

Renegotiating Roles and Expectations

“... as we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us, and we reshape our inner selves. When we act, the world acts back, and we and the world are co-created.”

Parker Palmer

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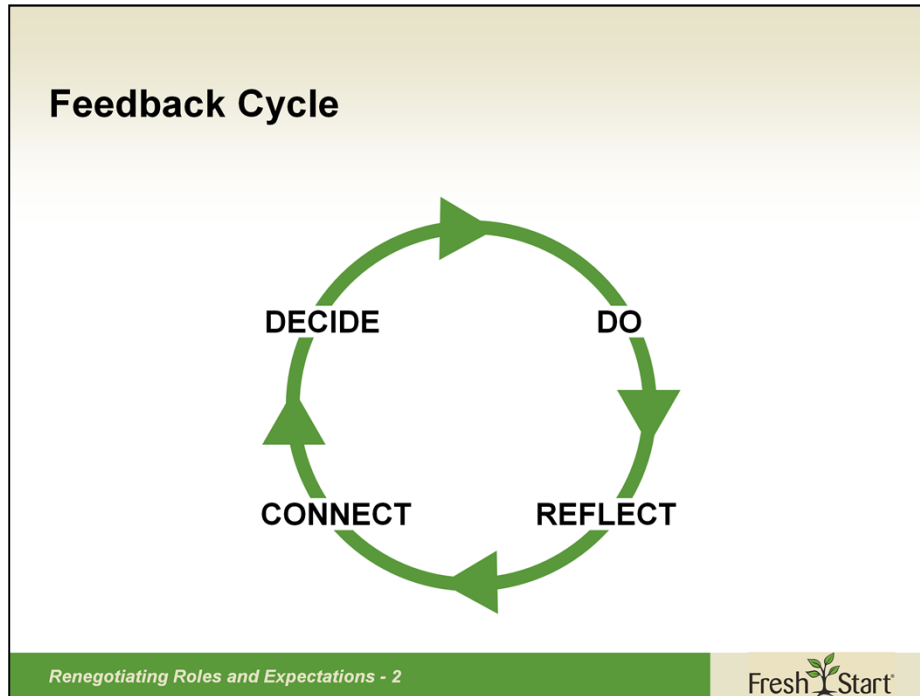
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Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Throughout the Bible people respond to the environment around them, adapting their roles and their expectations based on the circumstances. Jesus sets a prime example: sometimes a healer, sometimes a teacher, at other times an angry demonstrator. He does not always meet people's expectations, and he is willing to renegotiate his role when doing so does not conflict with who he is (witness his changing responses to his mother at the marriage feast in Cana). When it comes to renegotiating expectations, probably no one tackles a bigger job than Abraham when he negotiates with God for the salvation of Sodom.

In our lives, too, especially when we are in new situations, clarifying roles and expectations and being able to renegotiate them is critical.



Talking Points

All life forms rely on feedback – if organisms cannot change to meet the demands of their environment, they die. Much of that changing is simply in the nature of things and is done unconsciously much in the way that a thermostat regulates the temperature of our house by monitoring the air around it.

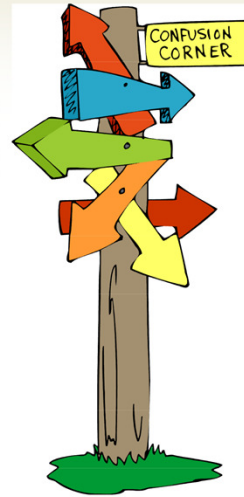
In relationships some of that feedback is also fairly spontaneous – the delighted look on a partner’s face, the eager questions of students you are teaching, the crying of a baby -- all tell us that we are doing something right (or wrong). And if we are in close relationships we may actively “check in” to see how things are going.

Feedback is useless, however, if there is no response. Learning requires that we take the time to reflect on what we have been doing (did it get the response we wanted?), to connect it to past situations to see if there is a pattern, then decide if we want to keep or change the behavior. All too often, however, we forget to take the time to reflect.

Think about a time when you DID reflect on something you had done or said and then changed something as a consequence. What was the circumstance? How did you KNOW to take the time to reflect?

Facilitate a large group discussion, capturing the signals that people used to stop and pause on a flip chart.


When there are differences in expectations, it is natural that uncertainty follows ...



Talking Points

If people's assumptions and expectations are not transparent, misunderstandings can happen. In new relationships such differences are inevitable.

This uncertainty leads to discomfort – what we call the “**Pinch**”.



