

**HOW TO FIND
THE RIGHT WORDS**

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INTRODUCTION

Life constantly presents us with a tension between two very significant forces: we want to let others know how we feel. And we want to be kind. Only too often, the two missions seem entirely opposed. If we revealed the true depths of our anger, frustration, disdain or love, we might ruin a friendship – and end up a pariah in the community. But if we said nothing, we would suffer from a sense of claustrophobia and inauthenticity.

Too often, unsure of how to proceed, we veer between extremes. We say nothing for too long and then, unable to take it any longer, exhausted or at wits' end, we explode. We divulge in an uncontained moment everything that for months we had been too inhibited and cowed to express politely.

We should be generous with ourselves. Speaking up directly but kindly is an art – and we may never have come close to any instruction in how to pull it off (this might even be the first time we're thinking about the matter squarely). Childhood is – as with so many issues – the classroom in which we are likely to have picked up most of what we know about communication and its consequences. Unfortunately, many of us grew up in homes where the art of authentic but gentle transmission was not in evidence. We may have had too many lessons in sulking or screaming, insistence or denial. We may have been exposed to people with such volatile tempers or fragile personalities that we became very 'good' boys and girls. That doesn't mean that we had nothing tricky we wanted to say, but there was just no way that we could dare to say it. We learnt to close our mouths and swallow our complaints. That may still be our first impulse in adulthood – though we now probably also occasionally lapse into the characteristic flipside of the shy

and the hyper-polite: what we haven't said for too long emerges in surprising and undignified torrents.

This is a book about diplomacy. Diplomacy is a skill that evolved initially to deal with problems in relationships between countries. The leaders of neighbouring states might be touchy on points of personal pride and quickly roused to anger; if they met head on, they might be liable to infuriate each other and start a disastrous war. So instead, they learnt to send emissaries, people who could state things in less inflammatory ways, who wouldn't take the issues so personally, who could be more patient and emollient. Diplomacy was a way of avoiding the dangers that come from decisions taken in the heat of the moment. In their own palaces, two kings might be thumping the table and calling their rivals by abusive names; but in the quiet negotiating halls, the diplomat would say: 'my master is slightly disconcerted...'

We still associate the term diplomacy with embassies, international relations and high politics but it really refers to a set of skills that matter in many areas of daily life, especially at the office and on the landing, outside the slammed doors of loved ones' bedrooms. Diplomacy is the art of advancing an idea or cause without unnecessarily inflaming passions or unleashing a catastrophe. It involves an understanding of the many facets of human nature that can undermine agreement and stoke conflict, and a commitment to unpicking these with foresight and grace.

Over the coming chapters, we are introduced to a range of scenarios where a lack of diplomacy could be an enormous danger, to our state of mind and to our friendships. Every case requires a slightly different approach but some broad principles of diplomacy can be observed:

The Importance of Respect

The good diplomat remembers, first and foremost, that some of the vehemence with which people insist on having their way draws energy from a sense of not being respected. People will fight with particular tenacity and apparent meanness over so-called small points when they have a sense that the other person has failed to honour their wider need for appreciation and esteem. So diplomatic people put extraordinary emphasis on overall reassurance. Whatever the particular dispute at hand, the diplomat sends out signals that their interlocutor is important, esteemed and completely worthy of their regard. That can make a local complaint so much easier to hear.

Admit Your Own Errors

It helps greatly to know that those making a complaint are not speaking from a position of impregnable perfection but are themselves flawed and aware of the fact. There can be few more successful moves than to confess genially from the outset of a complaint, 'Oh, and I do that all the time myself...'

Massage the Truth

In negotiations, the diplomat is not addicted to indiscriminate or heroic truth telling. They appreciate the legitimate place that minor lies can occupy in the service of greater truths. They know that if certain local facts are emphasised, then the most important principles in a relationship may be forever undermined. Diplomats know that a small lie may have to be the guardian of a big truth. They appreciate their own resistance to the unvarnished facts – and privately hope that others may on occasion, over certain matters,

also take the trouble to lie to them, and that they will never know.

Overlook Bad Behaviour

Another trait of the diplomat is to be serene in the face of obviously bad behaviour: a sudden loss of temper, a wild accusation, a very mean remark. They don't take it personally – even when they may be the target of rage. They reach instinctively for reasonable explanations and have clearly in their minds the better moments of a currently frantic but essentially decent person. They know themselves well enough to understand that abandonments of perspective are both hugely normal and usually indicative of nothing much beyond exhaustion or passing despair. They do not aggravate a febrile situation through self-righteousness, which is a symptom of not knowing oneself too well – and of having a very selective memory. The person who bangs a fist on the table or announces extravagant opinions may simply be rather worried, frightened or just very enthusiastic: conditions that should rightly invite sympathy rather than disgust.

