

# the executive

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**CalSAE**  
ADVANCING TOGETHER

# Managing Conflict Through **THE ARTFUL CONVERSATION**

## A Spinoff From the Highly Rated Seasonal Spectacular 2023 Session

BY ASHLEY VIRTUE

**R**emember the days when politics and religion were taboo to talk about at work? I hear your collective sigh ... “Yes. Yes, we miss those days.”

Even five years ago it would have been shocking to imagine talking about reproductive rights with colleagues and certainly as a company. But when the Supreme Court overturned Roe last year, not only was it common workplace conversation, but employees demanded to know how their employers were going to respond. What would the impact be for employees in different states and therefore – what’s our stance on this thing?



IF WE CAN TRAIN OUR BRAINS TO THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS AHEAD OF TIME, WE'RE MUCH LESS LIKELY TO FALL BACK ON SURVIVAL INSTINCT AND MORE LIKELY TO UTILIZE ARTFUL TECHNIQUES.

It's new and uncharted territory for workplace leaders, who face a mighty task: creating an environment where these conversations can be constructive and even welcome, rather than disruptive and dreaded. And this year will be especially challenging because it's a divisive political year as well.

At the National Conflict Resolution Center, we are working with companies and leaders who recognize that polarization can't be ignored when it comes to workplace culture. I talked about this in my session at CalSAE's Seasonal Spectacular when I presented to a thoughtful, engaged audience on how to manage conflict through the *ARTful Conversation*.

In the *Artful Conversation*, we share practical ways to have respectful dialogue even when we disagree. And while I can't give the entire workshop in less than 1,000 words, here are three takeaways that are important to understand.

The first three letters in *ARTful* stand for something:

**A** – Active Awareness

**R** – Respond Respectfully

**T** – Troubleshoot Together

**ACTIVE AWARENESS.** It's important for us all to recognize that when we enter into disagreement with someone, we have natural instincts that kick in. And those instincts aren't always helpful when resolving conflict. These primal reflexes – fight, flight and freeze – are effective at helping you survive in the wilderness but not when collaborating with your politically opposite colleague. We must, instead, be aware of our bias and our ego when engaged in these conversations. Taking that first step of simply recognizing that your defense mechanisms are up and that you may need to process your perceptions of the situation, can go a long way in setting a foundation for success.

**RESPOND RESPECTFULLY.** You hear the term "active listening" a lot but the meaning of it is often lost on people. Frequently, we associate active listening with "not interrupting." But while we politely wait for the other person to finish, what we're usually doing is loading up our counterarguments silently in our heads. One way to stop yourself from doing that is to see if you can restate what you heard the other person say. And to take it one step further, we encourage you to repeat it out loud to them.

This shockingly simple step is transformative in conflict. Not only do you show respect to the other person by showing curiosity about an opinion you don't hold, but you set a tone of civil dialogue for the rest of the conversation.

An important note here: you are *not* saying you agree with the other person. You are simply showing them the respect of being heard.

**TROUBLESHOOT TOGETHER.** Now that you've helped set a tone of *listening to understand* (as we like to phrase it) it's your turn to tell your perspective in a non-confrontational way. I always like to say, *you may have the most important message in the world, but if you can't say it in a way where it can be received by the other person, there's no point.* So, think about how you are communicating when you share your point of view. Are you using neutral language, or does it sound like an attack? Are you focusing on the issue at hand or getting personal? How's your tone and body language?

These strategies are pivotal to encouraging respectful disagreement. We know that between culture wars and politics, opportunities for conflict are only going to grow. So, we must equip ourselves with the tools necessary to navigate these conversations. It's foundational to a human-centered workplace, where employees feel a sense of belonging and safety – able to openly discuss difficult topics and disagree in healthy ways. Creating this type of culture takes time, and it's something workplace leaders should be doing now; after all, it's hard to build relationships in the midst of a crisis.

When we teach the ART methodology in workshops, we always include a lot of practice and discussion. The reason for this is, we know that conflict resolution sounds good in theory but is really hard to apply when emotions are triggered. So, I encourage you to think about this in the "off hours" when you are not in a heightened emotional state or responding to a disagreement. "How would I phrase that to XX if I brought this up to them?" "How might they respond?" "What bias am I walking into the situation with?" If we can train our brains to think about these things ahead of time, we're much less likely to fall back on survival instinct and more likely to utilize *ARTful* techniques.

After all, we know we can't see eye-to-eye with everyone. And in a truly diverse workforce, where we are asking for innovation and creativity, we shouldn't. Let's embrace the conflict as an opportunity to talk – and to find a path forward. ▶▶▶



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