

FORWARD

Often, we avoid face-to-face discussions if we think they will be difficult. However, communicating face-to-face assures your message is delivered and understood and is especially important if you are trying to change behavior and improve performance.

Difficult conversations:

Difficult conversations are high stakes situations; they are usually situations in which someone is being asked to change. Difficult solutions require what Ron Heifetz, in *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, terms Adaptive Work. Essentially, adaptive work means personal change. In order to practice the art of the difficult conversation you have to be able to lead others through the required change: the change of perspectives, beliefs, needs, and feelings. One way to accomplish this change is through re-framing. Re-framing puts the issue in a different context. A faculty member could complain to you: "Listening to student whining is a waste of my time." You can acknowledge their frustration, but re-frame the issue so that they see that listening may be the most important part of what they do every day. You've reframed the issue such that they now see value in something and a renewed sense of commitment to it.

Managing the difficult conversation:

There are three important ingredients to successfully managing the art of the difficult conversation: listening, caring, and empathy. It might not surprise you to learn that a full 50% of whether people trust a leader in a high stakes, high stress situation is their listening, caring, and empathy. Media communication studies have shown that the listener assesses these in the first 9 to 30 seconds of the interaction.

In terms of evaluation,

- **listening** means truly hearing what the other person says and demonstrating your understanding of their position through conversation.
- **caring** means sharing difficult information because doing so HELPS the person with whom you are sharing it do better in their work, develop strategies to achieve promotion or to be retained.
- **empathy** means understanding that the person with whom you are communicating may feel hurt or defensive initially, and framing the problem as one that can be solved, at least initially.

Practicing difficult conversations:

1. At your table, spend 5-6 minutes sharing the most challenging conversations you have had with faculty surrounding annual evaluation. (Be sure that you don't identify anyone.)
2. Choose one of your group's member's stories to work with. On the sheet of paper at the middle of the table, write down the situation (what was the topic of the difficult conversation? Who are the characters in the conversation? What other important facts should we know?) Write legibly.
3. Pass your scenario to the group to your left (as you face the speaker in the room).
4. Your table should have a scenario new to you. Talk through how you might approach this conversation.
 - How would you frame the conversation or problem so it is clear that you have the employee or faculty member's best interests at heart?
 - How can you make your discussion solution-oriented?
 - How might you demonstrate listening, caring, and empathy?
5. Be ready to share a few strategies with the larger group.

Why bother:

- Practicing difficult conversations and strategies for challenging interactions does make you better at them.
- It costs a lot to recruit faculty members. We need to have a 100% success rate in retaining the people we recruit. (Don't hire people who can't demonstrate the basic skills to be successful.)
- Chairs/heads owe their faculty careful and objective performance evaluations and frank discussions of those evaluations.
- A culture of evaluation, combined with a clear pattern of VALUATION (valuing faculty contributions and acknowledging them) develops positive attitudes and attachments in those you recruit through honest evaluations and support toward success.