

Sara: Hi everyone, and welcome to today's webinar. ***Difficult Conversations: Embrace Confrontation and Produce Long Lasting Benefits***, hosted by HRDQU and presented by Gary Turner. My name is Sara, and I will moderate today's webinar. The webinar will last about an hour. If you have any questions, go ahead and type them into the chat area in your GoToWebinar control panel, and then we'll either answer them as they come in or after the session by email. Today's webinar content is from our reproducible training library, the title Navigating Difficult Conversations. If you are interested in delivering this training within your organization, please contact HRDQ.

Sara: Our presenter today is Gary Turner. Gary is a senior faculty member of HRDQ, delivering dynamic sessions, certifying trainers, and teaching coaches. He completed his PhD coursework at The Ohio State University, was an organizational development director at M&M Mars for nine years, and founded Turner Consulting in 1991. Gary has worked with Fortune 500 countries in the US and in seven other countries. Welcome Gary, and thank you for joining us today.

Gary Turner: Thank you Sara. I'm looking forward to this discussion around difficult conversations because this is a challenging topic for people. It's an important workshop that's needed in organizations around the world. As you can see on the screen, this workshop is focused today on the nature of these conversations and how to handle these tough conversations, what the stages are to prepare, to discuss, and to follow up. Finally, we're going to look at how do we minimize some negative responses and strengthen relationships. All of this is important because conversations can be very difficult.

Gary Turner: I would like you to think of a difficult conversation you've had in the past year, or maybe a conversation you should have had but lacked the courage to attempt it. Do you have one in mind? Okay, now that you have one in mind, I'd like you to think, what was difficult about that conversation? Type in a quick answer, and Sara, would you read some of these as they come up on the screen? Sara, just when you get some, just start reading them.

Sara: Okay, sure. We've got some coming in already. We've got some good participation today. The first one, which is what I thought of too, "It was

going to be awkward." "I had already told him once, and now I'm having to say it again." Someone else wrote, "The person has a different opinion about everything." "I was afraid of an argument starting." "This person used to be my friend, but now isn't." That's sad. "This lady never changes or never listens to me."

Gary Turner: Thank you, Sara. Let me interrupt because these are great examples of what makes a conversation so difficult. These are typical examples that we get in our workshops, and here are some examples that we get in our workshop. Oops, I just clicked too far. Sara, I'm going to try to get back. Okay, there we are. These are ones that we've written down that we've had in workshops that, we're delivering bad news, we were giving negative performance feedback, we were saying no to a request, we were asking people to do something unpleasant or difficult. Maybe we had to acknowledge our own mistakes, and that comes in sometimes. Then, one that's sensitive is, we're dealing with personal things. That's sometimes very awkward and difficult.

Gary Turner: Let's dive a little deeper with this. We know what kind of conversations then become difficult. What I want you to do out there is think about, well, why do you think these conversations are so difficult? Type in a quick response now, and Sara, will you read several of these as these start coming up?

Sara: Sure. I can see people are typing. Okay, so, "I'm uncomfortable with negative feedback." "This guy is difficult to deal with." "My boss is expecting me to change this mechanic's attitude." "It's just hard for me and always has been hard."

Gary Turner: Yeah, let me interrupt you again, because you see, a lot of this is very personal. Isn't it? It's personal with the fact that maybe we're uncomfortable or the other person takes things so personally, and these things become extremely difficult for us. Maybe they're even a very sensitive area. Here are some things that we think are the kind of deeper dive into this. These are examples we'd get in workshops.

Gary Turner: Some of my perfectional business colleagues find it difficult to be a coach around these things, because sometimes it seems with managers I work with, you have to push them to meet the improvement goals they have, or sometimes I feel uncomfortable with this, even though it's in the best interest of my client to do so. I worry about the first one here, hurt feelings. I worry about embarrassing myself. Maybe I have feelings of powerlessness or I'm afraid in the intense disagreement that's going to start and a conflict's going to break out.

