

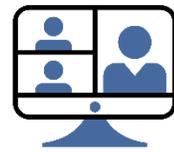


South Carolina

Effective Communications CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

Course 6 of 7

Tackling Difficult Conversations



Online
Version

DIVISION OF HUMAN RESOURCES

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An extremely important skill for all of us to learn is how to confront difficult situations. Difficult conversations, in this context, are topics that you may find challenging to discuss, such as addressing performance or behavior issues of an colleague or discussing delicate work-related issues with your manager. People are often reluctant to open a difficult conversation out of fear of potential consequences.

This course addresses the underlying issues that make these conversations especially uncomfortable and demanding, how to prepare yourself to have them, and how to confront the other person effectively. Face your fears of conflict and reduce your anxiety about the tough discussions you know you need to have with others. Based upon the best-selling book *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott.

Learning Objectives

The participant will be able to...

- Understand the principles of a fierce conversation;
- Use the conversation planner;
- Learn to do confrontation effectively; and
- Plan for a difficult conversation that you need to have now.

Reflection:

When it comes to having a difficult conversation, I can be chicken because...

When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade short-term discomfort for long-term dysfunction.

The Conversation

The conversation is the relationship. We effect change by engaging in robust conversations with ourselves and others.

- Relationships are constructed one conversation at a time.
- In a conversation, our aim should be to be understood rather than interpreted.
- Fierce conversations interrogate reality without assigning blame---they are designed to build relationships.

Fierce conversations do not mean ruthless, bitter or angry conversations. It means powerful or intense conversations. According to the author, “when you think of a fierce conversation, think passion, integrity, authenticity, collaboration. We come out from behind ourselves and make it real.” It simply means telling the other person what you really feel and being real with that person.

Make the Difficult Conversation “Real”

The world is an ever-changing place. Perhaps what we thought was true is no longer the truth in the current environment. People change, beliefs change, circumstances change, and relationships change. You must be open and acknowledge the changes that occur around you.

What each of us believes to be true simply reflects our views about reality. All of us own a piece of the truth about a relationship, a situation or an event. When looking for a solution to a problem or getting to the bottom of things, avoid laying blame.

Our conversations have integrity when we align our values and our actions. No plan survives its collision with reality and reality has a way of shifting as we change. Multiple realities are **not** competing. They just exist. Remember, you own a piece of the truth and so do I. **The success and the quality of your relationships depends upon the questions that you ask and the quality of the answers that you give and receive.**

Adopt a mindset of inquiry. Spend time reflecting on your attitudes toward the situation and the person involved. What are your preconceived notions about it? Your mindset will predetermine your reaction and interpretations of the other person's responses. So, it pays to approach the conversation with the right mindset—which is one of inquiry.

Understand your motives for the conversation. Your focus should be on making your employee successful in their role. So, you must interrogate your **own reality**. Exactly what does that mean?

Ask yourself *before* you have the conversation:

- Where am I going?
- Why am I going there?
- How am I going to get there?
- Am I fully extended in my capabilities (putting my best foot forward)?
- What are my feelings about the situation?

It is important to test your assumptions and give others the benefit of the doubt. Things are not always how they appear. Think about the lessons in the “Cookie Thief” video presentation.

Lessons Learned:

The Need to Be Authentic

While many people fear REAL, it is the UNREAL conversation that should scare us to death. Unreal conversations are expensive for the individual and the organization. Every individual in one way or another has withheld his true feelings for fear of conflict or in her aim to please. Some fear that by expressing their true feelings they will be viewed as selfish. However, consider this: successful relationships require that all parties' views are recognized. You have the right to clarify your opinion, state your view of reality and ask for what you want. This is the very nature of assertiveness.

To be the person that you want to be, your actions must be an authentic (truthful) expression of what you are and what you want to become. The truth will set you free-but first it may thoroughly irritate you! Remember:

- Authenticity is not something you have; it is something you choose.
- Some questions that can help with being authentic:
 - Am I on the right path?
 - Is there anything I am pretending not to know?
- All conversations are really with ourselves and sometimes they involve other people.

