Navigating Difficult Conversations
Deliver Your Message with Poise, Empathy, and Resolve

Course Objectives
This course will increase your ability to:
• Understand the nature of difficult conversations and what it takes to handle them.
• Identify the seven stages of handling difficult conversations.
• Use empathy in a way that minimizes negative responses and strengthens relationships.
• Apply best practices for preparing, initiating, and delivering the conversation.
• Discover how to generate solutions and bring the conversation to a close.

Conversations You May Find Difficult
• Delivering bad news
• Giving negative performance feedback; asking employees to make changes
• Saying “no”
• Asking people to do an unpleasant or difficult task
• Acknowledging your mistakes
Navigating Difficult Conversations

Why These Conversations are Difficult

- Fear of causing hurt feelings, not being liked, or not being respected
- Feeling of powerlessness
- Fear of embarrassing yourself or being seen to fall short in responsibilities
- Reluctance to engage in conflict

To Handle Difficult Conversations

- Prepare yourself.
- Know what you want to achieve.
- Choose the right time and place.
- Deliver the message promptly and clearly.
- Focus on the facts; tell the truth.
- Ask questions; try to see the situation from the other person’s perspective.

To Handle Difficult Conversations (cont.)

- Listen actively, empathize, and acknowledge, respect, and validate the other person’s feelings.
- Don’t take reactions personally.
- Stay calm.
- Keep an open mind and negotiate (when appropriate).
Navigating Difficult Conversations

**Stages of a Difficult Conversation**

- **Stage 1: Prepare for the Conversation**
- **Stage 2: Initiate the Conversation**
- **Stage 3: Deliver the Message**
- **Stage 4: Listen and Respond**
- **Stage 5: Explore alternatives and solutions, if appropriate**
- **Stage 6: Close the Conversation**
- **Stage 7: Follow up, if appropriate**

**Navigating Difficult Conversations**

**Why Prepare?**

To:
- Feel less stress and tension
- Get message across clearly and tactfully
- Cope with emotions
- Be ready for possible responses

**How to Prepare**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What’s the situation?</th>
<th>What are your feelings? How will you manage your emotions?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the stakes?</td>
<td>What’s your relationship with the other person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the facts?</td>
<td>What are your objectives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your assumptions?</td>
<td>What’s the ideal outcome?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the other person’s perspectives, feelings, and assumptions?</td>
<td>When and where will the conversation be held?</td>
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Empathy

“The experience of understanding another person’s condition from their perspective. You place yourself in their shoes and feel what they are feeling.”

Empathetic Language

“I’m so sorry that I won’t be able to...”  “You must be feeling pretty frustrated...”
“You must be disappointed...”  “It looks as if you are feeling...”
“I can see that this news is upsetting...”  “This must come as a surprise...”
“I’m sorry to hear that...”  “There is something I need to tell you...”
“I can understand why you feel that way...”

Getting Started

• Let the person know you want to talk and arrange a convenient time.
• Set the stage–sit at a corner or next to one another.
• Introduce the subject and get to the point quickly.
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**Conversation Openers**

- “You’ve probably heard that we lost a big contract....”
- “I’d like to talk 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....”

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**To Deliver Difficult Messages**

- Be clear, specific; focus on facts.
- Give examples.
- Be sincere; provide accurate information.
- Ask questions for more information
- Let the other person ask questions, answer them honestly, and say why if you can’t answer them.

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**To Deliver Difficult Messages (cont.)**

- Stay calm and use positive body language:
  - Sit up straight.
  - Don’t cross your arms.
  - Make eye contact.
  - Keep a neutral expression.
  - Sit still.
- Avoid distractions.
- Take responsibility when warranted.
- Reframe the situation in a positive light.
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To Listen and Respond

Staying Focused:
• Clear your mind.
• Make eye contact.
• Focus on one idea.
• Ignore distractions.

Capturing the Message:
• Be aware of speaker’s tone and body language.
• Be open-minded.
• Avoid making assumptions.
• Seek understanding of the person’s thoughts and feelings.
• Avoid telling the person what to do.
• Extract the main ideas.

Capturing the Message (cont.):
• Ask questions as needed.
• Encourage the speaker to discuss the subject in more depth.
• Summarize the speaker’s verbal or nonverbal messages from time to time.
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To Listen and Respond (cont.)

Helping the Speaker:
• Avoid distracting nonverbal actions.
• Encourage the speaker.
• Intercede with helpful comments so the speaker can recall his or her train of thought.
• Keep facial expressions open.
• Maintain an alert posture.
• Avoid interrupting.

Helping the Speaker (cont.):
• Allow for moments of silence.
• Stay calm; be aware of your own feelings.
• Avoid over-explaining, over-apologizing, and arguing.

To Cope With Difficult Responses

• **Anger**: Allow the person to “vent”; end the conversation immediately if the person becomes violent.
• **Tears**: Wait while the person gets his or her feelings under control, and acknowledge these feelings; suggest a break if necessary.
• **Frustration**: Acknowledge and empathize with their feelings; show you want to help.
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To Cope with Difficult Responses (cont.)

- *Resistance*: Empathize, focus on facts, and offer evidence.
- *Passivity*: Ask questions to draw out their thoughts.

To Explore Alternatives and Solutions

- Make sure each of you understands the issue/problem the same way.
- Try to see the situation from their perspective; identify their interests, needs, concerns, etc.
- Show empathy.
- Be aware of your own feelings; take a deep breath and step back to look at the facts if overwhelmed.

To Explore Alternatives and Solutions (cont.)

- Identify what’s important to you and what is non-negotiable.
- Have a collaborative attitude and seek a mutually satisfactory resolution.
- Work with the person to generate possible alternatives and solutions; keep an open mind and consider all ideas.
To Close a Difficult Conversation

• Avoid letting the conversation drag out.
• Be alert for signs of a natural ending.
• Clarify next steps.
• Look for ways to end on a positive note.
• Offer the person a chance to add anything that may have been missed.

Tips for Following Up

• Keep a journal.
• Ask for feedback.
• Find out what colleagues do.

Action Plan