



Dialog 8: Selena and Darshana

Colleague Helps Colleague / Initiates the Conversation / No Positional Power

An organization that works with at-risk youth runs workshops and retreats all over the world. The director of the organization has tasked two colleagues, Selena and Darshana, with creating a handbook for running these events so that all facilitators will follow the same standard operating procedures. Selena is feeling resentful about how the work is going. In her mind, she's pulling her weight while Darshana isn't. After two meetings and several weeks of this dynamic, she's ready to boil over. She wants to tell Darshana to honor her commitments; after all, Selena always does what she says she's going to do.

Step 1: Permission

Inner Prep

Selena is feeling resentful, and a bit confused. "It's not fair. Who flakes out on their work anyway, and doesn't even acknowledge it?"

Selena first allies with herself. "I'm resentful because I value fairness, and integrity. I care about this organization and the work we do, and I want it well-supported."

Next she looks for positive intent behind Darshana's behavior. "She may be extremely overextended, working on projects that I don't know about. English isn't her first language — maybe she struggles with writing, and is ashamed to admit it. And perhaps — I don't really believe this, but it could be true — I misunderstood what I thought we had agreed to."

Now she states her positive intent: "I want us to get the work done, and collaborate fairly, and have a great working relationship."

The Conversation

Selena: Can we talk about the events handbook for a second? I'm struggling with how we're working together on it, and I'd love your help.

Initiating the conversation by asking for permission (chapter 11).

Darshana: Yes. What's the problem?

Step 2: Outcome

Selena: I feel like we're having an issue with how we're communicating. For example, the last couple of meetings I thought we had divided up the work so that I was going to draft a couple of chapters and you were going to draft a couple of chapters. But when we met, you hadn't written anything and we worked on your part of the assignment together. I was confused about that, and to be honest, a little annoyed. I really want us to have a great working relationship, and for me, that includes being really clear about what each of us is going to accomplish.

Selena is sharing facts -- what Darshana did, and the effect it had on Selena -- rather than criticizing. This is a subtle distinction, but a crucial one.

Darshana: Well, both times we worked on those chapters together and I thought we did great. The handbook's really coming along, isn't it?

Deflecting, and not owning her behavior (chapter 13).

Selena: We definitely can make a good team. I agree that we got the work done. I'd like for us to be clearer in our communication, so that we collaborate in ways that feel good to both of us. And I want us to have a great working relationship — to enjoy working together. But let me check with you: what do you want?

Darshana: I want us to work together well. I thought we were — those meetings where we outlined and drafted the chapters together were really productive, and fun.

In a very passive way, Darshana is arguing with Selena's assessment of reality. "Those meetings were productive and fun." (chapter 13)

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

Selena: I'd like to feel the same way. And right now, I'm not. Can I share my experience of the past few weeks?

Darshana: Yes.

Selena: We met on March 3, and made a plan to break

Darshana has been doing everything possible to make there not be a problem. Selena states clearly that she sees things differently, and asks for permission to elaborate. This makes it difficult for Darshana to continue to dismiss her concerns (chapter 11).

down the handbook project into tasks and milestones. I thought we agreed that you would draft chapters 1 and 2, and I would draft chapters 3 and 4, and we'd go over them together the morning of March 10. When we met, you didn't have anything done. I was a little mystified, but I didn't say anything. I was just like, "OK, I guess we'll go over my chapters together." And then we talked about your chapters, and started outlining them together. And that same thing happened the following week. So I started wondering, what's going on? Do I have this backward? Did we agree that I would write everything and you'd just give me input?

Darshana: (embarrassed) Well, that worked out really well, I thought. You're really good at the writing.

Selena: Thanks. I'm open to us collaborating in whatever way best gets things done. For me, a big part of that is clear communication. Can you help me understand how that miscommunication happened?

Darshana: Yeah, I guess I was unclear.

Selena: How so?

Darshana: I said I'd draft those chapters, and then just got really busy with some fundraising work that was more urgent. And when I saw the work you'd done on your chapters, I figured that was the best way to go. I could share my thoughts, and you'd do a great job of putting them all into usable form.

What have you tried?

Selena: What prevented you from just telling me that at the time? It would have saved me a lot of frustration and self-doubt.

Darshana: I'm sorry about that. Truth is, I was a little embarrassed, and hoped that we could just move on. I didn't think about how that would affect you. I am a hard worker, you know.

Selena: Thank you for saying that. Was it just that you were busy with another project? Was there something else that made it hard for you to draft those chapters?

Darshana: Well, I didn't do them the first time because of the fundraising obligations, and also my daughter was sick and I was staying up late taking care of her. But I hate to let my personal life interfere with work, so I didn't say

Not blaming, but not backing away from the key issue as she sees it: Darshana didn't do what she say she was going to do (chapter 22).

anything. I figured I'd catch up later. And then we worked on my stuff during the meeting, and it was so much easier and more efficient and better than me working on my own. And I thought you were cool with it. So when we agreed to draft the next set of chapters, I just did the same thing — I thought about mine, but figured we'd draft them together.