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Even with the best of intentions and the hardest of efforts, there are bound to be misunderstandings, miscommunication, and unmet expectations in any community of people – and the Church is no different. When there are expectations of us that we cannot or will not meet, or we hold expectations of others that they cannot or will not meet or even if we are unaware of each other’s expectations we feel a ‘pinch’ – a minor discomfort that lets us know that something is amiss.

The “Pinch” Is:



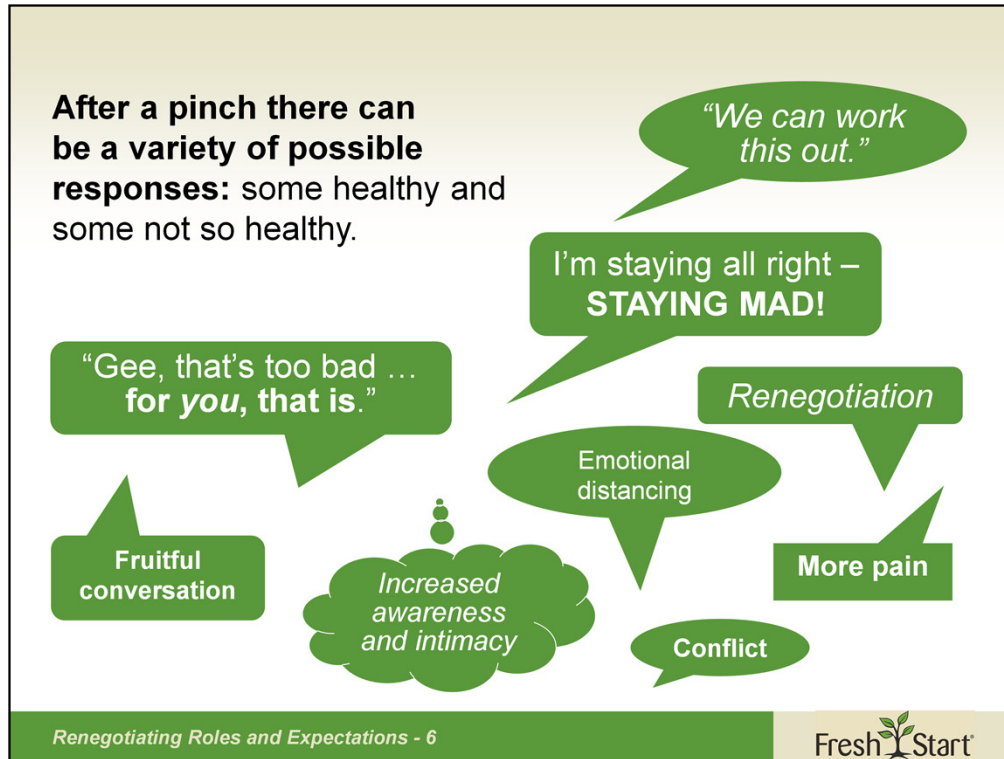
- Predictable, expected and normal
- A helpful indication that “it’s time to talk”

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

By its very nature, a “pinch” is a time of increased anxiety, the discomfort that happens when expectations clash. “Pinches” are also times of great opportunity: times to renegotiate, based on clearly articulated expectations and agreed-upon goals.



Talking Points


There are number of potential responses to a pinch. Some are healthy and help lay the groundwork for clear negotiation and/or compromise. Some responses are not so healthy and lead to more hurt and confusion.

Remember: **YOUR RESPONSE IS THE ONLY THING YOU CAN CONTROL.** Choosing how to respond and then sharing that response, which is a risk, can lead to increased awareness and intimacy or to further exacerbating the situation.


When have you responded to a “pinch” in a way that led to greater understanding?

Facilitate a large group discussion, capturing effective ways to respond to a “pinch” on a flip chart.

