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# Difficult Conversations and How to Prepare for Them

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## I. Introduction

- a. Situations and/or conflicts may arise between you and your supervisor **OR** you and a colleague that necessitate having a difficult conversation to effectively address the matter.
- b. The conversation may be initiated by you **OR** by your supervisor or colleague. In either scenario, the most important aspect is to understand **how** to effectively communicate with one another.

## II. Communication

- a. We act as if communication is simply you, me, and the information we exchange. In reality, our filters influence how we speak and how we listen. We're always seeing things through our own filters. Because of these filters, sometimes we assume negative circumstances where none exist.
- b. The key to effective communication is awareness of our interpretations to a situation.
  - i. Our interpretations create our emotions and our emotions drive our actions.
  - ii. Normally when events occur, it happens in this progression:  
**Event>Observation>Interpretation>Emotion>Action**
- c. Effective communicators:
  - i. **Stop** (pause or slow down) so they don't react too quickly
  - ii. Recognize/acknowledge their emotions – **mindfulness**
  - iii. Question if their story is the only true interpretation
  - iv. Return to the **facts**
- d. Our ability to separate facts from interpretations allows us to open a dialogue which is more inviting and engaging to the other person. When the other person is engaged, we have a greater chance of **understanding** each other and working together to solve an issue.
  - i. Understanding doesn't mean agreeing; understanding means you have a better idea of where the other person is coming from. Tips for listening to understand:
    1. Let the other person know you're open to listening ("I'd like to hear what you have to say")
    2. Take responsibility for your attempt to understand ("Tell me more" or "I don't follow")
    3. Check the accuracy of your understanding by using your own words rather than repeating what the other person says ("I think you're saying you feel disrespected. Is that right?")
    4. Stay silent and attentive; resist the urge to fill in the gaps with your words

## III. Steps to Conducting a Difficult Conversation

- a. Preparation: Do your homework. Identify the issue that needs to be addressed and the facts; think about what a resolution looks like; consider the possibilities of how the other person might react and think about how you would act in response.
  - i. If you go into the conversation with the wrong motives, you are going to get a bad result.
- b. Initiation: Start the conversation focusing on your shared goals. This allows both of you to start the conversation from the same place.
- c. Discussion (**STATE**): Conduct the conversation by **S**haring your facts, **T**elling your story, **A**sking for their view, **T**alking tentatively, and **E**ncouraging testing
  - i. Communicate your ideas in a calm and logical manner. Take accountability for the parts of the issue you may have caused. Use notes or an outline to help you stay on track, but be sure you're making eye contact and engaging with the other person
  - ii. Be careful not to place blame as it may evoke defensiveness, which is counterproductive. Don't start the conversation by telling the other person they are wrong.
- d. Conclusion: summarize agreements, disagreements, and action items. Encourage the other person to also express their viewpoint, even if it doesn't agree with yours.
  - i. To handle disagreements: Find where you agree, build on it with something the person may have missed or didn't know, and compare the differences between your viewpoints.

#### **IV. Additional Suggestions & Information**

- a. **Basic Lessons from Crucial Conversations:** Start with a positive mind-set; don't start from a place of anger or revenge. Stay in dialogue; nothing is solved if no one is talking. Make the person feel safe by listening. Don't get hooked by emotion. Agree on a mutual purpose. Separate facts from story/interpretations. Agree on a clear action plan.
- b. Don't wait until a situation or conflict has become toxic. The alternative to not dealing with a situation is much worse because the behavior continues, the relationship remains damaged, work productivity decreases, etc.
  - i. Addressing current issues will always be more impactful than waiting until the issue has faded from memory
- c. The Office of Human Resources **Employee & Management Relations** unit is available to discuss workplace issues with both managers and employees. They can help both employees and supervisors to think through available options for addressing situations and approaching work-related conversations.
  - i. **Facilitated Conversations:** used as a means of resolution for management and staff to restore interpersonal and/or workplace disputes. These are voluntary, structured conversations to assist employees and managers to come to a mutually acceptable outcome.
  - ii. **Documented Counseling Memo (DCM):** written record of what was discussed during a "counseling" meeting. This can be via email or a letter, but is a written documentation that a meeting took place and the issues were discussed.
  - iii. **Written Warning:** document that informs the employee in writing that disciplinary action is being taken to address the specific issue(s). The written warning tells the employee what specific improvements shall be made to address the specific issue(s) and also tells the employee the time frame allowed for making the required improvements/corrections. The warning details the consequences of failing to make the required improvements or corrections.
  - iv. **Pre-Disciplinary Conference (PDC):** Meeting/conference held prior to a demotion, suspension or dismissal of an employee. The PDC notice is a written notice of the conference and informs the employee of the type of disciplinary action being considered, that a lesser disciplinary action is possible, and the specific acts or omissions that are the reasons for the recommendation.

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### Helpful Links and Sources

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- **Organization & Professional Development Trainings:** Communication Essentials (IC1700); Conflict Management Skills for the Workplace (IC0800); Effective Communication (PD0013 & PD00014); How to Deal with a Difficult Person (PD0006); How to Receive Criticism and Make it Work for You (PD0011); Initiating Difficult Conversations (PD0019); Managing Interactions with Your Employees (SM0101); Using Reason to Resolve Conflict (PD0010)
- Steps to Conducting a Difficult Conversation: [https://hr.utexas.edu/current/services/difficult-conversations-supervisor#perf\\_eval](https://hr.utexas.edu/current/services/difficult-conversations-supervisor#perf_eval)
- STATE Method: <https://www.theexceptionalskills.com/using-crucial-conversations-state-method-conflict/>
- Basic Lessons from Crucial Conversations: <https://sloowdown.wordpress.com/2013/06/09/summary-of-crucial-conversations-tools-for-talking-when-the-stakes-are-high-by-kerry-patterson-joseph-grenny-ron-mcmillan-and-al-swizler/>
- Facilitated Conversations: <https://hr.unc.edu/managers/consultations/>
- [Disciplinary Action Policy](#) and [Disciplinary Action Forms & Related Notices](#)
- "Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well" by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen
- "Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, and Roger Fisher
- "[Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High / Edition 2](#)" by Kerry Patterson, Al Switzler, Joseph Grenny, and Ron McMillan