Discussion Question:

What type of conversations have you been unable to have with another person? Identify the issue(s).

Be Present, Participate Fully, and Be Respectful

We share a universal desire to be known. **The experience of being understood, versus interpreted is priceless.** While no single conversation can assure the transformation of a relationship or a person's life, any single conversation can. Speak and listen as if it is the most important conversation you have ever had. Participate as if it matters. Take a genuine interest in the response. When you are not paying attention and not really engaged, you might be missing out on opportunities to talk about something memorable and interesting. **You might miss out on learning about something important.**

When engaging someone in a conversation, focus on the basic aspect of being present - eye contact. Eye contact takes the pulse of the relationship by really listening to and acknowledging the person. When listening to a conversation or discussion you need to listen not only to the content but also to the emotion and intent of the message.

The goal of any fierce conversation is to expand the conversation rather than to narrow it. It is not about holding forth on your point of view or opinion, but about producing knowledge by sitting with someone (one on one) and mutually interrogating reality. Questions are much more effective than answers in bringing about learning.

Common mistakes we make are:

- Doing most of the talking
- Taking the problem away from them
- Neither sharing our feelings nor inquiring about other's feelings
- Delivering unclear messages
- Allowing interruptions
- Running out of time
- Assuming your time is effective

Most of us were likely raised to believe that emotions need to be left at the door. We now know that this is an old-school approach that isn't valid in today's work environments..

What starts as an annoyance, can move to anger and, in extreme cases, escalate to rage. *We can avoid this by being mindful of preserving the person's dignity—and treating them with respect*—even if we totally disagree with them.

Discussion Question:

Is there a conversation that you need to have (or recently had) that you have significant emotions about? Name the emotions you are/were feeling.

Disclose Both What You Think and Feel About the Situation

How many of you have had a regret about not addressing an issue with another person and have said to yourself, "I should have listened to that inner voice!"

In fierce conversations, you are encouraged to swap ideas and sentiments while paying close attention to and disclosing your inner thoughts. You are also encouraging others to do the same.

When talking or discussing we tend to filter our private thoughts, making public only what you assume needs to be heard, trying not to upset people nor create conflict. When you hold back important thoughts, you decrease your ability to learn and make good decisions.

During fierce conversations, your task is not to say what is easy to say or what can be said, but to say what you have been unable to say or what others are afraid to say. Pay close attention to the speaker when listening; listen not only for the content but for emotion and intent.

It is not your thoughts and feelings nor your disclosures that get you into trouble. Rather, it is your attachment to them and your belief that you are right. Participating in a fierce conversation means that you should be open to the possibility that your idea, opinion or feeling will be criticized or evaluated. Remember the first principle: when asking for opinion, resist the temptation to defend your idea immediately. Fierce conversation is about listening and questioning rather than holding forth your point of view. **It is about finding out other points of view.**

What do you think in conversations but not say?

Tool 1: Right-Hand/Left-Hand Column

The left-hand column is the basic premise that during conversations there are actually two conversations taking place. One conversation is explicit. This conversation consists of the words that are actually spoken throughout the exchange between two or more persons. The other conversation consists of what the individuals are thinking and feeling but not saying.

The term "left hand column" is derived from an exercise designed to explore what is not said, but thought about, during the course of a conversation. This "tool" offers a way to actually study our

conversations so that we can re-design them to be more effective at creating the results that we wish to create.

Step 1: The Right-Hand Column (What was said). Take a piece(s) of paper and draw a line down the center. In the right-hand column, write out the conversation that actually occurred. Or write the conversation you're pretty sure would occur if you were to raise this issue. The discussion may go on for several pages. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished.

Step 2: The Left-Hand Column (What you were thinking). Now in the left-hand column, write out what you were thinking and feeling, but not saying.

Step 3: Individual Reflection: Using your left-hand column as a resource. You can learn a great deal just from the act of writing out a case, putting it away for a week, and then looking at it again.

