



Communicating Effectively



Hensel Phelps Leadership Development Initiative

Session 2



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The Underlying Structure¹

What makes a conversation difficult?

15 years of research from the Harvard Negotiation Project reveals that difficult conversations have an underlying structure.

What happened?

Who said what?

Who did what?

Who's right?

Who meant what?

Who's to blame?

Assumptions

Difficult conversations are built on the assumption that: "I'm right and you're wrong." They are seldom about getting the facts straight. They are about differences in perceptions, interpretations, and values.

Intentions

We tend to assume we know the intentions of others when we often don't. And, when we're unsure of someone's intentions, we often assume they are bad. Intentions are invisible. We invent them based on the behavior of others.

¹ Based on Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters the Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen



The Underlying Structure

The blame game

Talking about fault evokes fear and either/or answers. Either you are at fault or I am. And, nobody wants to be blamed. The blame game can keep us from understanding why things went wrong and how to prevent it from happening again.

Feelings play a role

Are my feelings valid?

Should I express my feelings?

What about the other person's feelings?

Feelings are messy

We work hard to stay logical and rational in the presence of strong feelings. Getting into a discussion about feelings is uncomfortable and often seems inappropriate, particularly at work.

But, dealing effectively with difficult conversations means acknowledging feelings

Feelings are not just a byproduct of difficult conversations. They are a critical part of the conversation. Ignoring them may save time and reduce your discomfort in the short-term, but you probably haven't really resolved the issue if you don't address them.

Difficult conversations don't just involve feelings. Feelings are at their core.



Steps to Handling an Upset or Angry Colleague

1. **Listen and show you're listening.** Don't clam up or start defending yourself or arguing. Say things like "I see" or "I hear you."
2. **Take it seriously, but not personally.** Any negative response from a colleague is important, but in most cases, while the anger may seem directed personally at you, it seldom is.
3. **Let them finish.** You could interrupt, but for what purpose? Until the person has vented, he or she is not going to listen to you.
4. **Don't match their anger or tone. Be calm and show respect.**
5. **Discuss what part you may have played in creating the situation.** You can say something like "Jane, I didn't know you were upset. I should have touched base with you last week. Let's get this handled."
6. **Acknowledge their situation and demonstrate empathy.** For example "You sound pretty upset, and I understand how frustrating this is."
7. **Ask good questions.** Ask open-ended questions to find out more information, such as "Could you tell me more about that?" and closed-ended questions to focus on the facts, such as "In what way is it not doing what you want?"
8. **Begin problem solving.** Check your notes and any relevant documentation to guide your response. Ask for their suggestions (e.g., "What do you consider to be an appropriate solution?"). Escalate if necessary.
9. **Focus on the future.** Don't focus on past injustices or perceived mistreatment. Work on solutions to the current problem and ways to avoid future problems.
10. **Follow up!**

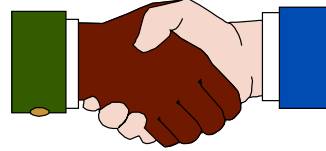


Getting off to a Good Start

Explaining Your Intent

Describe your purpose

- Understand their perspective.
- Share your own perspective.
- Talk about how to move forward.



Extend an invitation

- Don't cast the other person as the problem or in an unappealing light.
- **Off to a good start:** "I can see we have different ideas about how to proceed...."
- **Blow it by adding:** "But, since you're new here, I'll tell you how we usually do it."
- Offer the other person a genuine role in understanding and managing the problem.

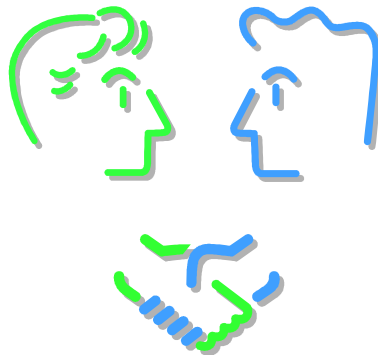


Resolving Challenging Conversations

Delivering Your Message with Clarity

Tips for communicating your own message

- Stay calm. Manage your own emotions. Don't get angry.
- Avoid getting trapped in a negative filter.
- Demonstrate mutual respect.
- Communicate your response clearly.
- Think before you speak.
- Respond with confidence.





Delivering Your Message with Clarity

Start with what matters the most

“For me, what this is really about is...”

“What I’m feeling is...”

“What is important to me is...”

Say what you mean

Don’t rely on subtext.

Be careful about easing in.

Don’t present your conclusions as the truth

Avoid presenting your point of view as the truth.

Distinguish opinion from fact.

Share where your conclusions came from

Help the other person see what’s under your conclusions and interpretations.

What information are you basing your opinion on?

What past experiences are influencing your thinking?

Avoid “always” and “never”

They are seldom accurate.

These words make it harder for the other person to consider changing their behavior.



Final Tips

Begin with Agreement

If you know you are going to be disagreeing with another person, start your discussion with some area on which you both agree. Even if it really requires some digging to uncover that common ground – do it!

Say “And” not “But”

“But” acts like an eraser. Even if you have made a good point or have been in agreement, as soon as you say “but” it erases the value of anything that was said before it in a sentence.

Guidelines to Follow When Saying “No”

- ☒ Always listen to a full explanation.
- ☒ Always empathize.
- ☒ Always explain why.
- ☒ Avoid ambiguity.
- ☒ Don't personalize the decision.
- ☒ Say “No” because it is the right thing to do.
- ☒ If someone does not feel they have been listened to, they may ask again for your reason. Be patient; probe for what they think they may not have heard.



Resources and References

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