

Difficult Conversations: Ways to Bypass Conflict



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Introduction

- How many of you had to muster up the courage to have a difficult conversation with someone at work or in your personal life?
- Because we spend most of our time at work, it's important that we have positive relationships with our bosses, with our coworkers, with people we manage.
- Sometimes those relationships can be difficult because everyone is different, people have different ways of communicating, and people may even perceive things differently. These differences can sometimes cause conflict.
- We're here to talk about how to have some difficult conversations to help prevent conflict or address and resolve problems when they arise.

Objectives

- Discuss common barriers that prevent, or cause a communication breakdown in, difficult conversations.
- Provide tips and tools to help prepare for difficult conversations.
- Identify considerations to keep in mind during difficult conversations, to reach successful outcomes.



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



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Inherent Challenges

What makes them difficult:

- Emotional
- High stakes involved
- Competing interests
- Power imbalance
- Risky

COMMON BARRIERS

- Assumptions
- Unconscious bias
- Blame
- Power imbalance
- Past history
- Lack of trust
- Fear and ego

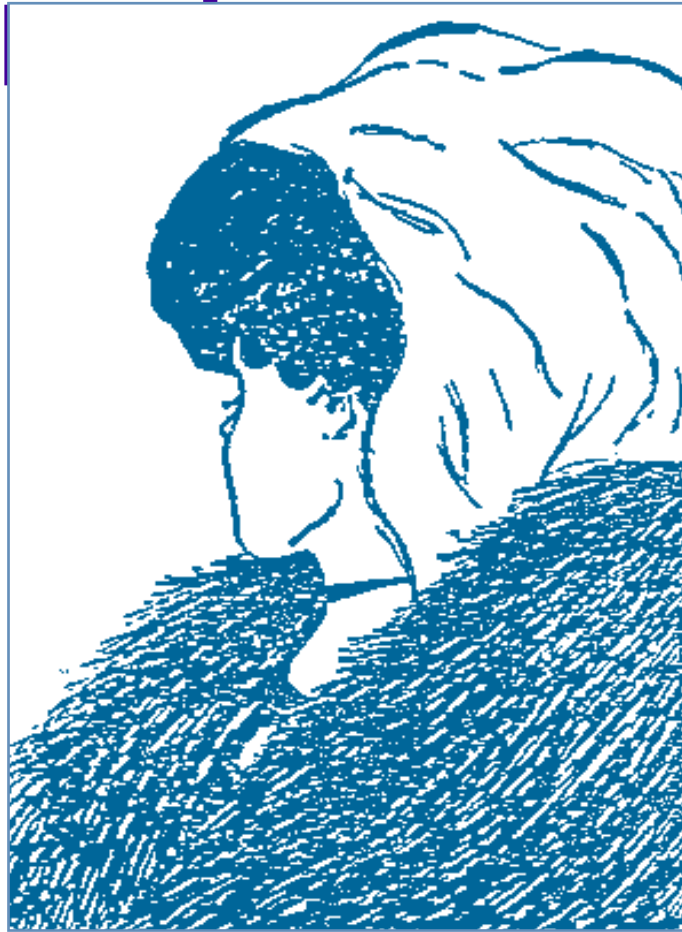
What typically ends up happening. . .

We decide it's easier to share our concerns and frustrations with our allies and representatives, and maybe even disparage the party with whom we have conflict, than to have a direct and difficult conversation to resolve the matter. It's too risky to even try.

How often have you seen gossip and disparagement behind someone's back solve the problem?

Rumors and tension simmer for a while and eventually boil over, possibly escalating into a formal complaint, disciplinary action, turnover, litigation, bad press, public distrust, etc.

All perceptions, by definition, are



- We go into difficult conversations with:
- Different perspectives
 - Limited information
 - Our own biases about that information
 - Different communication styles
 - Competing interests
 - Possibly divergent ideas on a successful outcome

None of us has sole possession of “the truth.”

You don’t know what you don’t know.

In difficult conversations, we end up trading our conclusions about people and their motives, based on limited information, instead of reflecting on and explaining to the other person how we reached those conclusions.

We rarely leave room for the other party to tell us where we may have gotten things wrong.



Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

Things to Consider, *Before* the Conversation

- Have a clear sense of the purpose of the conversation and state it:
 - I want to understand your perspective. (Listening)
 - I want you to understand mine. (Mutual understanding)
 - I want us to think of ways to resolve this, without making any promises. (Brainstorm)
 - I want us to come to an agreement on one of these options. (Solution)
- Think about your contribution to the conflict and acknowledge it
- Identify what biases and assumptions you might be carrying
- Think of the other person's perspective and how you might address it



NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



The Three Pillars

Difficult conversations require balance among the Three Pillars:

- 1) Inquiry
- 2) Advocacy
- 3) Acknowledgement

INQUIRY

- You don't know what you don't know.
- Be genuinely curious in learning what you don't know, in understanding the other person's perspective.

ADVOCACY

- Clearly communicate your perspective in a way that the other person can understand.
- The goal is not for the other person to agree with you, it's for them to understand you

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- Be ready and willing to own your part in the conflict.
- How did you contribute to the problem?
- It's a black belt move to acknowledge your contribution.
- Acknowledging your part is the only thing you can control.
- It can change the tenor of the conflict

Consider the following
conversation ...

- People over rely on advocacy and underutilize inquiry and acknowledgement.
- Difficult conversations breakdown when people are more defensive than curious and humble.
- Inquiry, Advocacy, Acknowledgement. Find



Intent vs. Impact

Intent vs. Impact

- Be aware that your *intent* might be different your *impact* on others.
 - Even our best intentions can a negative impact on others. (Microaggression)
- We assume people's impact on us was their intent.
- We assume our intent was the impact we had on others.
- You only know the impact on you. Don't assume the other party's intention. Ask them.
 - Advocacy: I assume you didn't mean to make me feel small, but when you did X, it made me feeling that way.
- Inquire what your impact was on the other party. Let them tell you, don't assume you know.
 - Inquiry: I noticed you seemed to shut down when I said X. Did I say or do something that offended you?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

- Active Listening
- Defusing anger
- Validating
- Reframing
- Taking responsibility
- Asking clarifying questions
- Empathizing

REFRAMING

What are better ways to say the following:

- Stay out of this – it’s not your business.
- I am disappointed that you thought it was appropriate or necessary to send your email.
- I’m sorry you feel that way.
- I’m going to speak to my union representative about this.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Power imbalance
- Be aware of other people's boundaries
- Speak up to (re)establish your boundaries
 - What are some ways people have crossed your boundaries?
 - How did you handle the situation? What worked? What did not work?
 - Keep past experiences in mind. Avoid negative habits. Repeat the positives.
- Goal and purpose of the conversation: listen, understand, agree, solve?

TAKEAWAYS

- You can't change what you don't confront.
- It's better to have a direct and difficult conversation than to do nothing and allow conflict to escalate.
- We bring our own biases, (mis)perceptions, interests, and limited information into difficult conversations.
- Be humble and curious. Leave room to learn and be corrected.
- Acknowledgement goes a long. Own your part in the conflict.
- Understand and state the purpose of the conversation.
- Success is respect and mutual understanding, not necessarily agreement.



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Thank you!

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