, so I can organize my thoughts? I’d like to be able to share my feelings with you, as you did so well for me?”

2. *Begin with an explanation of how the other person’s thoughts and feelings have affected you (avoid blaming and self-defense).* By letting the other person know that you have been affected by what you’ve heard the other person reveal (in Phase I), you make a crucial connection to the other person’s feelings and experiences. Consider that you may be affected in a soft and compassionate way, or the other person’s explanation may bring out strong and negative feelings in you. Allow for either reaction, and resist the temptation to rush to your own self-defense or to attack the other person for being “wrong.” The author suggests that you use your potent energy in a constructive, connecting way:

- “I’m bothered that you’re so upset because it makes me feel upset. I’d like to truly understand each other without being critical. While I’m explaining myself, please tell me if I start to sound critical. I don’t want that. I know it won’t help us.”
- “I’m not surprised by your feelings. I’ll try to share my position without getting defensive. I’ve been there and done that, and I know it doesn’t work.”
- “I appreciate your honesty. It has had a big impact on my feelings about this issue. Now, I’ll try to explain myself as honestly and calmly as I can.”

Allow for changing feelings, even as you are explaining yourself. Remember: honesty, flexibility, and openness are not signs of capitulation. The author counsels that “sharing your past and current feelings with the other person as honestly and nondefensively as possible is always a sign of inner strength” (p. 94).

3. *Carefully explain your thoughts, desires, and feelings as **your** truth, not **the** truth.* While explaining yourself as genuinely and passionately as possible, keep in mind that you are speaking from your world view and your specific experience. The goal of this effort is mutual understanding, not imposing your view as the “right” view. You may wish to initiate step 3 with one of these openers:
- “Please bear with me. I don’t mean to imply that I’m right and you’re wrong. I’d simply like for you to understand the reasons I feel so strongly about this issue.”
 - “Let’s not be concerned with trying to agree on what’s right. Let’s just try to fully understand each other’s feelings.”
 - “I know I have strong feelings about this issue and I’ll do my best to temper them, so that we can come to a true understanding of each other’s viewpoint.”

Getting started may seem like the most difficult aspect of the EP process. It’s usually a good idea to reveal your fears and admit your vulnerability. It’s helpful to be reminded that, at times, we’re all vulnerable. As the author makes clear, “Vulnerability is not a fault or soft spot; it’s the combination of our needs and sensitivities, and we are weakened only by attempting to hide it” (p. 96). If you feel uncertain about your viewpoint—or your ability to express it clearly and thoughtfully—you might try one of these opening statements:

- “I have to admit, talking openly about this problem isn’t easy for me. I appreciated your honesty, and I’ll do my best to be equally open and honest.”
- “Now that I’ve heard your viewpoint, I realize how sensitive I am about this issue. Here’s how I feel about it.”
- “I can feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach. Even so, I’ll do my best to explain my viewpoint as I see it. I’ll start with the part that has been the hardest for me to deal with, so please bear with me.”

4. *Ask for restatements of your position—and corrections of any factual inaccuracies—as necessary.* Requesting a restatement of your position may feel uncomfortable, awkward, and even artificial. As you learned in Phase I, some steps may seem contrived until you become accustomed to them and fully trust the process. This step is crucial in delicate or otherwise difficult exchanges. If your viewpoint is particularly lengthy, you may wish to ask for a restatement after you have presented a significant portion of it. The following statements often work well in this situation:
- “I’m not certain I’m making myself clear. Would you mind reviewing for me what you have heard me say so far? Getting your feedback will help me continue.”
 - “From what you’ve heard so far, do you think I’m making sense? I’d appreciate hearing you express what you believe I’ve said up to this point.”
 - “I’m not sure I’ve been as clear in explaining my point of view as you were in explaining yours. Would you mind telling me what you think I’ve said so far?”

At this point, feedback from the other person may or may not accurately capture your feelings and viewpoint. Keep in mind that, unlike facts and other relevant information, your feelings cannot be corrected. If the other person takes exception to your feelings, you may find it necessary to respond with one of these statements:

- “I appreciate the additional information you’ve provided, but my feelings are still the same. Instead of telling me how I should or shouldn’t feel, it would be helpful if you would restate what you heard me say about my feelings as they pertain to this issue.”
 - “Sorry, I guess my facts were a little off, but my feelings are still the same.”
 - “I’m willing to give this issue more thought, but I have to be truthful about the way I feel about it.”
5. *Review your respective positions.* This step may need repeating several times, until clarity and understanding have been achieved. The goal of this step is to summarize each other’s viewpoints, not simply give your own final position. To keep checking back with the other person, simple statements such as these can be used:
- “Let’s review each other’s viewpoints, to be sure we really understand each other.”
 - “I think I’ve been pretty clear, but I’d like to hear your take on my point of view one more time before we move on.”
 - “I appreciate that you’ve listened so patiently to me. I think we’ve made a lot of progress. Can we do a quick review of each other’s points of view?”

Do you recall from Phase I the one word the author emphasized for succeeding in this new process? Courage. Particularly in your first attempts at implementing EP statements within difficult communications, you can expect to experience some fear and uncertainty. If that happens, the author suggests you consider this: “Courage is a flexible and growing capacity for changing that *uses fears for fuel*” (p. 102). In other words, courage has energy that can take us to a new edge in our relationships, enriching them every step of the way. “Courage flows from the decision to go for self-respect, intimacy, and creative brilliance” (p. 106). *Go for it!*

Rusk, T., with Miller, D. (1993). *The Power of Ethical Persuasion*. New York: Viking.

Note: *The Power of Ethical Persuasion* is in the FDR library and available for loan.

Prepared by Susan Clair, FDR graduate assistant.