



EYE ROLLING: FIVE WAYS TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION ROLLING

by Marcia Reynolds, PsyD

"I can handle when they talk back to me," the HR Director said, "but when they roll their eyes, it just gets under my skin."

"I know," said the Training Manager. "I have an intern who does amazing work, but when I try to give him some direction, the eye roll makes me explain myself far more than I normally would. I feel I have to defend myself when I'm just stating a clear expectation."

"It's not just the younger employees," the director added. "I get the smirk and sideways glance from one of my most senior specialists. If I ask if she disagrees with me, or disapproves of my approach, she says, 'Oh no, I see what you mean' and acts as if she is the most agreeable person around."

"I think we need to address how eye-rolling impacts our communications. But I bet they roll their eyes if we suggest it!"

How to react when you notice eye-rolling

Most people emotionally react when someone rolls their eyes. The gesture is seen as a non-verbal judgment of your words. If you ask about the gesture, eye rollers generally deny they did anything disrespectful.

Whether in a business meeting or an informal conversation, the last thing you want to do is angrily respond to eye-rolling. If you stay curious instead of defensively reacting, you might find out what is underneath the eye roll. This could be your chance to connect by showing you care about the person's opinion.

For example, during a tense discussion, you might be focused on making your point heard. You want to influence thinking. Eye-rolling might indicate you have pressed too hard. You might back off and sincerely ask the eye roller to share his or her perspective.

You want the person to surface their anger and frustration, to feel safe enough to vent. You need to hear what they think is missing or what they feel they aren't getting in the moment. Even if you can't give them what they want, it is better they feel heard instead of ignored.

So, instead of checking out or having a knee-jerk reaction to eye-rolling, notice your urge to defend, reprimand, or shut off from someone for eye-rolling. Then follow these 5 steps to engage them in the conversation.

Encourage eye rollers to express what is on their mind

1. Exhale your stress and recall feelings of respect and care for the person as best you can. Shift to wondering why they are resisting what you are offering. Even if you can't feel good about the eye-roller, at least calmly (and genuinely) ask, "Would you please tell me what you think I have done or what I'm not hearing from you?" Then listen silently, resisting the urge to defend yourself.
2. Even if it takes prompting, encourage eye-rollers to vent. Venting is a way to release frustration. If you accept their words without making them wrong, they might feel you care about their point of view. In fact, letting people vent not only allows them to release their feelings, but you can find what they really want or what is causing them to feel the way they do if you listen. Then, once they feel heard, they will be more willing to try to understand your point of view.

Flip their resistance into participation

3. Summarize what the person tells you and ask for confirmation. Don't analyze what they say, just share what you hear. Say things like, "I think you are saying...", "I see you are upset because you think...", "I now understand that you think the decision was made based on these factors...". Let people tell you what you got right and correct you if you are off. They must feel heard before the conversation can move forward.
4. Shift their frustration from blame to desire. Once they feel you are listening, ask them what they need to so they feel their ideas or contribution is valued. Ask questions like, "What has you most frustrated right now?", "What do you need that you feel you aren't getting from me or other people?", "Do you have some ideas we can work on together?", "What would you like to see people stop doing, and what would you like to see happen instead?".
5. Agree on what the desired outcome is. You may not agree now on the best way to move forward but if you want the same end result, you might find a way to integrate some of their ideas. Agree, negotiate, or explain your point of view in light of their concerns keeping in mind what they think should happen as an end result. If they aren't ready to provide an answer, ask if you can come back to the conversation after giving the situation some thought.

Don't let eye-rolling get by you. Eye rollers have something on their mind. See if you can get them to express their views. Show you value their perspective. Integrate their ideas as best you can.

"I discovered something today," the HR Director said, "Eye rolling could be a way of getting my attention, not pushing me away."

"Thanks!" the Training Manager said, "That bit of wisdom could help me with my teenager."

Vincent Van Gogh said, "Let's not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives, and we obey them without realizing it." Catch your reactions to eye-rolling. It's your chance to show them you care about what they think.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Marcia Reynolds is an award-winning author and world-renowned expert on how leaders inspire change through conversations. She has spoken at conferences and taught workshops in 41 countries on leadership and transformational coaching. Global Gurus names her #3 coach in the world. Her books include *Outsmart Your Brain*, *The Discomfort Zone*, and *Coach the Person, Not the Problem*. Read more at www.Covisioning.com