Gary Turner: Similarly, managers in your organizations often have a grueling time

with conversations, even when the conversation is in the best interest of the employee. Your managers are looking for help. They're looking for, "What can I do, how do I approach difficult conversations?" Here in the workshop, we have our seven stages that we take managers through, in terms of how to handle a difficult conversation. Each of these seven stages has a variety of tips, ideas, suggestions, models, worksheets and so forth for that stage. In this webinar today, we're going to follow these seven stages. Even though we don't have time to thoroughly explain each state, it'll at least give you an idea about what that stage is all about.

Gary Turner: Stage one then, in preparing, is preparing for the discussion. With thorough preparation, the next six steps become a lot easier. Let's look at preparation, at stage one, and figure out what does this all mean. The first suggestion we give in the workshop is, prepare yourself. Well, what does that mean? You have to be mentally and emotionally ready for this conversation. Never begin planning when you're upset, you're angry, you're worried, you're tense. Your planning itself needs to be calm, just like you're going to want to be calm in the discussion. I like to do things that calm me down. I practice deep breathing. I wear a favorite shirt to make me feel good. Even, for some people, planning out what they're going to wear helps them prepare themselves.

Gary Turner: The second item is also huge here. Know what you want to achieve. What I am and what I'm not wanting to achieve. Because, conversations can go AWOL pretty fast. You need a guiding light to keep the conversation on track. Then the third one, choose the right time and place. It's important that you consider the other person with this, what would be the right time and the right place for them to feel comfortable. For instance, calling them into your office might not be a place that makes them feel comfortable. Arrange for the message to be prompt and clear. Tell the truth. Focus on the facts. Don't give an opinion, but here are the facts of the feedback. Prepare by seeing the other person's perspective. Think about what, from their point of view, is something that they are concerned about.

Gary Turner: That's how to prepare. Let's think now about why you prepare, and why you prepare is so important. Several years ago, I was teaching a class in dealing with tough negotiators. We started again with preparation. I asked the question, why prepare? Someone in the session laughed. He said, "If you don't prepare, you're going to hit a brick wall." Yes, we will hit a brick wall if we're not ready. You need to de-stress, get your message across clearly, cope with emotions, be ready for left field responses that just don't make sense to you. These are the main reasons you want to prepare. It's a huge step towards success.

Gary Turner: Let's read a scenario here. The scenario is Lucinda needs to tell Michelle that the project she's completed is not acceptable. In fact, a significant part needs to be completely redone. Lucinda is not looking forward to this conversation. She knows that Michelle worked very hard, and Michelle believed she had done an excellent job. There have also been other times when Michelle has grown very angry in the face of bad news. With this in mind, Lucinda knows it's unlikely that Michelle will readily agree to redo the project. Sound familiar? Yeah, I've had to give people feedback that their work was not acceptable, and I'm sure many of you out there have had that same feedback.

Gary Turner: What could Lucinda do to prepare for this conversation so that it goes as well as possible? Why don't you put some things in the chat box now, that you would think of first of all when you're preparing for this. Sara, when you start seeing some suggestions come in, would you read some of those? I'm sure people have ideas about what's the first thing they would think of in preparing for this.

Sara: Yep, we do, yes.

Gary Turner: Okay, good.

Sara: Yep. The first one I've got there is, "I'd start with recognizing what she's done well in the past." Another says, "I would have written out examples of what is not acceptable." Speaking of what you've been talking about Gary, "I would stay calm, no matter what happens." "I'd pick a good time of day to meet, one where we're relaxed."

Gary Turner: Okay, good.

Sara: "I would tell her that it is nothing personal."

Gary Turner: Okay, those are all excellent. Aren't they? Thank you, everyone, for your ideas. As you can see, there are many different things to consider. Many different things that you have to think of as you're planning. Now, how do you decide all the different things you have to do? Well, you need a strategy to start your conversation.

