Fairness Toolkit: Managing Difficult Conversations

Safety
- Avoid judgmental and blaming language or words
- Don’t use vague or ambiguous language when you could describe the situation as if you were watching it as an observer
- When someone feels disrespected, they stop hearing content and will focus their energy on defending themselves.
- Talk about the impact an action/event had on you without blaming.

Humanize
- Try to focus on commonalities and similarities
- Remember, they’re also human and feel emotions too!
- Give people the benefit of the doubt
- Speak with empathy and show empathy when receiving or giving information

Active Listening
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Additional Tips

**Timing**

- While our instinct is to avoid or delay having a difficult conversation with someone, having it early and now allowing negative emotions to multiply over time increases the chances of achieving a satisfying and affirming result.

**Email**

- Don’t use email to start a difficult conversation.
- Use email only to request a meeting or confirm procedural matters.
- Emails tend to de-humanize the communication and often reduce our inhibitions so we write things that we may not say in person.
- One-way conversation that deprives the sender of concurrent reaction and response to their comments and can often miscommunicate tone and intent.

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**Responsibility**

- Step back and reflect on your actions, reactions, assumptions and judgments that could aggravate or help resolve the conflict.
- Be open to the chance of not having all the information.
- Think about and be prepared to take responsibility.
- What can you do to facilitate a fair resolution?

**Evaluate**

- Look at why one person wants a specific result rather than just what they want.
- Appreciate the particular circumstances and limitations that exist for one party and assist in finding creative ways of overcoming potential barriers.
- Communicate your willingness to understand a different perspective, to accept new information and to move forward.
- Focus on the present and don’t get stuck in what was done in the past.
  - Errors and misjudgments may have been made, while they may be important in understanding how you got to where you are.
  - Don’t use the past as an excuse or a justification not to move forward.