

GUIDELINES FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

BEFORE:

1. Frame the issue as a problem to be resolved. What do you hope to accomplish?
2. Determine who should be part of the conversation. Do you need a third party mediator or witness? Does any other participant need a witness or advocate? (Note: If confidential matters are to be discussed, waivers may be required of third party participants). Make sure you are following any institutional policies and processes that may have bearing on the matter.
3. Gather any information you need through consultation (e.g., involved students, faculty, staff, HR director, your supervisor, college attorney) or information gathering (e.g., reviewing faculty, student and employee handbooks, obtaining data). Refrain from reaching conclusions based on information obtained (this is not a witch hunt) and be cognizant of privacy issues.
4. Clearly and succinctly communicate to the persons involved the purpose of the meeting. Even if someone else schedules the meeting, the initial communication should come from you. Do not be drawn into a conversation prior to the actual meeting, but allow time and space for questions and preparation.
5. Stage setting: Schedule sufficient time and the appropriate location. If any participant(s) feels you rushed the conversation, you will undermine your credibility as a leader who is willing to listen. With regard to location, sometimes it is best to find neutral ground rather than the participant(s)'s or your office, sometimes going to the other person's office is a sign of good will, sometimes it is viewed as an invasion!
6. Practice and reflect on the personal, interpersonal and leadership skills needed for these conversations: anger management, firm resolve, willingness to compromise and negotiate, active listening, affirming responses, ability to gently deliver constructive criticism, and problem solving.

DURING:

1. Opening: Express appreciation for attendance. State the purpose of the conversation and the problem you are trying to resolve or goal you hope to achieve. Be specific, clear and use data to support your statements.
2. Stay positive – believe a solution is possible, focus on the issue (not the person) and on the goal.
3. Identify agreed upon norms, values, goals (e.g., “I know you want what is best for our students,” “We agree that all students be held to the same academic expectations”).
4. Stay cool – the minute your emotions drive your responses, the conversation has just become more difficult and less likely to produce the desired goal. It is acceptable to acknowledge emotions (“I find this frustrating because...,” “I am sure this is upsetting for you”) but your cognitive responses must be in the driver's seat.

5. Saying less is better, don't be intimidated by silence. The other participant(s) needs time to think.
6. Let other participant(s) state his or her case – listen, listen, listen.
7. If you suspect the message is not being received, repeat and ask the other participant(s) to state it back to you. You cannot move forward if you are not on the same page.
8. Encourage the other participant(s) to generate possible solutions.
9. Once a possible solution has been identified and agreed upon, formulate a specific action plan - steps to achieve, who is responsible for what, timeframe, criteria to evaluate success, and follow-up.
10. If the conversation becomes heated and it appears nothing will be resolved, call a “stop.” Reschedule the meeting for another time to allow tempers to cool and for you and the other participant(s) to reflect on how to move forward. Consult with others as needed to determine how best to proceed, whether it be a second conversation, inviting others into the conversation, using a mediator, or making a decision without further conversation.
11. Say thank you.

AFTER:

1. Immediately document the meeting (see handout): key issues raised, identified solutions and action plan (see number nine above).
2. Share documentation with all participant(s) and secure agreement that the document reflects his or her understanding of what occurred. Again express your appreciation for his or her participation, even if the conversation did not go as you hoped. If appropriate, share with others for documentation purposes (e.g., your supervisor, human resources, legal counsel). You may wish to do the latter first in order to obtain feedback.
3. Follow-up as needed, especially in terms of any commitments you made.
4. Reflect on the conversation by asking yourself the following questions:
 - a. What did I do well?
 - b. What could I have done better?
 - c. What additional resources or professional development would be helpful for handling similar situations in the future?
 - d. Did the conversation raise larger issues related to my position's responsibilities that I need to address (communication deficits, faculty development needs, resource needs, policy changes, etc.)?

ALWAYS:

1. Do not allow someone to refuse a conversation that you have requested, especially if you are in a supervisory role to that person.
2. Never try to have difficult conversations over email.
3. Do not delay a necessary conversation; however, make sure you have all the information you need before initiating.

4. Remember that your job is to provide the best educational experience possible for your students. Sometimes that means having these difficult conversations; keeping in mind that you are doing so for the good of the students makes it easier.