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# Additional resources

## The Neurochemistry of Positive Conversations

By *Judith E. Glaser and Richard D. Glaser*

## Tackle Conflicts with Conversation

By *Judith E. Glaser*

**Harvard  
Business  
Review**

Conversational Intelligence<sup>®</sup> for Coaches



## Why do negative comments and conversations stick with us so much longer than positive ones?

By *Judith E. Glaser and Richard D. Glaser*

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A critique from a boss, a disagreement with a colleague, a fight with a friend – the sting from any of these can make you forget a month’s worth of praise or accord. If you’ve been called lazy, careless, or a disappointment, you’re likely to remember and internalize it. It’s somehow easier to forget, or discount, all the times people have said you’re talented or conscientious or that you make them proud.

Chemistry plays a big role in this phenomenon. When we face criticism, rejection or fear, when we feel marginalized or minimized, our bodies produce higher levels of cortisol, a hormone that shuts down the thinking center of our brains and activates conflict aversion and protection behaviors. We become more reactive and sensitive. We often perceive even greater judgment and negativity than actually exists. And these effects can last for 26 hours or more, imprinting the interaction on our memories and magnifying the impact it has on our future behavior. Cortisol functions like a sustained-release tablet – the more we ruminate about our fear, the longer the impact.

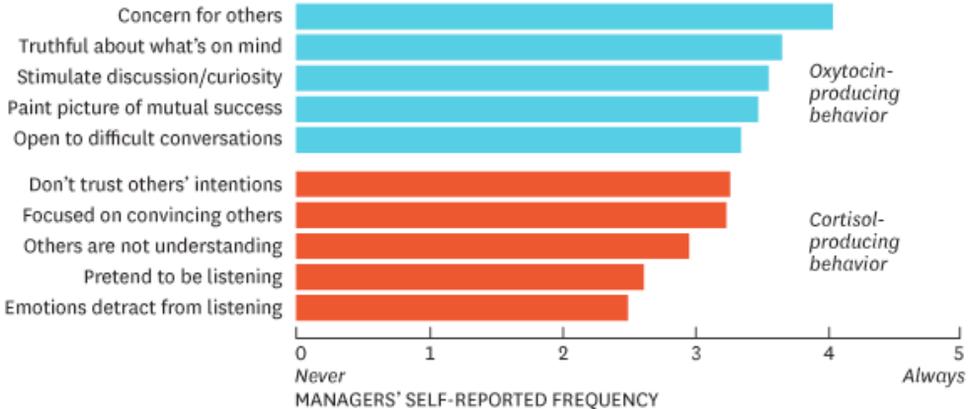
Positive comments and conversations produce a chemical reaction too. They spur the production of oxytocin, a feel-good hormone that elevates our ability to communicate, collaborate and trust others by activating networks in our prefrontal cortex. But oxytocin metabolizes more quickly than cortisol, so its effects are less dramatic and long-lasting.

This “chemistry of conversations” is why it’s so critical for all of us – especially managers – to be more mindful about our interactions. Behaviors that increase cortisol levels reduce what I call “Conversational Intelligence®” or “C-IQ,” or a person’s ability to connect and think innovatively, empathetically, creatively and strategically with others. Behaviors that spark oxytocin, by contrast, raise C-IQ.

## MANAGERS' POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONVERSATIONAL BEHAVIORS

They may be sending mixed messages.

### BEHAVIORS



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The good news is that managers appear to be using positive, oxytocin and C-IQ elevating behaviors more often than negative behaviors.

Survey respondents said that they exhibited all five positive behaviors, such as “showing concern for others” more frequently than all five negative ones, such as “pretending to be listening.” However, most respondents – approximately 85% — also admitted to “sometimes” acting in ways that could derail not only specific interactions but also future relationships.

And, unfortunately, when leaders exhibit both types of behaviors it creates dissonance or uncertainty in followers’ brains, spurring cortisol production and reducing C-IQ.