Choice Point



Ignore or Renegotiate

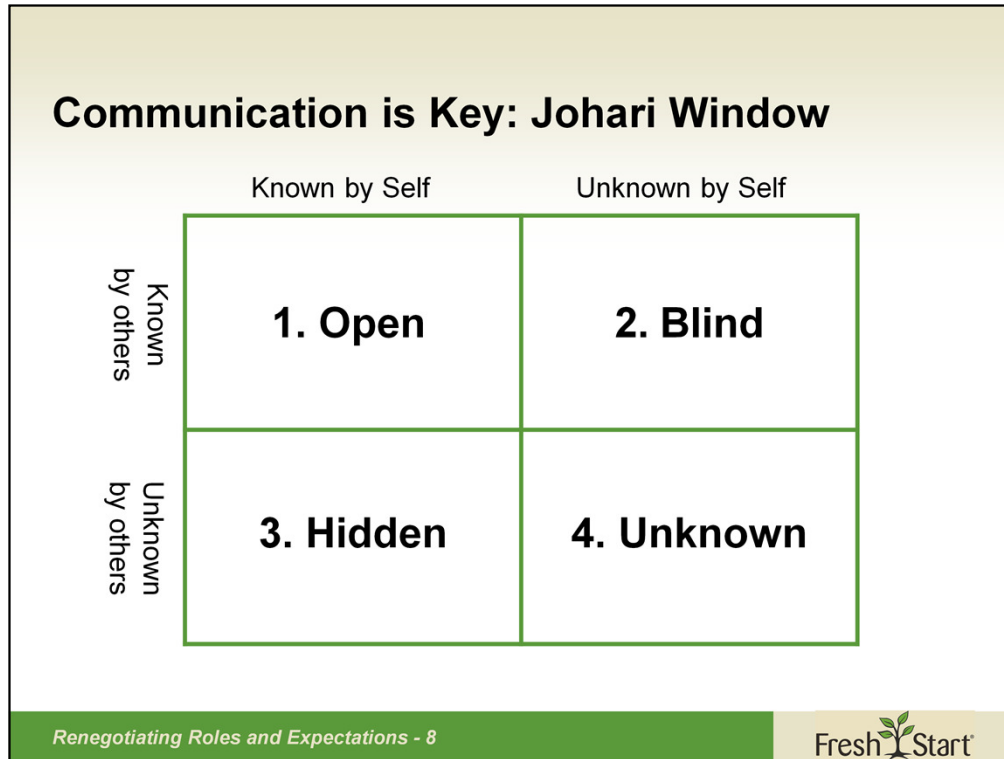
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Talking Points

When a “pinch” occurs, you can choose to ignore it. Under what circumstances might that be a reasonable approach?

The danger, of course, is that if a “pinch” is not dealt with and repeats itself over and over it can build into a **CRUNCH**. By that time emotions are higher, anxiety is higher, and the ability to respond appropriately may be greatly reduced.

If you decide to share your discomfort (“This hurts”) and open the door to discussion, you run the risk of rejection. If preservation of the relationship is important, it is worth the risk. Let’s return for a moment to the concept of feedback.