As you reflect, ask yourself:

- What has really led me to think and feel this way?
- What beliefs do I have that might have caused the communication to happen in the way that it did?
- How might my comments have contributed to the difficulties?
- Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column?
- What assumptions am I making about the other person or people?
- How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve our communications?

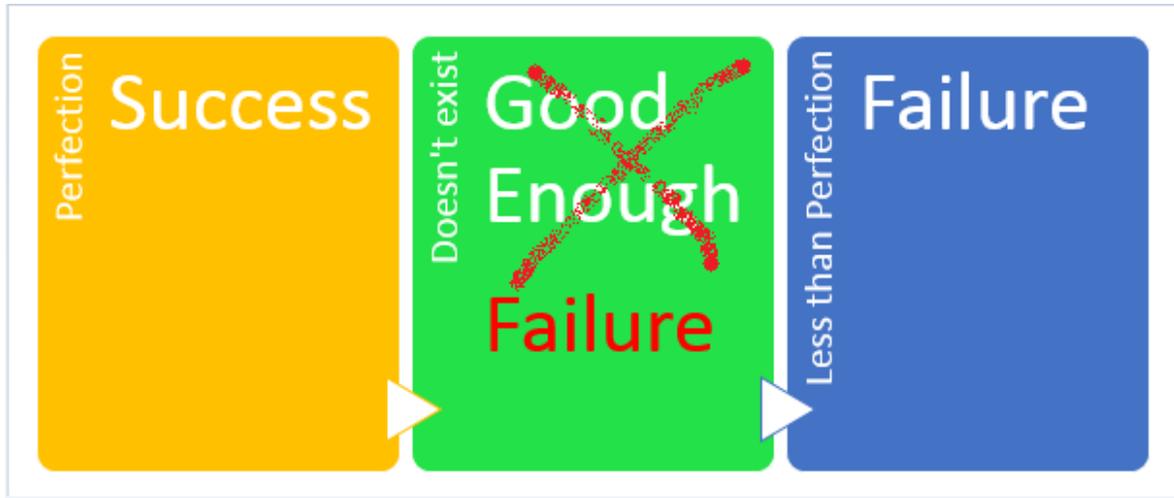
Left-hand column #2 (What I was thinking and feeling.)	Right-hand column (What was said.)

The Left-Hand Column Exercise is adopted from *The Field Discipline Fieldbook*, by Peter Senge.

Taking on the Challenge

All confrontation is a search for the truth. When confronting issues, it is best that you prepare a presentation of the problem. Typically, a very careful conversation is a failed conversation.

A Common roadblock to not tackling the problem is “All-or-Nothing” thinking. With “All-or-Nothing” thinking, we consider conversations failures when every single detail is not resolved or if we cannot agree immediately on some key points. Most difficult conversations are iterative, not one-off events, so don’t make this common error when deciding to have a tough conversation.



To prepare for the conversation, you need to ask yourself some questions:

- What exactly is the behavior that is causing the problem?
- What is the impact that the behavior is having on you, the team or the department?

These answers should be clear so you can explain the issue(s) in a concise manner to get the conversation started. You should also consider your objectives in the conversation.

- What do you want to accomplish?
- What is the desired outcome?
- Are there any non-negotiables?

Once you have determined this, plan how you will close the conversation. Difficult conversations should not end without clear expectations and action steps. You do not want to let issues linger - schedule a follow up to evaluate progress and definitively reach closure if needed.

Exercise: Think of a Difficult Conversation that you recently had or need to have soon.

Tool 2: The Planning Worksheet (See Page 16 of this handout)

Identify your most pressing issue (What do I need or want to be understood?)

Clarify the issue (What is going on? How long has it been going on? How bad is it?)

Determine the current impact (How is this issue currently impacting me and others? What are the results? What are our emotions?)

Determine the future implications (If nothing changes, what's likely to happen? What's at stake? What are the emotions?)

Examine your personal contribution to the issue or situation (How have I contributed to the problem?)

Describe the ideal outcome (When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make? What results will I enjoy? When this issue is resolved, what results will others enjoy? When I imagine this resolution, what are my emotions?)

