

TIPS FOR LEADERS

Preparing for and Leading Difficult Conversations

Required difficult conversations	If you are having a conversation only because you “have to”, e.g. performance, discipline, investigation, evaluation, etc., there is a disconnect between you and the person/office/policy. Address the source of the disconnect before you have your conversation.
Required difficult conversations II	Don’t blame the boss, policy, law, or political correctness for having to have a difficult conversation. You undermine yourself, and the relevant office/authority.
If you share fault	Many leaders fail to address difficult topics because they believe they contributed to the situation. It is possible to acknowledge your own mistakes AND address the other person’s conduct.
Avoiding judgment	Having a grievance or complaint filed against you is not a proper reason to avoid a difficult conversation. In fact, doing everything right is exactly what may lead to a grievance/complaint. Let the reviewing authority evaluate the situation by participating fully and openly.
Labels	Having a difficult conversation doesn’t make you an “...ist”.
Message to all	When you have a conflict with one person, you need to talk to them one on one. An announcement, message, or policy update delivered in a staff meeting doesn’t replace the need for a direct conversation and can negatively impact the work and morale of others.
Silence speaks volumes	When you don’t address an undesired behavior, you are endorsing it.
Expectations	You don’t have to accept the performance standards and climate established by predecessors.
Fact vs. Story	Make sure you separate what took place from your opinion about what took place.
Fact vs. Story II	There will be times you aren’t a direct witness to behavior which may be inappropriate or unprofessional. Not directly witnessing a behavior isn’t a reason to not investigate.
Data gathering	There are three main parts to difficult conversations: gather information, determine outcomes and future behaviors, plan follow-up. Most of us avoid these because we expect them to be adversarial. Be curious and start by collecting information only.
Jumping to Problem-solver	Don’t lead with problem solving....how can you solve a problem that hasn’t been fully defined? Collecting information may completely change the nature of an issue.
Anticipating explanations	Don’t offer excuses when asking why something happened. “You probably did this because...”
They know better	“They should have known...” is a fragile basis for you to say someone didn’t meet your expectations.

They share the blame	In conflict between two or more people, they are not always equally engaged in conflict. You must distinguish between offensive, and defensive action. You must also separately evaluate offensive/offensive behavior. They are not equal in severity or impact.
Rater bias	Be vigilant about your own bias related to evaluating “the truth” in conflict. Halo/horn, recency effect, affinity, central tendency etc. are alive and well in crucial conversations. Also, the loudest person, or the person who complains first, isn’t necessarily providing accurate information.
Numbers are deceptive	When determining the validity of a complaint, “three against one” isn’t enough to prove guilt. (Though it certainly means something.) Group think, rater bias, and ganging up/bullying behavior can create a “false positive” conclusion.
Maintain boundaries	All personal or professional relationships you maintain outside of work with persons whose work you supervise, or might influence, will: 1) be known by others, 2) have the potential to be perceived as creating a conflict of interest. People are always scanning groups to see who is favored and most influential. Blurred boundaries is an invitation to scrutiny and misunderstandings.
Check that conclusion	You overestimate your ability to recognize misstatements and interpret intentions.
Like or respect	If you care about being liked, you can be manipulated. If you use authority to secure compliance, you aren’t leading you’re pushing. If your goal is to be respected, your values will guide your decisions and actions. A respected leader may or may not be liked, but they won’t be manipulated by relationships, they will lead the work knowing the team will follow, and it will quickly become apparent which team members aren’t in alignment with team values.