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How to Have a Difficult Conversation

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Peace can be only be obtained, non-violently, through:

- ❖ Respect
- ❖ Understanding
- ❖ Acceptance
- ❖ Appreciation

Arun Gandhi, Speech, Auburn University, February 9, 2016



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"Most people do not listen to understand.
Most people listen to reply."

—Stephen Covey



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Pas de Deux

- ❖ It takes two to tango
 - ❖ The tango – requires collaboration and courage
 - ❖ Dialoguing in dance, in good faith, common purpose



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Keep an Open Mind

- ❖ Be amenable to learning and accepting new information.
- ❖ Look for the value in your other party's perspective.
- ❖ Be willing to move from your position with the goal of creating something that, although different, may be greater than your original thought.



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What is a Difficult Conversation?

- ❖ A conversation in which there are high stakes
 - ❖ Threat to job, relationship, status
- ❖ Something of significance to at least one of the persons, if not both
- ❖ Examples: discussing an issue with a colleague; confronting a worker who isn't performing; performance review; value differences.



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The Key

SAFETY



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A Formula

- ❖ Prepare what you want to say beforehand. What is your purpose? Rehearse.
- ❖ Make the person feel safe. [You value, trust, respect, and care about the person]
- ❖ State what you prepared to say. Be transparent and firm, but kind.
- ❖ Use your active listening skills. Remain firm, but kind.
- ❖ When leaving, make the person feel safe again.



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Questions to Convey Safety

- ❖ There's a way you and I can improve the way we interact with each other. Are you interested? Let's set a time to talk about it.
- ❖ I want us to work well together. Here's an idea that might help make that happen. What are your thoughts?
- ❖ There's a specific problem you and I can solve if we _____. Why don't we get together and brainstorm about that?



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- ❖ I think we are seeing things differently and I would like to hear your thoughts and share my own. Would you like to get together to talk about that?
- ❖ "I've noticed a recurring conversation (conflict, disagreement, problem) we seem to have. I'd like to talk about why that happens."*
- ❖ "I'd like to talk with you about some things I've noticed over the last little while. I have some observations I'd like to share with you and some of the conclusions I am starting to draw, and then I'd be really interested in hearing your perspective."*

* <https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>



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Stop and enjoy a BLT

- ❖ Stop
- ❖ **B**reathe
- ❖ **L**isten
- ❖ **T**hink
- ❖ Ask for clarification
- ❖ Generate options
- ❖ Conflict is a negotiation. With the ability to listen and understand, you can generate options and create an action plan.



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Underlying Interests



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Active Listening

- ❖ Listen to understand the other person.
- ❖ Support them as they speak, using empathy.
- ❖ Reflect their feelings back to them.
- ❖ Ask open-ended questions, to allow them to tell their story.
- ❖ Identify and acknowledge the “underlying interest” that has caused that person to be upset.



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Empathy

- ❖ Skilled empathizers
 - ❖ See with the eyes of the other person
 - ❖ Listen with the ears of the other person
 - ❖ Feel with the heart of the other person
- ❖ Quickly builds trust, relaxes an emotional situation



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How to Give Feedback Effectively

- ❖ Treat feedback as a two-way street. Both parties must embrace the experience with good faith, with the genuine goal of improving.
- ❖ We have blind spots others can see, but we don't.
- ❖ Accept feedback made in good faith with thanks.
- ❖ Give feedback when timely, when relevant.
- ❖ Healthy exchange of feedback provides opportunity for discussion, creativity, and bonding.



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Question: How do You Train Employees to Identify and Report Workplace Bullying?

- ❖ The employee must feel safe! Without safety, they will not report workplace bullying.
 - ❖ They can identify workplace bullying.
 - ❖ They don't report because they feel they will be retaliated against.
 - ❖ The person being bullied
 - ❖ The bystander who would like to report workplace bullying
 - ❖ The supervisor's receptiveness to reports is crucial!



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Bullying Question, Continued

- ❖ Policy against retaliation is not trusted
- ❖ 72% of employers deny, discount, justify, or enable workplace bullying
- ❖ Bosses constitute the majority of bullies in the workplace
- ❖ The supervisor's supervisor needs to understand what bullying is, value the reports, and be prepared to deal with the problem – this is how we can improve a bullying culture.



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“RIP” Bullying Definition *

- ❖ Bullying is abusive behavior that is:
 - ❖ Repeated
 - ❖ Intentional
 - ❖ Power-based
- ❖ *Carpenter, M. and D'Antona, R. (2014) Bullying Solutions. Barron's, Hauppauge, NY, at 4



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Gratuitous Advertisement

- ❖ *Bullying in the Workplace*, ElevatED, Human Resources Development, Glenn and Dean Administrative Complex, October 11, 8:30 – 11:30 AM, Kevin Coonrod, presenter.



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Question: What is the Best Practice for Having Conversations When Certain Information is Confidential?

- ❖ Don't reveal confidential information.
- ❖ "There may be information I am unable to discuss due to university policy."
- ❖ "I will focus only on you during this conversation."
- ❖ "I am unable to discuss personnel matters regarding other people due to university policy."
- ❖ We are going to discuss your actions and how we can work together to improve.



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What are Best Practices for Having a Difficult Conversation?

- ❖ Make the other person feel safe
- ❖ Know what you want to say – rehearse
- ❖ Listen to understand - use active listening skills.
- ❖ If detoured, come back to your original purpose. Be firm and transparent, but kind.
- ❖ Generate options that meet both your interests if possible.
- ❖ At the end, make the other person feel safe again.



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References

- ❖ Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High, Patterson K, Grenny J, McMillan R, Switzler A, 2012, McGraw Hill, NY
- ❖ Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most, Stone D, Patton B, Heen S, 2010, Penguin, NY
- ❖ Thanks for the Feedback, The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well, Stone D, Heen S, 2014, Penguin, NY
- ❖ We Have to Talk: A Step-by-Step Checklist For Difficult Conversations, by Judy Ringer, <https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>, (retrieved, July 30, 2023)



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