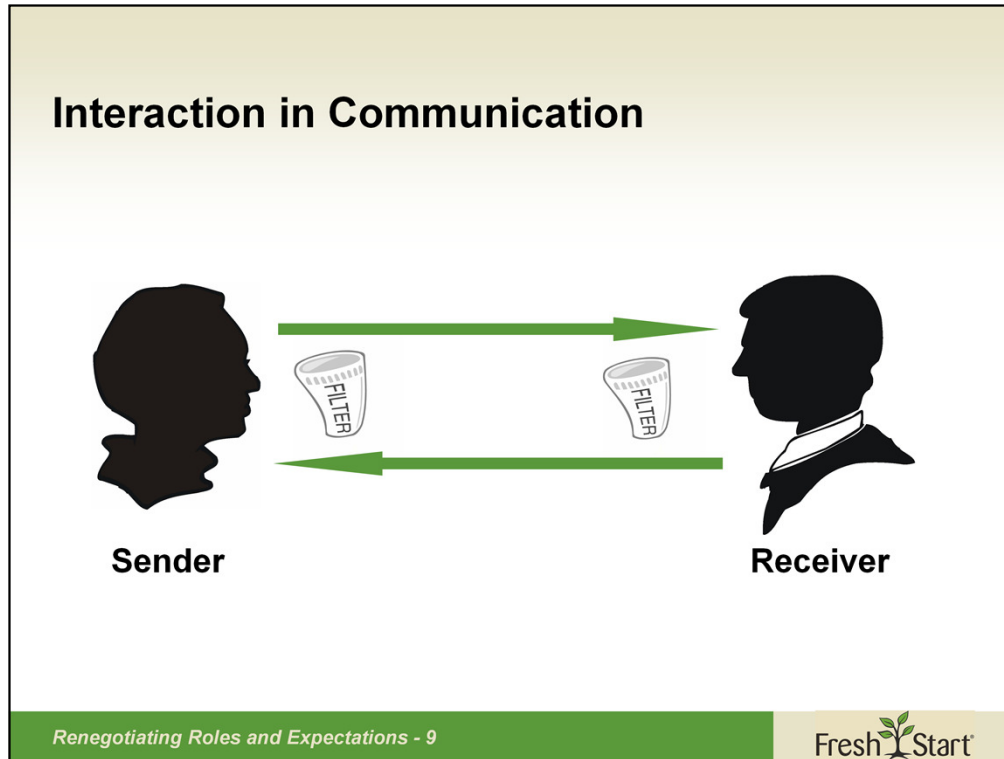


Talking Points

In the 1950's American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham came up with this diagram to explain the importance of getting feedback from others. In the upper left hand corner are those attributes that are known to yourself and to others either because they are observable (you are left-handed) or because you choose to share (your name, the fact that you have a dog, etc.). In the upper right hand corner are those things that others think, know or feel about you, but do not share (the feelings people have toward you, for example, or anything that someone else observes but does not tell you about). This is your "blind spot".

On the lower left hand side are those things you keep hidden from others, things that you do not want them to know. On the lower right is the realm of the unconscious, things that are not known to you or to others. The only way to open up the "blind" section is by getting feedback; the only way to open the "hidden" section is to share.

In a "pinch" it is often the hidden expectations you have of others or they of you or the "blind spot" of how one's actions are affecting others that are at the heart of the discomfort. Expanding the "open" window – where you and others make transparent assumptions, concerns, and expectations is the beginning of renegotiation.



Talking Points

Interaction between two people is complicated – we can never be sure (unless we ask) whether what we said has been understood or interpreted in the way we intended. Each of us has a story which has grown out of the information we have available to us, our observations of the world around us, and our interpretations of all this data.

When one person sends a message, its meaning is filtered by the receiver – in other words, what I say may not be understood by you in the way I intended it. When I receive a message, I hear it through my experience – of you and our relationship, of similar situations from my past, etc. – and I give it meaning. That evokes a feeling in me (which may or may not be the feeling you intended to evoke), and I make a decision on how I feel about it (am I OK or not OK?), and develop a response accordingly. That response, however, is filtered through YOUR experience and you assign meaning to it, entering the same cycle I just experienced (feeling, deciding whether I'm OK, developing a response).

This is an important concept to remember when giving or receiving feedback. By checking our assumptions we can help ourselves stay balanced and non-anxious.

Giving Feedback

- Be true to self
- Respond to the other person and situation
- Focus on mutual learning
- Speak for self – perceptions and feelings
- Give observations, not interpretations
- Be open about your assumptions

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Fresh Start 


Talking Points


When you are in a “pinch” you are in a position to give feedback to whomever it is that is causing you discomfort. Remember that feedback may not be welcome – and that you have no control over whether the other person will accept the feedback and change accordingly. In initiating the feedback, you are in the “one-up” position – the best approach is to take a stance of mutual learning to shift the balance to a win/win. While being clear about the effect the situation is having on you (use “I” statements), you need to be curious about what the other person is experiencing as well and be able to respond. Own up to your perceptions and feelings, while not attributing anything to the other person. Keep the Johari Window in mind – what the other person is thinking, feeling, or assuming is hidden from you unless you inquire and the person is willing to be open as well.

Distribute Handout 1 and ask participants to think of a current “pinch” they are facing. How would they start the conversation? After they have a few minutes to jot down a response, have them pair up with a partner and get feedback on their approach. Debrief in the large group – how did things go?

Structuring a Conversation for Mutual Learning

- Purpose
- Contribution not blame
- Begin with the “third story”
- Listen
- Joint problem-solving



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Talking Points

Trying to change the other person is NOT a purpose for the conversation – because that is not something you can do. Legitimate purposes are to learn more about the other person’s perspective (“what am I missing in this situation?”), to express your own views and feelings (“I feel as though I have no privacy when parishioners call me at home during my day off”), and to engage in mutual problem-solving (“how can we meet their needs to have time with me and provide me with uninterrupted time for my family?”).

Before starting the conversation, think through what contributions you have made to the situation, avoiding placing blame on the other (“I may not have been clear in my communications with the parish about the kinds of situations I feel are emergencies that I want to be interrupted for. I have not maintained a regular office hour schedule). Put yourself in the position of an outside observer – how would someone who is not involved in the situation describe it? Instead of starting with your side of the story, see if you can simply describe what is happening in a way that everyone can agree on the definition of the problem (“I receive two or three phone calls on average during my day off. We may have different expectations about the circumstances that require the rector’s attention.”) At any time in the conversation be willing to listen, really listen, to the other person’s story and check your understanding of what they are saying by acknowledging, paraphrasing, or asking questions for clarification. Then invite the other to help find a mutually beneficial solution.

