

## **How to Have Difficult Conversations**

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Having difficult conversations is embedded in departmental culture. Creating a climate in which dialogue can thrive is essential. The following steps include empirically-based communication strategies and recommendations that can be used to facilitate difficult conversations between Department Chairs and members of their departments. These suggestions, of course, can and should be facilitated within the context of larger dialogic and climate-building initiatives<sup>1</sup>.

### **Step 1: Prepare for the Conversation**

#### **Self-Reflection**

- What is your concern?
  - Why is it a concern?
  - Does it need to be a concern?
  - If it does, be clear about why it is a concern.
- Are you making any assumptions that could be wrong or problematic?
  - What attributions are you making about this person's intent?
  - What attributions are you making about this behavior?
  - Is it possible that your attributions are unfair or incorrect? (Note: most people make *external* attributions [e.g., something external to oneself and/or outside of one's control] for *their own* negative behavior but *internal* attributions [i.e., something about the person or within their control] for *others'* negative behavior. Are you operating under this kind of bias?)
  - If you gave the person the benefit-of-the-doubt for their behavior, how might that change your reaction to it?
- How else might you explain behavior that might temper your interpretation of the situation? Can you recognize that you don't have the whole story with just your perspective? Are you prepared to be wrong about the situation when presented with reasonable, conflicting evidence?
- What's at stake for you in this conflict or situation?
  - Threats to identity?
  - Threats to valued relationship(s)?

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<sup>1</sup> For example, intergroup dialogue is a structured and facilitated group intervention centered on providing individuals opportunities to engage attitudes about polarizing social issues through sustained interactions with the goal of collaborative decision-making, alliance building, and/or attitude change (Frantell et al. 2019). For more information about research, teaching, and the practice of conflict resolution and/or intergroup dialogue, please contact Dr. Jody Koenig Kellas, Chair, for the Department of Communication Studies at [jkellas2@unl.edu](mailto:jkellas2@unl.edu).

- Threats to power?
- Threats to realizing goals?
- Threats to department?
- Are any of these perceived threats over-blown? Can you temper them by changing your perspective on them before the conversation?
- What is your position and why do you hold it?

### Other-Reflection

- Why might this other person value the behavior and/or position with which you disagree?
- Might there be some value to it that you aren't recognizing?
- How might this person view a confrontation about this behavior?
- Consider what may be at stake for the other person in this conflict or situation.
  - Threats to identity?
  - Threats to valued relationship(s)?
  - Threats to power?
  - Threats to realizing goals?
  - Threats to department?
- What does this behavior seem to achieve for them?
- What do you assume their position is? Why do you assume they hold it?
- Are you prepared to be wrong about these assumptions?

### Attitude of Openness

- Your first goal in a conflict should be to understand.
- Your second goal in a conflict should be to be understood.
- You should recognize that your position should be open to the possibility of change as you move through conflict interaction and allow yourself to be impacted by the other person's experiences and perspectives.
- You should expect the other person to share that level of openness.

### Step 2: Framing and Beginning the Difficult Conversation

The way you begin, and ultimately frame, this conversation matters.

- Do not engage when angry. Calm down, reflect on self and other, gain perspective, then consider how best to frame the issue.
- Recognize that when a person (you or the other) feels threatened, their level of **anxiety** increases, they tend to become more rigid in their thinking, less open to new ideas, and tend to zero in on fragments of the conversation. It is vital that you create an environment that is as non-threatening as possible, and, where one exists, acknowledge it and minimize it.
- Be clear about your **goal** for the conversation and state it at the outset.
- As you begin the conversation and stating your goal, avoid focusing on what the person is doing "wrong." Focus more on the impact of the behavior on you and/or on the department and/or the university. For example, use the **XYZ skill** (focusing on "I" statements): "I have a problem. When you do X, I feel Y, resulting in Z".

- Try to frame this conversation in terms of a common goal that you both share, then bring this issue up as an instance in which we are at odds in a way that detracts from our common goal. For example: “We both want you to succeed in your teaching. XX behavior is detracting from that goal.” Use this “**superordinate goal**” as your framing reference for the conversation, returning to it when you are at what feels like an impasse and allowing you to re-consider the problem in various ways.
- **Set ground rules**—work together to acknowledge this will be a tough conversation, and that it will be important that we maintain a sense of mutual respect. Establish these rules collaboratively to build trust.

### Step 3: The Conversation

- Use **Person-Centered Speech** rather than **Position-Centered Speech** to encourage disclosure—build trust<sup>2</sup>. Position-centered speech tends to focus on the task at hand without regard for the needs and feelings of the other person. Person-centered speech consists of pro-social behaviors and displays a willingness on the part of the speaker to manage task at hand and express their views and perspectives while taking the other person’s needs and desires into account. You engage in person-centered speech by confirming the other person’s perspective in a genuine and authentic way. Humans’ fundamental need is confirmation. Acknowledge that they are worthy of your attention by (a) validating them as a valued person/member of the department, (b) protecting each other’s face (c) listening, and (d) engaging in communicated perspective-taking (see below).
  - **Validate:** Making confirming statements about the other person and their perspective. Be sure to focus on them as a unique individual and recognize they might have a lot of (negative) feelings about the issue at hand.
  - **Protect each other’s face:** People have three major face needs that you should do your best to attend to and avoid threatening during the conversation. Affirm each if/as you can:
    - Fellowship face: the desire to be liked and respected
    - Competence face: the desire to be seen as competent (and good at their job)
    - Autonomy face: the desire to be free from obligation or constraint
  - **Listen:** Getting everyone’s viewpoint/perspectives out on the table so there can be mutual understanding that dispels wrongly held assumptions and beliefs and provides opportunity to identify the fundamental issue(s) at play. Your goal is mutual meaning-making. Listen with the intent of understanding, not with a list of counterpoints with which to reply.
  - **Communicate Perspective-taking:** It is one thing to mentally put yourself in another person’s shoes. It is another to communicate it. Ways to communicate:
    - Attentiveness: be nonverbally attentive (eye contact, forward lean, head nods, responsive noises)

