Preparing for a Challenging Conversation

Overview

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Part A: Preparing for the Conversation

Goal: Prepare for a successful conversation

Preparation is key. Time invested in advance greatly increases the likelihood of a fruitful conversation. Apply my research skills to the problem. If this was an exam or significant academic project how would you prepare? Apply those same skills.

Consult or role play with the UCR Ombuds Office (x2-3213), friends or other resources

Reflect and journal

Look ahead to other steps and think through how you will address them

Utilize books and other resources:

- Difficult Conversations by Stone, Patton, & Heen
- Crucial Conversations by Patterson et al.
- Crucial Confrontations by Paterson et al.

If another party initiates the conversation, you may not have time to prepare. If you feel caught off guard, consider taking the following approach: listen, summarize and then say something like "You have given me a lot to think about. I would like to follow up and talk with you about it further after I have a little time to process. Can we set a time to talk sometime next week?"

Step 1: Reflecting

Goal: Reflect deeply and deliberately about the conversation in order to gain greater insight into the underlying issues.

When reflecting it is important to consider the issues from your perspective and from the perspectives of other involved parties.

Critical Questions for Reflection:

What outcome am I looking for? Why are these outcomes important to me? What will I consider a successful conversation?

What outcome might the other party be looking for? Why might these outcomes be important to them? What might they consider a successful conversation?

Is it realistic to expect these outcomes?

Realistic outcomes	Unrealistic outcomes
● Learn more about the other person's perspective	● Change the other person in a way they are not likely to embrace
● Express my perspective or feelings	
● Engage in collaborative problem solving	

Additional Questions for Reflection:

What is my perception of the situation? What might be the perception of the other party?

What assumptions do I have about the situation? What assumptions might the other party have?

What data or information might be relevant? What information do I have access to? What information does the other party have access to?

What common ground do I and the other party have in how we see the situation? How might we be perceiving the situation differently?

What are my goals over the short-term, medium-term, long-term? What are theirs?

How have my actions contributed to the situation? How have the other party's actions contributed to the situation?

What larger systemic dynamics might be at work?

How am I feeling about this situation? What might be the feelings of the other party? How are these feelings impacting how we are approaching the situation?

What fears do I have about this conversation? What fears might the other party have?

What do I anticipate as possible trouble spots?

What would be the consequence if I avoid or delay the conversation?

What implications does this issue have for the way I see myself? What implications might the issue have for the way the other party sees her/himself?

What is the possible range of options or solutions?

What are my alternatives if I do not achieve a satisfactory outcome through the conversation?

What alternatives does the other party have if they do not achieve a satisfactory outcome through the conversation?

What laws or university policies, if any might be applicable to this issue?

Are there any deadlines that might be relevant?

Are there other people whom it might be helpful to involve in this issue? How might they impact the situation? How might the existing parties react to the inclusion of these new parties?

Step 2: Deciding whether to initiate a conversation
Goal: Decide whether or not to initiate a conversation

Reasons to initiate a conversation	Reasons to not initiate a conversation
● Issue is likely to persist, recur or worsen if not addressed	● Issue is likely to go away if not addressed
● Addressing the issue well is likely to produce a positive outcome	● The time to address the issue is not yet ripe
	● There is a better way to address the issue than talking about it
	● This is really an issue inside of you rather than an issue between you and the other party
	● Your purpose for having the conversation is unrealistic

Step 3: Convening the Conversation

Goal: Setup the meeting in an environment most conducive to productive outcome

Reach out to the other party and invite them to have a conversation with you. Here are some items you might want to consider:
Topic: What is it that you wish to discuss?
Time: How long will you need to discuss it and when should the conversation take place?
Place: Where will the conversation happen?
Context of the request: How will you make the request? By email? By phone? In person?

One important consideration is trying to allay fears and reduce the anxiety of the person you are meeting with. The more at ease the other party is, the more likely they are to engage constructively. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you feel about the conversation if you received this type of request?
Scenarios to avoid if possible:
1) "The Ambush" – Other party thinks it is just a casual conversation, and feels caught off guard, triggering defensiveness.
2) "The Anxious Wait" – Other party becomes extremely anxious in anticipation of the conversation, and comes into the meeting a nervous wreck.
3) "The Premature Conversation" – You end up having the conversation when your goal is merely to convene it.
4) "The Quick 'NO'" – The other party gives a quick definitive answer, without engaging you in the underlying issues.

Goal: Have a successful conversation

Once you begin to have the conversation you no longer have complete control over the process. Conversations are shared processes and therefore inherently dynamic and free flowing. It is helpful to have a general structure in mind but to remain flexible to the circumstances.

Here is a general structure:

> Step 4: Framing the conversation
> Step 5: Listening to the other party's perspective
> Step 6: Sharing your perspective
> Step 7: Problem Solving
> Step 8: Concluding the Conversation

In practice, listening, sharing, and problem solving constitute the heart of the conversation and are typically comingled. You will have to bounce back between them or cycle through them several times. As a general principle, it is best to try to do them in the order listed. By listening well to others first you increase the likelihood that they will listen to you, and problem solving tends to be more productive if everyone feels heard and the perspectives are out on the table.