Consider Rob, a senior executive from Verizon. He thought of himself as a “best practices” leader who told people what to do, set clear goals, and challenged his team to produce high quality results. But when one of his direct reports had a minor heart attack, and three others asked HR to move to be transferred off his team, he realized there was a problem.

Observing Rob's conversational patterns for a few weeks, I saw clearly that the negative (cortisol-producing) behaviors easily outweighed the positive (oxytocin-producing) behaviors. Instead of asking questions to stimulate discussion, showing concern for others, and painting a compelling picture of shared success, his tendency was to tell and sell his ideas, entering most discussions with a fixed opinion, determined to convince others he was right. He was not open to others' influence; he failed to listen to connect.

When I explained this to Rob, and told him about the chemical impact his behavior was having on his employees, he vowed to change, and it worked. A few weeks later, a member of his team even asked me: "What did you give my boss to drink?"

I'm not suggesting that you can't ever demand results or deliver difficult feedback. But it's important to do so in a way that is perceived as inclusive and supportive, thereby limiting cortisol production and hopefully stimulating oxytocin instead. Be mindful of the behaviors that open us up, and those that close us down, in our relationships. Harness the chemistry of conversations.

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# Tackle Conflicts with Conversation

By *Judith E. Glaser*

February 11, 2014

My husband and I got married after only three dates. Three weeks after the wedding, we had our first fight. An extreme conflict avoider, I packed my bags and walked out. Rich chased after me. “Turn around,” he said. “Let’s sit down and have a conversation. There are two things we have to learn to do — one is to fight, the other is to make up.” We’ve now been practicing both for 44 years, empathetically, creatively and strategically with others. Behaviors that spark oxytocin, by contrast, raise C-IQ.

**Effective leadership, like a good marriage, hinges on how you deal with the tough stuff. But addressing and resolving conflicts requires enormous mental and emotional strength, which is why many of us try to avoid it.**

When confronted with a problem or dispute, we either move away (flee the scene, rely on others for resolution), move against (quietly using positional power to quell opposing arguments) or move toward (make nice, give in). This is natural. We instinctively want to avoid the risk of loss and social embarrassment, to stick with our points of view, to preserve relationships and the status quo.

But all three strategies are wrong-headed. When you fail to engage with a conflict, you can’t gather the input you need to find a workable solution. And it hurts your image as a leader. Take Sarah, the head of IT at a global technology company. Her job was to develop new engagement technologies in her organization, but instead of embracing critical feedback on her ideas, she ignored it.

When people challenged her, she would simply reiterate her points, smile, nod and move onto something else as though the issue had been resolved, leaving everyone frustrated. Team members and colleagues began to see her as a conflict avoider, and she lost their trust.

So how does someone like Sarah learn to embrace, rather than avoid, disagreement? Through my executive coaching work (and my own experience), I’ve developed a few conversation-centered techniques that help.

### **1. Clarify the conflict by talking through each party's stance.**

For example, “You seem to be suggesting that we really need to focus on elevating our gross revenue before we invest in a new IT strategy. Is that right?” or “It seems like we’re envisioning two different levels of risk. Tell me more about what you’re seeing as the downside.”

### **2. Consult a neutral friend or colleague.**

Discussing the problem with someone else will make it seem smaller. The social interaction will also put you in a more collaborative, connected state of mind.

### **3. Reframe, refocus, and redirect the conversation.**

Use the conflict as a springboard to find common ground. Say something like, “Let’s leave this aside for the moment and think about another way to approach the issue.”

All the companies I work with have checklists of behaviors their leaders need to thrive at the top. Chief among these are courage, resilience and agility in the face of change. There’s no question that an ability to manage conflict is part and parcel of all three. So the next time you’re faced with a situation in which positions are hardened and disagreement seems inevitable, don’t avoid it. Engage in conversation, and tackle the conflict head on.

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