

Handling Difficult Conversations - HANDOUT

Let's look at the different types of Difficult Conversations, the psychology behind them, how to prepare for a Difficult Conversation and how to manage that conversation.

The three types of conversation:

1. The 'What Happened' conversation.
2. The 'Feelings' Conversation.
3. The 'Identity' Conversation.

All three types of conversation should seek to uncover the truth, clarify intentions, and avoid any sense of 'blame-game'.

Some of the Psychological bases

Useful background information can be found in the work of Maslow (*Hierarchy of Needs*). Herzberg (*Hygiene factors*). Eric Berne (*Transaction Analysis Theory and Therapy*). This theorises that the human personality and interaction is made up of three "ego states" the Parent, Adult, and Child. Each ego state is an entire system of thought, feeling, and behaviour.

Whole Body Listening

7% is expressed within the words we use.

38% is the tonality used within those words.

The 55% balance is non-verbal (body language, facial cues and expressions).

Recognising and Understanding Defensive Behaviour

1. **Projection.** This defence mechanism involves attributing our own unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or motivations to others.
2. **Denial.** Sometimes, reality can be too painful or threatening to accept.

- 3. Rationalisation.** This involves creating logical-sounding explanations to justify our actions or beliefs, even when they're not entirely rational.
- 4. Displacement.** When we can't express our emotions towards the actual source of our frustration, we might redirect those feelings onto a safer target.
- 5. Regression.** In times of stress, we might revert to behaviour(s) associated with earlier stages of development.

The Triggers to Defensive Behaviour

1. Perceived threats to self-esteem.
2. Past traumatic experiences.
3. Insecure attachment styles.
4. Cultural and social influences.

Strategies for Managing and Overcoming Defensive Behaviour

1. Self-reflection and mindfulness techniques.
2. Cognitive-behavioral therapy approaches.
3. Developing emotional intelligence.
4. Building resilience and self-confidence.

Preparing for a structured conversation

1. Decide what you want to achieve.
2. Check your facts and gather relevant documents.
3. Think about the other persons/employee's perspective.
4. Consider whether you need support.
5. Consider the logistics/ location and seating.
6. Prepare what you are going to say.
7. Give the other person/employee time to prepare.

The Difficult Conversation: Ground Rules

- As much as possible, stay at about the same eye level.
- Speak directly to the other person(s).
- Speak as calmly - and in as matter-of-fact tone - as possible.
- Avoid finger-pointing, whether blaming or literally pointing fingers.
- Avoid name-calling, yelling, put-downs, insults, or threats.
- Be as clear as possible and use specific examples.
- No interruption when they are speaking.
- Make sure you understand what the other person has said before you respond. Reflect your understanding.
- Approach the conversation with openness.
- Stay on topic.
- Don't assume you know what happened or their thoughts.
- Do not walk away or leave the conversation without the other person's agreement. Confirm they fully understand that the conversation is ending.

The Difficult Conversation

- Step 1 State what you see as the issue/ problem.
- Step 2 Listen and question.
- Step 3 Acknowledge their perspective.
- Step 4 Reassess your position.
- Step 5 Look for solutions.
- Step 6 Close the conversation with mutual understanding.
- Step 7 After the meeting confirm in writing or email.
- Step 8 Keep your notes safe!

If you feel the conversation is going wrong, take a break. Stay calm and if necessary postpone the conversation to later in the day - or another day.

Don't try to deal with more than one issue at a time: eg addressing challenging performance before moving on to future development.