Find the Right Moment

The diplomat understands that there are better and worse times to bring up issues. They do not try to get a point across whenever it might first or most apply: they wait till it has the best chance of being heard. That might mean waiting for the morning or for the effects of alcohol to have subsided.

Be Pessimistic

The diplomat's tone of reasonableness is built, fundamentally, on a base of deep pessimism. They know what the human animal

is, they understand how many problems are going to beset even a very good friendship, marriage, business or society. Their good-humoured way of greeting problems is a symptom of having swallowed a healthy measure of sadness from the outset. They have given up on the ideal, not out of weakness but out of a mature readiness to see compromise as a necessary requirement for getting by in a radically imperfect world.

Be Frank

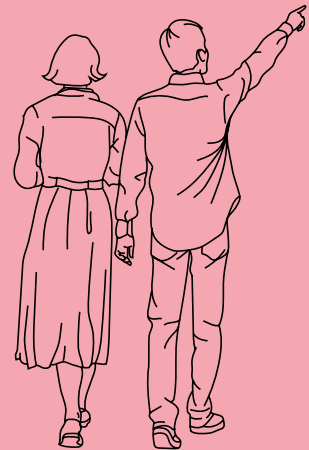
The diplomat may be polite, but they are not, for that matter, averse to delivering bits of bad news with frankness. Too often, we seek to preserve our image in the eyes of others by tiptoeing around the harsh decisions – and thereby make things far worse than they need to be. We should say that we're leaving them, that they're fired, that their pet project isn't going ahead, but we mutter instead that we're a little preoccupied at the moment, that we're delighted by their performance and that the project is being actively discussed by the senior team. We mistake leaving some room for hope with kindness. But true niceness does not mean seeming nice, it means helping the people we are going to disappoint to adjust as best they can to reality. By administering a sharp, clean blow, the diplomatic person kills off the torture of hope, accepting the frustration that's likely to come their way: the diplomat is kind enough to let themselves be the target of hate.

* * *

The result of reading this book, and of thereby learning how to find the right words, isn't that we will become consummate liars or well-polished fakes. We will learn how to hit a far narrower but far more valuable target. We will know how to be at once *kind* and *honest*.

RELATIONSHIPS

**I WANT US JUST TO
BE FRIENDS**



I WANT US JUST TO BE FRIENDS

It is never easy to be rejected but it's arguably a great deal worse to have to reject; the pains of unrequited love are as nothing next to the agonies of having to inflict a dismissal. Someone is willing to offer you everything; concretely, their body, but more metaphysically, their soul, and your answer is in essence a plain: no thank you. But that isn't to say that there aren't far better and worse ways to get the message across. Here's how an ideal note might go:

—> *Forgive me for bringing this up...*

It's profoundly tempting to say nothing, to sidestep the interest while the pursuer convinces themselves that you perhaps haven't yet fully noticed or are just profoundly 'shy'. But such ambiguity merely prolongs the torture. You have the agency, maturity and responsibility to bring this to an end.

—> *I so love spending time with you...*

The overwhelming priority is to help the rejected candidate preserve their dignity. They aren't a bad or shameful person, they have a huge range of qualities (which is why this is so hard); it's just that sex won't be possible. Be unembarrassed, for embarrassment is catching; if you're not ashamed, they'll have a chance not to be so either. You didn't will your lack of desire, any more than you willed your sexual orientation.

—> *... but I feel if we go further...*

Frame the decision as somehow mutual. It isn't simply they who want it and you who conclusively shudders. *We* are looking at this

together. Both of you are in theory rather tempted to go forward, you just happen to have noticed a problem from where you're standing.

—> *... if we let things develop, you won't get the best out of me.*

It isn't, and can't be, their fault. It's a basic act of kindness to assume responsibility. But, so you must suggest, this has nothing to do with a lack of attraction; it arises from a sincere wish to protect them from your many trickier sides.

—> *If this became something else, I'd hate to damage what we have.*

The traditional assumption is that going out with someone gives us access to their best selves: their truest, most authentic and most kindly aspects. But this is plainly false. Most relationships are a calamity of ugliness; we are almost always far better friends than we are lovers. Friendship isn't some kind of consolation prize, it's the truly valuable state besides which the average relationship looks like the squalid alternative.

—> *I need your advice, your support and your unique way of looking at the world. Might you be free this Monday to see a show and maybe pick up some supper?*

Make the ongoing offer of friendship concrete. You aren't 'rejecting' them as a whole; you're offering them something far more significant than your sexuality: a chance to enjoy the best sides of you, right now. Friendship is the real gift and privilege.