



Office of the Ombudsperson for Students

Fairness Toolkit: Managing Difficult Conversations

Everyone will be part of a difficult conversation at some time in their life. When you have time to prepare and think ahead before going into such a conversation, there are some key concepts you can keep in mind and use in building your strategy for achieving a positive and constructive result.

Many conflicts arise because one or both parties don't have or have not looked at all the information, have inaccurate information or have misunderstood the information. When we want to resolve conflict, we need to ensure that the people involved are able to say what they need to say, listen to what others say and that we understand ourselves and each other as clearly as is possible – all in a safe and respectful environment. *Sharing* our facts, views, experiences and desired outcomes with each other can move us towards resolution.

SHARE

Safety Humanize Active Listening Responsibility Evaluating Options

Safety

It is important to ensure that everyone in the conversation feels safe and respected. This means no one should feel personally attacked or judged. Sometimes when we are feeling strongly about a certain issue, it is easy for us to blame others or attribute mal-intent to the person whom we feel is responsible for the event.

- Avoid judgmental and blaming language or words. E.g. Avoid: "I felt personally attacked." Instead: "I felt scared when the instructor started to talk about my case at the meeting."
- Don't use vague or ambiguous language when you could describe the situation as if you were watching it as an observer. E.g. Avoid: "Everyone just passed the buck – no one helped me." Instead: "I called the advisor's office four times in three days and I did not receive a response for three weeks."
- Remember that when someone feels disrespected, they stop hearing content and will focus their energy on defending themselves. Acknowledge it when you see that happening and bring the discussion back to content. E.g. "I'm sorry, I didn't intend to convey that you did this to intentionally hurt me. I want to make sure you know that I have valued your support and I want to understand why you made this decision."
- Talk about the impact an action/event has had on you without blaming. E.g. Avoid: "No one returned my calls – no one cared." Instead: "I didn't know what to do when I didn't get a reply to my calls. I became afraid that I would not be able to talk to someone about my problem."

Humanize



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When we are in conflict, it is very easy for us to see the other person as an adversary and de-humanize them so they are no longer people, but rather only a medium for the actions that have adversely affected us. Everyone, whether a student, professor, manager or Dean, has their own struggles and challenges, good days and bad days, and times of feeling overwhelmed. In seeking a resolution, it is extremely helpful if you can avoid losing sight of the fact that the person across the table from you is as human as you are and you resist stereotyping and assuming the worst.

- Try to focus on commonalities and similarities – remember that the other person is a human being who feels the same kinds of emotions as you do.
- Give people the benefit of the doubt.
- Speak with empathy and show empathy when receiving or giving information.

Active Listening

Seeing and feeling that you have been heard, with respect and an open-mind, go a long way to breaking down barriers that can build up over layers of communications and exchanges. While we may feel that we have all the information we need to confirm our decision or judgment, stay open to listening to what the person has to say. Even if you don't learn anything new (which is unlikely), you may hear something in a different tone or another perspective; if nothing else, it shows the other person you respect them enough to listen.

- Acknowledge what the other person is saying, even if you don't agree; paraphrase to confirm your understanding. E.g. "I can understand how you may have reached the conclusion that I was neglecting my responsibilities."
- Ensure that you use verbal and non-verbal cues to make the other person feel that they have been heard.
- Prompt and invite the other person to tell their story completely.
- Listen for cues that indicate that the person is struggling with safety and is focusing on defending themselves rather than on the issue or concern.

Responsibility

One of the most important things we can do in working through a conflict is to give ourselves a fair and honest self-assessment. Identifying your own actions or omissions - how you responded or didn't, what you could have done better, how your tone or body language may have affected the other person – is the first step towards taking responsibility for where you find yourself and moving towards resolution.

- Step back and reflect on your actions, reactions, your assumptions and judgments and what could aggravate or help to resolve the conflict.
- Acknowledge and stay open to the probability that you don't have all the information.



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- Think about and be prepared to take responsibility for any actions or omissions on your part that may have contributed to the outcome. If you are seeking accountability from others, first take stock of your own accountability.
- Also, be willing to take responsibility for what you could do to facilitate a fair resolution.

Evaluating Options

This is where you want to get to and the outcome will greatly depend upon how you were able to manage the conversation and what you take into it. Rarely does going in with only one acceptable solution lead to a satisfying resolution. Try to articulate *why* you want a particular result – list the reasons supporting a particular result – and from there expand on different outcomes that would still address those reasons.

- When assessing what might be a fair outcome, focus on why one person wants a particular result, instead of looking just at what it is they want. E.g. Avoid: “I can’t and won’t take the exams again at the end of the term.” Instead: “My child-care arrangements will change in April and I have no other support mechanisms that will allow me the time I would need to re-take three exams.”
- Try to appreciate the particular circumstances and limitations that might exist for one party and assist in finding creative ways of overcoming potential barriers.
- In discussing options, 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, who was “right” and who was “wrong”. Errors and misjudgements 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. E.g. Avoid: “It was her own fault that she missed the assignments and we bent over backwards to help her. I don’t see why we need to open up discussions again because she’s got a new problem.”

Additional Tips

Timing

While our instinct is to avoid or delay having a difficult conversation with someone, having it early and not allowing negative emotions to multiply over time increases the chances of achieving a satisfying and affirming result.

Email

Don’t use email to have or 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 might not necessarily say in person. It is also a one-way conversation that



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deprives the sender of concurrent reaction and response to their comments and can often miscommunicate tone and intent.