Describe what you need to learn (What do I need to learn in this situation? What is their reality? What questions might be helpful for me to learn what I need to know?)

Exercise

We will break you into pairs.

A. Share out loud what you have written with your partner.

B. Partner listen and provide feedback on your worksheet. Address only the following issues:

1. Was the problem clearly stated?
2. Was the impact of the situation addressed?
3. Did the person share how they were feeling about the situation?
4. Did the person state their personal contribution to the situation?
5. Was their desired outcome clear?

The feedback is on the statement, not on dealing with the issue to be addressed. Your role is NOT to give advice on how you would handle the situation.

C. Switch roles and have the other person share their worksheet out loud and provide feedback on the same questions in part B.

Be Prepared for the Emotional Wake

An emotional wake is what someone remembers about a conversation after you are gone. **No comment is insignificant, unimportant, or trivial.** Something you have said (or not remembered saying) may have a damaging impact on someone or it may have inspired another. Your comments can leave a positive or a negative impact - an emotional wake.

People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

You have no control over how others might react on the statement that you gave. The most effective position to take is to focus on your own actions and to take responsibility for your emotional wake. Your goal should be to preserve the relationship. It can take years to build bridges with people and it may only take minutes to blow them up. Think about how the conversation can fix the situation without creating a wall between you and another person.

Discussion Question:

How many of you can recall a conversation from many years ago that had a profound effect on you, but you doubt that the other party even remembers it?

Positive Wake: Appreciation

A negative emotional wake is not solely caused by thoughtlessness or unkind comments. It may also be caused by lack of appreciative comments. In today's world of confrontation, cynicism and anger, expressions of appreciation are given less importance. Yet this expression of appreciation is a value-creating activity. It brings a more positive change - an emotional wake. Sometimes the most powerful thing to say is *thank you*. Don't just tell people that they are appreciated, tell them why. They will remember that conversation.

Sometimes people in a relationship have produced such a negative emotional wake that one or both parties are ready to pull the plug. Fierce conversations can turn things around, and it requires going back to the basics. For any relationship to work, it is best to follow the "Platinum rule" - *give unto others as they would like done unto them*. In other words, give to others what they want to receive; live the principles you are focused on learning. If you make deposits in emotional bank accounts of others, they will be more receptive if you need to make a withdrawal in the future.

The conversation is not about the relationship, it is the relationship.

Reflective Question:

What are some words of appreciation you could express to your co-workers or family more often?

Select one or two and plan to use them over the next week.

Negative Wake: Loaded Words

A negative emotional wake is costly. To leave a positive wake and lessen the chance for an incorrect spin to be attached to your message, learn to deliver the message without the load. Loaded messages can cause the other party to be defensive, withdrawn or fail to give you the response needed for positive change. The following words, phrases or emotions can be considered loaded and can lead to inaccurate receipt of the message:

- Laying Blame. *"The whole thing is your fault." "It's you, not me."*
- Name calling, labeling. *"You're an insensitive jerk." "You're a liar."*
- Using sarcasm or dark humor. *"Seems you've hit bottom and still digging."*
- Attaching global weight to tip-of-the-iceberg stuff. Making mountains out of mole-hills.
- Threatening, intimidating. *"I don't want to pull rank but..." "You do this one more time..."*
- Exaggerating by using absolute words. *"You do this every single time we talk." "You never..."*
- Pointing to someone else's failure to communicate, assuming a position of superiority.
- Saying *"if I were you..." "Why can't you be more like me?"*
- Bringing up old issues.
- Assailing and criticizing someone in public.
- Making blatantly negative facial expressions or using displaying negative body language.
- Layering your interpretation on something someone has said or done, assigning negative or false motives.
- Being unresponsive, refusing to speak. This can be the worst load you can attach. It feels like a lack of caring, lack of validation.

Remember, attaching a load to a message leaves the relationship worst off than before you started.

Reflective Question:

What are some loaded words that I have found myself using in difficult conversations?

What could I do to lessen the likelihood that I continue to use them?

