



THE
DISCONNECT
PRINCIPLE

DIALOG

COLLECTION

The Disconnect Principle Dialog Collection by Ann Latham

This guide is intended as a quick reference for those very familiar and comfortable with my book, *The Disconnect Principle*.

When your expectations aren't met, it doesn't matter whether you are dealing with a boss, a coworker, or a direct report. Your best response is:

"We have a disconnect."

Once you recognize that you have a disconnect, it's time to investigate.

"I was expecting _____. It seems something went awry because I don't think that's what happened."

The next question is really easy: "Where are we on this?"

No judgment, but this is how I feel:

"We have a disconnect. When you pointed out my mistake in front of everyone during our meeting this morning, I was really embarrassed."

Setting expectations without doing TO (though not quite this quickly!):

"We need to do _____ by _____. As our expert in _____, I am thinking you are the one to ensure _____ for this project. Does that make sense to you? Is there any reason why you can't do that? Do you think you can meet that deadline? Is there anything you need from me?"

Teaching without doing TO:

"Would you be interested in learning a faster way of doing that or how to avoid that problem next time?" "If so, is now a good time?"

"I noticed that you put a lot of time into that project and still missed the deadline. Now maybe our expectations were unrealistic, but I was wondering if you would be interested in digging into what happened a bit with me. If I understood a little about how you approach a task like that, I might have some advice for how you could speed things up next time. Or perhaps Adrienne would be a better choice; she has a lot of experience on projects like that. Or maybe you have other ideas? Either way, I am happy to help."

A simple question can grant ongoing permission to teach:

"Would you like me to correct any mistakes I hear so you can improve your Spanish?"

There is never harm in asking:

"Would you like some advice?"

A problematic track record:

"We've tried several times now to figure out how you can _____ (meet deadlines/avoid mistakes/ manage employees without drama—whatever the need that doesn't seem to

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be a good match for the employee, being as specific as possible). I think we are at the point where we have to ask whether responsibility for _____ is a good fit for you.”

“If you think it is a good match, help me understand how you see the situation. How do you see this coming together? What do you think can fundamentally change what’s happening?”

“Most important of all, are you truly interested in developing those skills, awareness, and habits. If it isn’t interesting enough to you to ensure a serious investment of your effort and time, we need to shift these responsibilities to someone else. If you don’t really want to learn these things, why torture yourself?”

Or differing styles maybe:

“It seems you don’t like or respect our _____ (values/management approach/culture/processes/strategy). I can understand that. Some people think we are _____ (too idealistic/cautious/lean/aggressive/slow). Nonetheless, this is our way of thinking and operating. I think the question is whether you can embrace it? Can you see yourself enthusiastically working within the constraints of our organization? If not, it doesn’t make sense for you work here.”

Possibly the result of a change in responsibilities:

“It seems to me you were happy before you became _____ and you did really well as _____. Luckily, our current staffing situation would allow you to resume that work and then we could take this burden away.”

Or maybe a subset of responsibilities seems to be a mismatch:

“Let’s plan on removing these responsibilities. I’ll dig into our staffing needs and see whether there are other needs you might be well positioned to fulfill. Keep in mind though that I can’t guarantee a full-time position at your current salary level once we remove these responsibilities.”

If the employee suddenly wants to learn something that has seemed of little interest in the past:

“I am sorry, but if you aren’t a good match for that, ignoring that mother of all disconnects would be a mistake for both of us. You won’t be happy and we won’t be happy. If you have other ideas of what you might do for us, I am happy to consider them, but this particular issue has been too disruptive for too long and I’m considering this a final decision.”

It's all about the match:

“We really appreciate your ability to do X, but as you know, you’ve struggled to do Y and doing X is not a full-time position. As you also know, we had you try Z for a while, but that really wasn’t of interest to you.”

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Different standards:

“Thank you for working so hard on this. I owe you an apology. I screwed up. I obviously didn’t make my expectations clear. Let’s sit down a little later and see if we can come up with clearer criteria for what success looks like.”

Defensiveness despite all your efforts:

“When I tried to give you feedback just now, you replied that _____ (it wasn’t your fault/I wasn’t being fair—fill in the blank). I know I don’t always choose my words well, but I want to learn and I want to be able to work with you better. I certainly didn’t mean for you to react that way. Can we talk about what happened?”