Gary Turner: Here's a strategy we use on preparing. We ask, first of all, what the situation is and what your feelings are about this, and what are the stakes in this? What's the relationship with the other person? What are the facts versus your assumptions? What are your objectives, the ideal outcome? Finally, what are the other person's perspectives, feelings, and assumptions, and based upon all that, then, when and where should this conversation be held? This is sort of a game plan, a road map

for your preparing. These questions help your framework as you begin a discussion strategy. In the workshop, we work on a worksheet that includes all those different factors.

Gary Turner: Now, you're prepared. How do you start the conversation? How do you initially just get into it? What are some things that you like to do? Do you like to tell a joke, like, did you hear about the turkey that got into a fight? He got the stuffing knocked out of him. Oh, my. Jokes, I don't think go over very well. Do you chit chat about the weekend, about things that have happened, about what your football team did? What do you do? I'm sure you have a lot of great ideas about this, but here's sort of what we say about how you start.

Gary Turner: Let the other person know that you want to talk. You know, that you want to have a convenient and arrange a convenient time for you to talk. Set the stage. One of the things we also say here is sit at a corner of the table next to one another, not across from each other. There's nothing like sitting on opposite sides of a table that often encourages friction. It almost looks like a battle of two people against each other. Make sure you sit like this couple are sitting here and kind of adjacent to each other. Then introduce the subject, and get to the point pretty quickly. Explain what you're there for, introduce what you want to discuss, and then get to the point of what you're discussing.

Gary Turner: Here's some sample conversations openers. Notice how all these openers get to the business. You probably heard that we lost a big contract. I'd like to talk to you about your performance evaluation. I need a favor from you. There's something important that I would like to discuss. I have some bad news. Notice that these often start with the word "I". It illustrates getting to the point from your perspective. It avoids blaming the other person. It doesn't start with you, you did this or you did that. Instead, it's more what I need or I have, what I like. The "I" opener is often the best. It opens the eyes of the other person to your situation.

Gary Turner: Then, after you then open this whole conversation, how do you deliver the message? You've opened up this dialog. You've set the stage. You've explained where you are, what I have, but now you need to get to the meat and potatoes of the discussion. Here are five suggestions in terms of the content. These five content ideas talk about what you're going to say.

Gary Turner: The first thing is to be clear, specific. Focus on facts. Give examples. Provide accurate information. Ask questions. Let the other person ask questions, answer them honestly. This is about the content of what you are saying. Now, the process has to look at how you say it, and how you

say it or to stay calm yourself. Use positive body language. Sit up straight. Don't cross your arms. Make eye contact. Keep a neutral expression. Sit still.

Gary Turner: I was having a coaching discussion with someone this past year, a manager, and this manager I was coaching needed some help on how to have discussions themselves. It was interesting, she was constantly tapping her pen and shaking her leg, and I thought, "Oh my, you need to just stay calm and you need some composure. When you have discussions with people, they would go better if you were just a little more composed yourself." Also, avoid distractions and take responsibility yourself when it's warranted. Reframe the situation in a positive light. It can't all be bad news. There's got to be some good news that comes out of this. This is the process, then, of how you deliver the message.

Gary Turner: Now that you've delivered the message, to have a meaningful conversation you're going to have to listen and respond to what the other person's saying. What are some things you need to be prepared for as you listen and respond to them? They could have emotional responses. They could have a lot of facts. They could have a lot of stuff they hit you with.

Gary Turner: Rule number one we call stay focused. It's so easy to get unfocused, so clear your mind. Make eye contact with them. Focus on one idea that they have. Ignore the distractions that are going to happen in this conversation. That's rule number one. As you listen, stay focused and really make sure you've heard them correctly.

Gary Turner: Then number two, capture the message itself. Your brain and sometimes your ink pen need to be working hard here to capture that message. Watch their tone of voice, be open minded. Avoid making some assumptions. Seek to understand what they're saying and what they're feeling. Avoid telling the other person what to do and extract the main ideas. This capture the message takes a lot of intense activity. I believe you need to have ... someone asked me once, "Do you really need to have a pen and paper?" Yes, I say you've got to have that, because they're liable to throw things at you that later become confusing. You want to capture the message as accurately, as factually as you can.