Do Not Fear Silence in the Conversation

An American characteristic is “general discomfort with silence in conversations, homes, working places.” Fierce conversations require silence. **Memorable conversations include breathing space.** Insight can occur in the space between the words, and you can discover what the conversation really wants and needs to be about. **Silence is your most useful tool in slowing down a conversation. It allows everyone to participate more fully and creates an opportunity to focus on the cause of the problem instead of the symptoms.**

Do not speak unless you can improve upon the silence.

Slow down the conversation so that opinions can be given, and you can discover what the exchange really wants and needs to be about. Fierce conversations entail **silence**. It is about conversing with people, exchanging ideas. The more emotionally loaded the issue, the more silence is required.

Here are the signs that specify silence is needed:

- Cutting someone in mid-sentence.
- Interrupting or talking over someone else.
- Formulating your own response while someone is talking.
- Responding quickly with little or no thought.
- Attempting to be clever, witty, charming, etc.
- Giving advice before an issue is clarified.
- Using silence or break in conversation to change the topic of conversation.
- Talking in circles. Repeating the same points over and over.
- Monopolizing the airspace and not allowing the other person the opportunity to speak.

Silence presents you an opportunity to think and plan. It gives you the space to focus on the cause not just the effect. It allows everyone to participate, to be part of the discussion.



Tool 3: Confrontation Format Worksheet

To effectively deliver an opening statement, use the confrontation format below. You should be able to deliver your opening statement in 60 seconds or less. The Planning Worksheet can help you to prepare for writing the statement using this format (your initial conversation with yourself). See the worksheet on pages 16-17.



Practice Exercises

Directions:

You can use a **Confrontation Worksheet** to prepare for these crucial conversations (See pages 18-19). You should be able to deliver your opening statement in 60 seconds or less in the Confrontation format.

Situation 1

You have a new co-worker. This co-worker is very experienced in the type of work that your organization does but is unfamiliar with how the job is supposed to be performed in your unit. Unfortunately, they don't seem to be asking a lot of questions to get clarification. You are unsure if your mutual supervisor has arranged for or conducted any formal training for this new person. However, their uninformed work processes are starting to cause problems for you and your ability to complete some tasks successfully. How will you confront this co-worker with your concerns?

Were you able to create a 60 second or less opening statement?

Situation 2

Same situation as the one above. How will you confront your supervisor with your concerns?

Were you able to create a 60 second or less opening statement?

Planning Worksheet

Identify your most pressing issue (What do I need or want to be understood?)

Clarify the issue (What is going on, How long has it been going on? How bad is it?)

Determine the current impact (How is this issue currently impacting me and others? What are the results? What are our emotions?)

Determine the future implications (If nothing changes, what's likely to happen? What's at stake? What are the emotions?)

Examine your personal contribution to the issue or situation (How have I contributed to the problem?)

Describe the ideal outcome (When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make? What will I have learned? What results will I enjoy? When this issue is resolved, what results will others enjoy? When I imagine this resolution, what are my emotions?)

What do I need to learn? (What do I need to learn in this situation? What is their reality? What questions might be helpful for me to learn what I need to know?)

Confrontation Worksheet

Think through the following prompts to examine and clarify your thoughts about the feedback that you want to give to the other person.

(1)  **Name the Issue** (What do I need or want to be understood?)

(2)  **Clarify the issue** (Give an example, How long has it been going on? How big of a issue is it?)

(3)  **Describe your Emotions** (How do you feel about the situation?)

(4)  **Clarify What is at Stake?** (What is the impact on you, the person and others?)

(5)  **Identify Your Contributions to the Issue** (How have I contributed to the problem?)

(6)  **Indicate your wish for a resolution** (When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make? What results will I/we enjoy? When this issue is resolved, what results will others enjoy? When I imagine this resolution, what are my/others emotions likely to be?)

(6)  **Invite a response** (How will you ask for a reply? What request will I make (if any)?)

Debrief (Ask)

What worked or did not work in your delivery?

How did it feel to hear what I said?

How could I have shared more effectively?