Or:

“When you did _____ two weeks ago, I tried to explain the implications and, as I recall, we had a really awkward conversation. When you did it again today, I tried to talk with you about it and that too turned uncomfortable. Despite two awkward conversations, I can’t see that we have accomplished anything. I don’t know what went wrong, but here is the situation. We have to be able to work together better than that. I have to be able to give you feedback, and you have to be able to listen and work with me on necessary changes. Now I know I am not perfect and I probably set you off with something I said, but we need to sort this out. So how about we start over and figure this out? How about we get together tomorrow and take a look together at what happened?”

1. Employee complains:

“Do you have a specific disconnect you would like to discuss or are you just venting?”

2. Employee complains about others:

“Do you have a specific disconnect in mind?”

“Have you discussed it with the person central to the issue?”

“Remember to focus on fixing the situation, not the person.”

3. Employee complains about processes (rules, etc.):

“Do you have a specific disconnect or obstacle in mind?”

“Is it within our authority to fix?”

If the issue is known (on hold, underway, or scheduled):

“Are you aware that we are _____?”

If a new issue:

“How about raising that issue by _____ (whatever mechanism exists or makes sense in this situation to bring attention to a new issue)?”

4. Employee complains instead of figuring out how to get their job done:

“It sure will be nice when that’s resolved, won’t it!”

“In the meantime, we all have to work within the constraints and limitations surrounding us. If you aren’t willing and able, we may have the ultimate disconnect!”

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If the complaints continue:

“We’ve discussed these same concerns of yours several times. You know that some of those issues are either being addressed or have been put on hold due to other priorities. In the meantime, we have to operate with our existing employees and processes. I am happy to help you figure out how to do that, but talking about these same issues repeatedly is a waste of time for both of us. If you simply can’t work within the current constraints, I think we have the mother of all disconnects—a mismatch between what the organization needs and what you are willing and able to provide.”

If and when any conversation just plain goes wrong, recognize the disconnect!

“Let’s stop. We have a disconnect.”

And if appropriate:

“This isn’t the way I expected this conversation to go. Think we can start over? Think you can help me understand what went wrong? I really want to figure this out. Would you like to try now or would it be better to try again later?”

The Disconnect Principle applies to little simple problems such as a boss’s lack of Clarity:

“I think we have a disconnect. Will you tell me more specifically what needs to be different when I am done?” (Those of you who have read *The Power of Clarity* recognize the magic in that question!)

It applies to uncomfortable conversations:

“When I tried to explain the consequences of what you just did, you didn’t react as I expected, or at least not as I’d hoped. I think we have a disconnect. Can we try that again?”

It applies to big problems and makes it easier for people to admit mistakes:

“Holy Schmoly! I think we are about to suffer the consequences of a humongous disconnect! I’m sorry, but I was off track. Let’s sit down and see if we can sort out what to do next.”

It applies to perennial performance problems:

“I think we have a disconnect. Let’s talk about these responsibilities in terms of how they fit with your interests and capabilities, especially your interests. It helps neither of us if I am hoping you will do something you simply don’t care to do.”

It transcends the workplace and can be used to deal with disappointments that involve family and friends:

“I’m sorry. I think we have a disconnect. I think I just said something regrettable. How about I shut up and let you explain.”

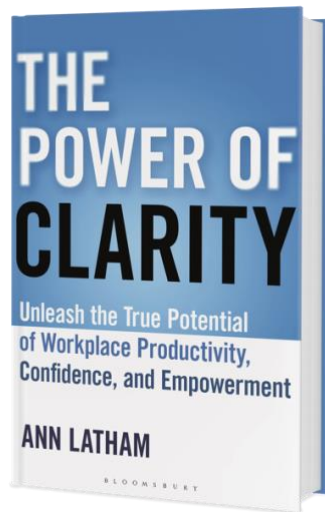
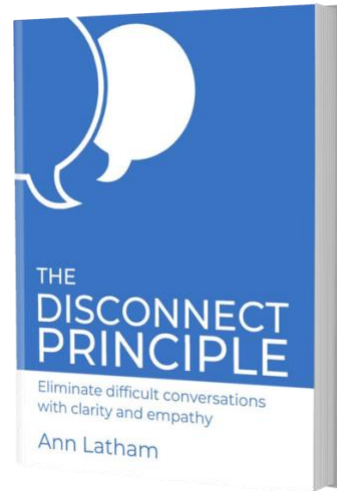
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It even works with contractors and suppliers, volunteer workers, and community issues:

“We clearly have a disconnect. Help me understand where things stand and what you are suggesting or trying to do.”

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