Gary Turner: Then the final rule, rule three. This is an interesting one. It's called help the speaker. You want to help the speaker be able to say what they want to say. Here are a list of suggestions that we have for helping the speaker. Avoid you making any distracting nonverbal actions. You know, just stay calm. Encourage the speaker. I like to call it the head nod, you know, just kind of nod your head real slow. That encourages the speaker

to keep on talking. Intercede with helpful comments so the speaker can recall his or her train of thought. It might be a helpful comment saying, "You were surprised with the message, also." A little helpful comment, feeding back real quickly where that person's at helps them stay on their train of thought.

Gary Turner: Keep your facial expressions open. Don't sit there with a poker face. Don't have a scowl on your face. Sort of look at the other person in a way that shows you're really taking in what it is they're saying. Maintain an alert posture. Have your posture so that you're really staying tuned to what's going on. Avoid interrupting. You know, let them go until there's a time that you can really say things. Interruptions will, for some people, really upset them. They'll feel like you weren't listening because you interrupted me in the middle of a thought.

Gary Turner: Now, you've listened, you've helped the speaker, you've captured the message, you stayed focused. Now, there becomes a point at which we explore alternatives about what to do. The question about what to do now requires a little bit of your thought and a little skill in being able to do this well. Even your managers need to have some of these kind of suggestions, like, to handle difficult suggestions that they give you. Listen, empathize, acknowledge, respect, validate their feelings, but don't take their reactions personally. Stay calm again. Keep an open mind. Negotiate when it is appropriate. As these buttons say, don't panic. Don't get stressed out by what alternatives start coming to mind as they're giving you ideas.

Gary Turner: It's hard to explore these alternatives when they're having difficult emotions. How do you cope with difficult emotions that they're having? First of all, if they're in anger, allow them to vent. End the conversation immediately if the person becomes violent, slamming their fists down or maybe even physically standing up and looking like they're going to come to you. Say, "We're done talking here until we can both settle down, calm down on this."

Gary Turner: Another difficult emotion is tears. I've been in meetings where the other person just breaks down crying. You stay clam and wait until they get their feeling under control. Acknowledge their feelings with, "I can see this is very upsetting." Suggest a break if necessary, and ask, "Would you like to take a five minute break here just to run to the restroom and get a drink of water?" Tears are difficult.

Gary Turner: Finally, if the other person becomes very frustrated, you know, with what's going on and they're upset and they're telling a story that shows their frustration, acknowledge it and empathize with their feelings. Let them know you want to help. Let them know, "I'm here to kind of help

with your situation." Particularly, managers need to be able to say, "I'm here to help. I'm here to help you get better in your performance, so that's why I'm here."

Gary Turner: Now, you've got to come to some conclusions about the alternatives. Here's how you explore alternatives and solutions. Beforehand, know what is negotiable and what is nonnegotiable, and what you have as your important items, I call them your must haves, you've got to have out of this conversation this or that. Know that ahead of time. Secondly, have this collaborative attitude toward a win-win solution. Let them know that, "I think we'll be able to work this out."

Gary Turner: Finally, the last thing here is generate possible alternatives. Keep an open mind. Consider ideas, and tell them, let's think about this. Maybe you identify a few solutions that are possible and even close the meeting here with, "Let's think about these things. Let's sleep on them. Let's get back together and decide which of these things are really the best actions for us to take."

Gary Turner: That takes us to the point of, now, we've got alternatives. How do we at this point then close the conversation? What do we do in closing this conversation in stage six? I know I've heard a lot of different things that people say about closing it. One of the things I often hear is non-commitment. That just, it's difficult to close because the other person doesn't appear committed to things. Sometimes it's non-commitment because of resistance. They outright say, "I can't do that. I don't want to do that." If that happens, you need to empathize with why they might not want to, but focus on the facts, offer evidence, and explain that this just has to happen.