Selena: It seems like you prefer to work collaboratively.

Darshana: Yes, it's more fun, and I have a lot more clarity and energy when we're brainstorming and working together. I mean, didn't you think we worked well together?

Find the opportunity in the problem

Selena: Yes, I did. And you did have some great ideas. It sounds like the way we had agreed to share the work didn't work for you. Are there ways we can organize our work that allows you to be your best, and also makes our expectations and obligations clear?

Finding the opportunity in a skills gap (chapter 21).

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

Darshana: How do you feel about working on all the chapters collaboratively in future? That way, neither of us has to write chapters by ourselves.

Selena: That's an idea. What else might we try, especially around clear communication?

Darshana: We talked about dividing up the work, but didn't put it in writing. I think that would help me remember, and put the tasks into my calendar.

Selena: Great. Anything else?

Darshana: If you're upset, will you tell me right away? I think I have a bad habit of trying to pretend that I didn't blow off an obligation. As you noticed. And don't worry about making a fuss; you're really good at giving feedback. I do feel a little ashamed, but that's on me, not you.

Selena: Yes, thanks for saying that. I'll commit to giving you feedback — both positive and negative — if you do the same. I'm sure there's a lot I can learn from you as well.

Darshana: It's a deal.

Selena: Anything else you can think of?

Darshana: No, I think what we've come up with is great.

Selena: Could I add a suggestion?

Darshana: Sure.

Selena: Would you be willing to take responsibility for note taking, and turning the notes into action items and deadlines?

Darshana: Oh, well, I'm not that good at that stuff. You have a much more linear, organized mind. Couldn't you do it?

Selena: I could. But I'd prefer you to do it, for a couple of reasons. First, I don't want to act like your supervisor; we're colleagues, after all. And since you've admitted this isn't your strong suit, I can see how I could get sucked into managing you, and hounding you for work. That doesn't sound fun for me.

Darshana: I can see that. What's the other reason?

Selena: I could be wrong here — and I'd like to hear your reaction — but I think you're selling yourself short. When we've been working on this handbook together, I've seen you have a very logical and step-wise approach. You think things through, and you spot holes and weaknesses with an eagle eye. I'd be happy to help you become better at workflow and project management. Would that be a useful skill for you to develop?

Darshana: Yeah, it would. That's been an "area of improvement" in my annual reviews for years. In fact, I'd probably be assistant director at this point if I were better at managing work. I keep telling myself that I'm the creative one, and the one with heart, as if I couldn't also be better at keeping on task.

Selena: I'd love to help you. I wasn't so great at that early in my career, and a mentor made a big difference. So what would you like us to do?

Choose

Darshana: I do want us to work collaboratively. I think I can actually add more value and save you writing time if we just sit together and craft each chapter side by side.

Suggesting an option (chapter 24).

Holding firm to a boundary about sharing work (chapter 13).

Expressing confidence in the other person (chapter 10).

Expressing vulnerability and empathy (chapter 10).

I'm happy to do editing and rewriting on my own — I don't mean to put an unfair burden on you.

Selena: What about a structured way for us to check in and get and give feedback?

Darshana: How about we put a 10-minute meeting on our calendars once a week? We can create a real simple agenda: How it's going, compliments and complaints, and what we're going to do differently next week?

Selena: You're turning into a project manager as we speak! Very cool.

Darshana: Well, while I'm at it, I'll agree to take the notes from each working session and turn them into action items. If you'd be willing to help me do that, at least the first few times.

Selena: It's a deal. Anything else?

Darshana: I'm good. How about you? Does this plan take care of what was bugging you?

Selena: I believe it does. And remember, we don't have to get it perfect, because we're going to have regular check-ins. So whatever doesn't work for either of us, we have a platform and an opportunity to address it.

Darshana: Great.

Commit

Selena: So what shall we do first? Do you want to schedule that weekly check-in?

Darshana: Yes. How's Friday at 11 for you?

Selena: Perfect. Will you send me an invite?

Darshana: Yes, as soon as I get back to my desk. You'll have it in your inbox by noon today.

Selena: Great. And our next working session is tomorrow morning. What do each of us commit to doing before then?

Darshana: Let's work on chapter 7, about techniques for mediation. I'll review all the training materials, and come to the session with a summary of our conflict resolution methodology. Can you review our processes for communicating with parents and guardians, and the rules for when and how we expel students and get them home?

Creating an action plan is the heart of the commitment task (chapter 26).

Using "each of us" makes it an "us-issue" rather than a "you-issue" - keeps them as allies rather than Selena turning into a critic.

Selena: Yes. Can you put both of those tasks in an email?
Maybe in the invite notes?

Darshana: Will do. See you tomorrow.

Selena: Yup. And Darshana? Thanks for being so open.
I was nervous to have this conversation, and now I'm
so relieved, and really optimistic about what we can
accomplish together.

Darshana: Me too.