Ask participants to return to the “pinch” they identified earlier. What is their purpose in raising it, what is the contribution, what would the “third story” look like? Have them jot down the beginning to a mutual learning conversation then share it with the same partner they had before and get feedback from that individual. Debrief the experience in a large group – how did it go? What did they learn?

Receiving Feedback

“To influence, we must be willing to be influenced.”
Anonymous

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Talking Points

In a “pinch” you need to be able to accept feedback from others, as well as share your perceptions and feelings with them. Opening yourself to feedback is always risky, but without such openness it is hard to convince others to be open.

There are three areas for feedback: the content of your work, your management or administrative skills, and your interpersonal skills. If you are seeking feedback, be clear on the boundaries of the feedback you are seeking. Do you want feedback on your sermons, your ability to run the Vestry meeting, the way in which the financial tables are displayed? Listen between the lines – what is NOT being said or how things are said to determine whether there are interpersonal skills you should be exploring. Explore by asking for clarification and for specifics – if people are unhappy about the way Vestry meetings are going, what could you do to make things better. Don’t be defensive – it is up to you whether to take the feedback seriously. Is it something you have heard before? Does it align with the “pinch” you’ve been feeling? You don’t have to respond immediately – you can take time to sort through your feelings and determine a response.

And don’t forget to thank the people who accepted your invitation and offered you their perceptions and suggestions.

Distribute Handout 2 on Tips for Giving and Receiving Feedback.

Built-in Feedback Loops Are Essential



- Meeting evaluations
- Leadership retreats
- Mutual Ministry Reviews
- Periodic reviews of letters of agreement
- Staff evaluations

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Feedback is essential to healthy functioning in the congregation. The best way to keep clear about expectations and roles is to establish on-going mechanisms for feedback and honest dialogue about how things are going.

This process needs to be a regular part of the congregation's functioning. Most often, no one wants to do evaluation/feedback/renegotiation until there's a huge problem – and by then, the emotions are too high and the conflict is too deep to do much more than damage control.

What feedback mechanisms are already built into your congregation? What might you want to change or add?

Distribute Handout 3 and ask participants to identify the built-in feedback loops that already exist. What are they? How are they working? What is the best example of a feedback process they have seen in congregational life? What made it that way? After they have had a few minutes to jot down their responses, have them gather in small groups or congregational teams to discuss their answers. Debrief in the large group to capture “best practices.”

What If You Have To Say “No”?

- Behind every “no” is a “yes” – what is yours?
- Respect the other
- Say “no” in a way that preserves relationship
- Offer an option

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Talking Points

Sometimes when the other’s side of the story is clear, you are in the position of not being able or willing to do as they ask. Yet maintaining relationships in community is important. William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project talks about using a “positive no” – one which leaves the door open for continuing relationship. Such a “no” begins and ends with a “yes.”

The first “yes” is the flip side of that to which you are saying “no” – if you will not do/change something it is because it conflicts with some deeper value of yours. You need to be clear about that value (“My family time is precious to me, and with so many evening and weekend commitments, it is important for my relationship to them to give them my undivided attention on my day off.”).

With that opening, you offer your “no” – “Unless someone has died or requires the last sacrament, I ask that no one call me at home on that day.” When saying “no” do so in a tone of respect and sometimes specific words that acknowledge the other’s right to their side of the story (in our example, the desire to have the rector’s attention).

Then end with another “yes” – “I will start keeping more regular office hours so that people know when to reach me with nonurgent issues. I hope that will meet both our needs.”

When All Else Fails: Formal Renegotiation

- Explore consequences
- Ask for help
- Use a third party



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Talking Points

Sometimes reaching agreement is difficult – people’s interests are simply too divergent. In that case ask clarifying questions about the consequences of taking the negotiations to a formal stage. If people agree that only formal negotiations will work and the consequences of not moving forward are too high, then ask for help from your Bishop and bring in an outside person to facilitate further conversation or, as a last resort, to mediate.

When have you been involved in a formal renegotiation that ended successfully from your perspective? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome? What did you learn as a result?

Facilitate a large group discussion about the learnings from these situations.