

Apply 3 rules from Judith Honesty to ace your next crucial conversation

Prepare for the difficult conversations between vendors and wholesalers.



Crucial conversations between vendors and wholesalers, such as Delta Faucet and Winsupply, have to happen on the path to profitable growth. Here, Pensacola (Florida) Winsupply President Marty McCrory (left) and team member Aaron Schneier discuss new Delta products. Photo by Howard Robinson Photography.

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Think about the most difficult conversations that vendors and wholesalers can have as we work together to drive profitable growth.

Don't you wish you had an antidote to make those difficult conversations easier – and more successful?

During ASA's Women in Industry ELEVATE2021 virtual conference in April, we learned how to change the trajectory of our crucial conversations. Here are three rules shared by Judith Honesty, master trainer in VitalSmarts' Crucial Conversations training, and our take on how to apply these rules to achieve better outcomes from difficult conversations.

Focus on the results you really want

Conversations can get tense when programs change. It's easy to get defensive and "fight or flight" can set in, if a wholesaler protests: "But we're a huge company and should always get the best price!" or "Why do we have to grow that much year over year?"

Sometimes a vendor's comment to a showroom manager can feel like a personal attack: "You'd do better if you operated your showroom like Competitor ABC." A showroom manager who feels attacked may shut down, go silent and check out.

Kneejerk responses like these won't get you where you need to go.

Instead of getting stuck in the heat of the moment, take a breath. Get emotion off the table. Then, decide where you want to end up with this wholesaler or vendor.

If your end game is profitable growth together, ask questions to begin a dialogue. Be respectful, and listen to show you care about your working relationship. Use data to support your position since facts are difficult to challenge. Always let the end game, not the heat of the moment, drive your response.

Separate the facts from the stories you are telling yourself

If you're a wholesaler in a quarterly meeting with a vendor, have you ever listened to that voice in your head that says, "I just know Vendor ABC is giving my competitor a better deal!" or "Why is Vendor XYZ wasting my time pushing this cookie-cutter program? Don't they know it doesn't fit how we operate and what we've done for decades?"

If you're a vendor, maybe you've said to yourself, "I'm sure Wholesaler ABC is supporting our competing line, so I'm not going out of my way with any extras." Or "I'll bet Wholesaler XYZ has some excuse why they didn't meet their goals last quarter. Here we go again!"

Judgments tend to come first; that's human nature. But telling ourselves stories – without the facts – derails crucial conversations.

Instead of going down that judgment path, step back to think through what you've seen and heard as the facts. Come together. Be curious. Ask questions. Talk it through.

- If you're a wholesaler: "OK, I see you've had some leadership changes, so you need to learn how we go to market. Let me get you up-to-speed ... "

- If you're a vendor: "Now I get it: You had a big project last year that really skewed your sales. So yes, I can take that into consideration ..."

Make the environment safe to have a dialogue

When wholesalers or vendors feel blamed or threatened during a crucial conversation, they feel unsafe. As a result, they may respond inappropriately – even aggressively.

Until they feel safe again, no dialogue can happen, and no progress can be made toward the end goal.

Instead of replying with a like emotion – inappropriately or aggressively – say something to turn down the heat and make the other person feel safe again. Lean in to the conversation. Be calm, reassuring and clear about your intention:

"Joe, I don't want you to get caught up in those details, because in our book, it's not black and white. There's a lot of gray here, so let's talk about what we can do for you."

"Randy, I know you've invested a lot into your new product., but it doesn't make sense for us because it doesn't fit our market. Let's find another line we can grow this year."

Perhaps the most powerful advice is this: Assume that people have good intentions — always.

When you do? You'll find it changes everything.

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