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The SPACE Model

A practical coaching framework to manage challenging conversations

Difficult conversations are an unavoidable part of working life. A concern about performance, a disagreement over priorities or an unwelcome challenge to an idea can quickly become tense. Sometimes we know in advance that a conversation may be difficult. At other times, an apparently straightforward discussion changes direction without warning.

When this happens, the natural response is often to defend our position. We interrupt, explain, criticise, blame or stop listening. As tension rises, our ability to think clearly and take in another person's perspective diminishes. Both parties may become more concerned with proving a point or protecting themselves than with addressing the issue. Even if the conversation ends in apparent agreement, the underlying problem may remain unresolved and the relationship may have been damaged.

Constructive conversations have a different quality. People listen, seek to understand different perspectives and communicate with respect. This doesn't mean avoiding disagreement or making every exchange comfortable. It means creating the conditions in which people can think together, even when the subject is challenging.

The SPACE model is a simple coaching framework designed to create those conditions. It provides five practical steps:

Stop
Pause before reacting

Permission
Create psychological safety

Ask
Seek to understand before being understood

Contrast
Clarify your intentions

Explore
Work in partnership towards a solution

S: Stop

The first step is to pause before reacting. This sounds simple, but it can be the most demanding part of the model. A challenging remark can trigger an immediate emotional and physical response: the heart rate rises, the body stiffens and a defensive answer is ready before the other person has finished speaking.

Consider this exchange:

> *"Your reports are always late."*
> *"That's because you never get me the information on time!"*

The reply may contain a legitimate point, but its speed and tone are likely to intensify the conflict. A short pause creates a choice. Instead of reacting automatically, the person can notice what is happening, consider the purpose of the conversation and respond more deliberately:

> *"Your reports are always late."*
> *"I can understand why it looks that way. One challenge is that I don't always receive the information in time."*

The second response doesn't accept an inaccurate accusation, but neither does it counterattack. It acknowledges the other person's perspective and introduces relevant information in a way that keeps the conversation open.

Stopping may mean taking one breath, allowing a few seconds of silence or asking for a moment to think. If emotions are too strong for a useful discussion, it may mean suggesting a short break and agreeing when to resume. The purpose is not to suppress emotion; it is to prevent emotion from deciding the next move.

As the words often attributed to Viktor Frankl put it:

> *"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."*

P: Permission

Permission creates psychological safety: a shared sense that concerns, questions and different views can be expressed without humiliation or punishment. When the subject is sensitive, entering the conversation abruptly can make the other person feel cornered. Asking permission gives them some choice and helps establish a collaborative tone.

A simple question such as “Could we discuss this?” can make a significant difference. Other possibilities include:

- *“Would now be a suitable time to talk about what happened in the meeting?”*
- *“May I explain what I am concerned about?”*
- *“Could I ask you a few questions so that I can understand your view?”*

Permission is not a device for disguising a demand. If the timing is genuinely unsuitable, be prepared to agree another time. Nor does permission remove a manager’s responsibility to address an important issue. It changes how the conversation begins, not whether the issue is discussed. Permission may also be needed during the exchange. “May I finish this point?” sets a boundary when someone interrupts; “Could we slow this down?” can restore order when the discussion becomes heated. Used well, permission balances harmony with clarity and boundaries.

A: Ask

When we disagree, our instinct is usually to explain why we are right. The SPACE model reverses that sequence: *seek to understand before trying to be understood*.

Ask open, genuine questions and listen carefully to the answers. The aim is not to gather evidence for a rebuttal, but to discover what the other person sees, needs or fears. Useful questions might include:

- “*What is leading you to that conclusion?”*
- *“What has been happening from your perspective?”*
- *“What is your main concern?”*
- *“What would you like me to understand?”*

The quality of the listening matters as much as the wording of the question. Avoid interrupting, preparing your answer while the other person speaks or asking questions that are really accusations, such as “Why are you always so negative?” Summarise what you have heard and check that you have understood it correctly.

Coaching questions and the GROW model (Goal, Reality, Options and Will) provide a useful structure. What outcome does each person want? What is happening now? What possibilities are available? What will each person do next? The questions should serve the conversation rather than turn it into an interrogation.

C: Contrast

Even when we pause, ask permission and speak carefully, the conversation may still become defensive. People do not respond only to the words we use; they respond to what they believe those words imply. A suggestion intended to simplify a process may be heard as criticism. A question may be interpreted as a challenge to someone’s competence or authority.