Gary Turner: Sometimes it's passivity. They just sit there, and they're a little bit in a trance hearing this and they just don't seem to be committed to doing anything about it. If that happens, ask questions to draw out their thoughts. You know, ask them, "What are you thinking about this? What appeals to you in this? What is it you're worried about with this?" There are amazing things you can do by just sitting and drawing them out. These are two major things we have, and again, there's worksheets in the workshop that will help you with this.

Gary Turner: Now, here's what you really need to do. Don't let the conversation drag out. Be alert for any signs of a natural ending. I sometimes call it when I see them, when their head is nodding yes, when they've written something down, they are in agreement. You notice that the ending is coming because they closed the notepad they're writing in. They kind of sense that, yeah, they've got agreement, you're agreeing, and so they feel like there's a natural ending.

Gary Turner: One thing to do when it just feels like it's the ending is clarify next steps. Say, "Here's what I see as the next steps. Is there anything I missed, or anything from your point of view we've got to do?" Then look for a way to end on a positive note. I call it sometimes the vision statement at the end, about when this is worked out, when this is changed, when this happens, this is going to be great. End on that positive note about your optimism for the way things are going to work out.

Gary Turner: Finally, just make sure you let them add anything they want to add at the end and just say to them, "Now, is there anything we failed to talk about here? Anything we have missed talking about?" Let them say anything they want to say at that point. That closes out the conversation.

Gary Turner: Finally, stage seven. There is follow up that has to happen. There's obvious things to follow up with that are on the accountability actions that you agreed to. Now, those are obvious. If the person says, "By May 1st I will do this," you have that as an action plan, an item, and you need to follow up on that. Before May 1st gets there, you need to check with them, are they coming along on getting that done. Those are obvious follow ups that all of you know to do.

Gary Turner: Hang onto your seat, here's three other things that I think are important. One is, keep a journal. Keep a journal of your conversations, and particularly note what went well, what you might do differently in the future. What went well in the conversation? What did you do well? What did the other person do well? What might we do differently if we have a conversation again about this? You might have had a conversation, and then you find yourself having to have the same conversation about two months later. That journal will help you review what went well, what do I need to do, and what do I do now.

Gary Turner: Secondly, when it makes sense or when it's possible, talk to the other person involved in the conversation. At some point ask them, "How did that conversation go for you? What is it I might have done differently to have a better conversation at that point?" Just let them talk, let them give you feedback. It's better that they talk to you about that than go around talking to everyone else the rest of their life about what a crummy job you did in handling something. This is sort of a decompress. It's sort of a way to get them feeling okay about the fact that they can approach you about things.

Gary Turner: Then, thirdly, find out what others do. Share your experiences in navigating difficult conversations with your colleagues. Be open to hearing what they do, their suggestions for improvement. Ask them

about their difficult conversations and what they've done. These are different process issues, three different process issues that you might handle that makes you better at this in the future. Sure, you're going to follow up on the content and the action plans, but these are three process suggestions that are going to make sure that you improve and get better at handling difficult conversations in the future.

Gary Turner: I know you're going to like this workshop. I know this workshop is going to be helpful. I know that a lot of you out there probably have managers that need this type of training, and it's something that they would appreciate. They would appreciate knowing these seven steps, understanding some of the methods and action sheets that are in each of those seven steps. I think you would really enjoy this workshop. I enjoyed talking to you today about this important subject. Thank you for your attention and all the things that you chatted in with. I'm going to now turn the microphone back to Sara for a wrap up and conclusion to this. Sara.

Sara: Thank you so much, Gary, that was great. If you have any questions for Gary, please use your chat window and send those in now. Then we'll share the responses with the audience by email, as we're a little short on time today. Consider looking to HRDQ for your training needs. We publish research based experiential learning products that you can deliver in your organization. You can check out online or print self assessments, we have up out of your seat games, our reproducible the workshops that you can customize, and more.

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