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<sup>2</sup> This is easier in a culture of trust. If that culture of trust does not exist, you need to start building it.

- Agreement: agree with the person's perspective (verbally and nonverbally if and when you can)
- Space: give the other person plenty of space to share their side of things.
- Validate identity: whenever appropriate, affirm who they are as a person and colleague
- Positive tone: keep the tone of the meeting as positive as possible; positivity communicates perspective-taking
- **Articulate your perspective.** Paraphrase what you heard. Ask the other person to paraphrase what they heard if they do not offer that up on their own. Allow this process to result in continued conversation.
- **Respond rather than react.** We choose our responses. Exercise patience. De-personalize the conversation—stay focused on substantive issues rather than personal attacks. If the conversation moves to personal attacks, it is no longer productive and should either be re-focused or re-scheduled.

#### Step 4: Solution Generation

- Once all perspectives are adequately heard and legitimized, try to identify a **shared understanding of the problem.**
- Are the positions that each party came into the conversation with actually reflective of this problem, or should they be adjusted?
- Are the positions the parties came in with reflective of a problem, or are they simply pre-determined solutions to the problem that are incompatible? If this is the case, perhaps there is a more mutually agreeable solution for solving the problem that is not incompatible.
- Ask the other person for solution ideas. Offer ideas for solutions. Be open to all solutions.
- If possible, choose the solution that best allows both parties to meet their needs, if necessary, and that supports the over-arching goal that both parties share. Note: The best conflict management strategies take creativity and time. It may not be possible to solve the problem in the context of one conversation. If it is necessary to reflect on the conversation or discuss with others, thank them for the meeting and commit to following up.
- As appropriate, follow up with relevant and trusted others (without overstepping or breaking trust).

#### Step 5: Follow Up

- Once a solution is reached (even if that solution is having the difficult conversation), follow up with the other person. Send them an email or call them to check in and see if they thought of anything else after the meeting. Let them know you heard them.
- Follow up on what you learned in this conversation, even those things that extend beyond the problem you worked through together.
- What other needs were identified that you can, as Chair, work to meet?
- How can you use this information to be more responsive to this (or other) individual(s) moving forward? This works toward building, or if already there, reinforcing that culture of trust.

## References

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### Having a Difficult Conversation: A Chair's Worksheet

*Use this guide to prepare for a difficult conversation, to refer to during the conversation, and to debrief and follow up after the conversation*

#### Step 1: Preparing for the Conversation

##### Self reflection:

○ What are your concerns?	
○ What assumptions are you making about the other person('s behavior)? How do these need to change, if at all?	
○ What part of the story are you missing?	
○ What are the perceived threats of the conflict or behavior? Are any overblown?	
○ What is your position and why?	

##### Other reflection:

○ What are your assumptions about the other person's behavior/position? (their values, positions, reasoning)	
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#### Step 2: Framing and Beginning the Conversation

○ Identify and name a time and place when you can be calm and help to facilitate the other person's calm (i.e., do not set this meeting after a long stressful meeting).	
○ What is the goal you will state at the outset of the meeting?	
○ Before the meeting, restate the problem using the XYZ skill (*write it down here*)	
○ What is the common goal you share?	
○ What are ground rules you want to set?	

<b>Step 3: The Conversation</b> Keep the following skills in mind and have this sheet handy as a reminder as you have the difficult conversation.	
<b>Encourage disclosure</b>	<b>Validate and confirm</b>
<b>Protect each other's face</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fellowship face (liked and respected)</li> <li>○ Competence face (good at their job)_</li> <li>○ Autonomy face (able to make choices)</li> </ul>	<b>Listen for understanding</b>
<b>Communicate perspective-taking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Be attentive</li> <li>○ Agree (when you can)</li> <li>○ Give them space to talk</li> <li>○ Validate their identity</li> <li>○ Keep the tone as positive as possible</li> </ul>	<b>Person-centered speech (vs. position-centered speech)</b>
<b>Paraphrase and ask for a paraphrase</b>	<b>Respond rather than react!!</b>
<b>Step 4: Generate a Solution</b> After the meeting, use this space to summarize your perception of the solutions generated.	
○ What shared understandings/meanings did you create during the conversation?	
○ What lingering incompatibilities exist, if any?	
○ What is a mutually beneficial solution?	
<b>Step 5: Follow-up</b> Use this space to engage in self-reflection and hold yourself accountable to the process	
○ Did you follow up with the other person? Learn anything new?	
○ What did you learn from this conversation?	
○ What steps do you need to take as chair to prevent or further address needs moving forward?	
○ From whom can you get support?	