Contrasting addresses this gap between intention and interpretation. First clarify what you do not intend; then state what you do intend:

> "I don't want to make life harder for the team; I do want to simplify the process so that it helps them."
>
> "I'm not intending to increase your workload; I would like us to find a system that saves you time."

The order matters. Addressing the feared or assumed intention first helps the other person recognise that their concern has been heard. Stating the positive intention then gives the conversation a clearer direction.

Contrasting is not the same as saying, "I'm not criticising you, but…", followed by criticism. It must be accurate, respectful and supported by what comes next. It can be used to correct an existing misunderstanding or to prevent a predictable one: "I am not asking you to abandon the work you have done. I would like us to look at how it could be adapted."

E: Explore

Once people understand one another's perspectives and intentions, it becomes possible to explore what might work. This stage is collaborative. Instead of defending fixed positions, both parties consider possibilities, constraints and shared interests.

Questions such as these can move the conversation forwards:

- *"What could work for both of us?"*
- *"How might we solve this together?"*
- *"What options have we not yet considered?"*
- *"What would a workable next step look like?"*

Exploration does not guarantee agreement. Some differences are real, and a leader may ultimately need to make a decision.

The aim of SPACE is not to win, convince or defeat. The goal is not necessarily agreement. The goal is to make it possible to think together. Even where the final decision is difficult, a process in which people feel heard and understand the reasoning is more likely to preserve trust.

End by making any agreement specific. Clarify what will happen, who will take responsibility and when progress will be reviewed. This turns a constructive exchange into purposeful action.

SPACE is a cycle, not a script

Real conversations rarely move neatly through five stages. You may ask a question and discover that the other person has misunderstood your intention, so you return to Contrast. You may begin to explore solutions and feel the tension rise again, so you Stop. You may need to ask permission more than once as the discussion enters sensitive territory.

This flexibility is one of the model's strengths. SPACE is not a set of phrases to recite. It is a way of paying attention to the quality of the conversation and choosing an intervention that will help. If the exchange becomes defensive or aggressive again, return to the first step and repeat the process.

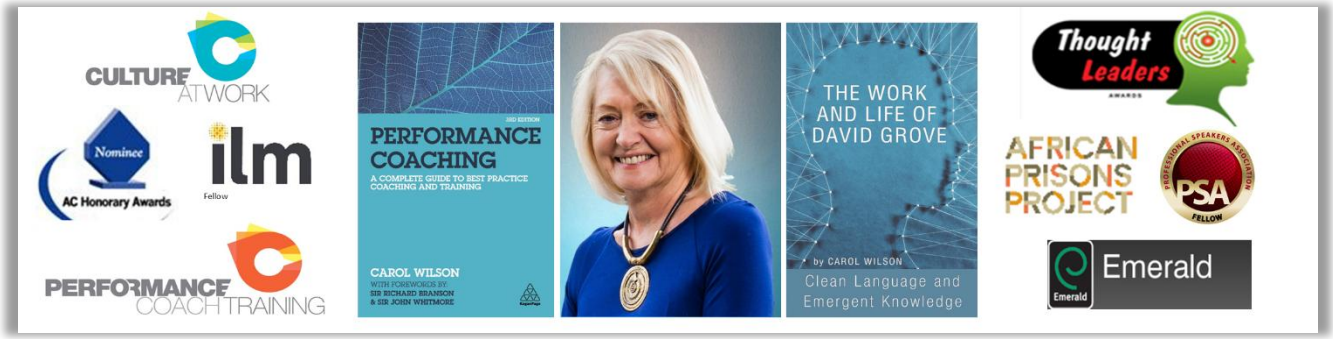
Putting SPACE into practice

The model becomes useful through practice, particularly when people rehearse situations that are relevant to their work. Begin with a challenging statement such as "*You never listen to anyone else's ideas"* or *"You're against every new idea."* Pause before responding. Ask permission to explore the comment, use questions to understand what lies behind it, contrast any misunderstood intentions and then invite the other person to consider possible ways forwards.

Practising each element separately makes it easier to use the whole model under pressure. It is also helpful to reflect after a difficult conversation: At what point did it become tense? Which assumptions were made? What physical or emotional signals did you notice? Which SPACE step might have changed the direction of the exchange?

Difficult conversations cannot always be made easy. They can, however, be made more thoughtful, respectful and productive. SPACE provides enough structure to interrupt automatic reactions without making the conversation mechanical. It helps people move from defending territory to understanding perspectives, and from opposing one another to addressing the issue together.

About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to facilitate change management and create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide, and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, '*The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge*' and a novel called *'Carnations in Lisbon'.* She has contributed to six other business psychology books and published over 70 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

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