Step 4 Framing the Conversation

Goal: Frame the discussion, establish expectations, set the tone for the meeting, and invite other parties to participate as partners in a learning conversation

Prepare how you want to open the conversation. You might find it helpful to write out a very brief opening statement. Here is what you might want to include in the conversation:

> Your purpose in the conversation
> Expectations you have
> The intended tone of the conversation
> The scope of the conversation
> What actions might follow
> Confidentiality and who might be informed about the conversation
> The structure of the conversation

Frame the issue in neutral language. Avoid language that connotes judgment: ex "Let's talk about your performance on project x." Try to use language that both of you can agree with: ex. "I think we may have different perspectives on project x." Emphasize mutual contribution rather than blame.

Example: "I wanted to talk with you about project x, and hear from you your sense of how it is going and also share with you my feelings about it. I was hoping that today we would just have an initial informal conversation between the two of us to make sure that we are on the same page, and then to outline next steps. I can share my thoughts or we could begin with yours. What do you think?"

<u>Persistently extend invitation:</u> If you encounter an initially defensive or adversarial response, here is one approach that can get the conversation back on course:
1) Resist the temptation to become defensive or adversarial yourself
2) Defuse using active listening (See step 5)
3) Persist in extending an invitation to engage in a learning conversation, and gain buy-in

Just before the meeting prepare your own internal posture. Revisit your purpose. Remind yourself that you do not see the whole situation.

Step 5: Listening to the other party's perspective
Goal: Listen with curiosity, and communicate to the other party that you are interested in understanding their perspective
Be prepared to present information first. However, be prepared to shift quickly and early into a listening posture.
Seek to understand one another's perspectives rather than determining "the truth."
Maintain open body language.
Maintain a curious posture.
Assume that you have incomplete information and that you do not understand the entire issue.
Summarize feelings and opinions of the other party to communicate that you understand them.
Reframe.
Ask open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions. Ex. "What happened with the presentation?" rather than "Did you double-check that you had the presentation?"
Elicit interests – the "whys" behind positions.

Step 6: Sharing your perspective
Goal: Present your perspective in the way they are most likely to hear it
Transition from listening to sharing your perspective. You may want to prepare a transition statement that invites their buy-in. Ex "I think I am getting a sense of how you see the situation. It sounds like you … Is that about right? <Yes.> Good then I would like to share my perspective on the situation."
Start with what matters most.
Present your ideas not as "the truth" but as your perspective.
Acknowledge your own short comings and apologize appropriately.
Utilize "AND" statements to acknowledge complexity of circumstances. Ex. "You want to innovate AND I want to make sure we maintain our core strengths."
Disentangle intent from impact:
- Avoid attributing intent to other party. Ex. "You were trying to undermine me."
- Instead describe actions of other party and their impact upon you. Ex. "I am confused and angry because you did not speak up to support the proposal in the meeting after you told me in private that you liked it."
- If you must attribute intent, provide reasoning and present it as an open question. Ex. "… and so I do not know whether you are trying to undermine me, or whether you felt intimidated or what."

- Acknowledge the impact of your actions upon the other party. Avoid using your lack of a negative intent to invalidate impact. Ex. "I realize that my actions left you feeling hurt even if that was not my intent" rather than "I never meant to hurt you."

Share true feelings rather than judgments disguised as feelings. Ex. "I feel frustrated" rather than "I feel disrespected."

Avoid blanket generalizations. Avoid "always' and "never." Ex. "You never take time to listen."

Be mindful of any identity issues you could trigger in them, and do your best to allay those issues. Ex. "I know that take great pride in the quality of your work. So I was surprised to see five typos in your email."

Invite them to summarize. Ex. "Let's check to see if I'm being clear. Would you mind playing back what you've heard me say thus far?"

Ask how they see it differently, (looping back to step 6) especially if you sense they have not fully shared their perspective.

Step 7: Problem Solving
Goal: Work collaboratively to solve the problem
Summarize the similarities and differences in perspective in a neutral way.
Utilize the AND statements to describe the problem.
Name the dynamic. Ex. "I notice that we seem to get into a heated discussion whenever we talk about the budget."
Invite them into problem solving.
Shift from past orientation to future orientation.
Ask them what would be most important to them in a solution.
Ask them what standards should apply.
Invite them to propose potential solutions.
Generate multiple options.
Build upon interests.

Step 8: Concluding the Conversation
Goal: Cement agreements, and maintain open dialogue for continuing conversations and honest assessment of plans
Consider establishing SMART (Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Realistic, Timely) goals to be able to measure progress
Set a time line for follow up and to review implementation

Part C: Follow-up
Step 9: Follow-up
Goal: Maintain and build upon successes
Check in with other party to review implementation, and maintain open lines of communication.

For more assistance, feel free to contact the UCR Ombuds Office (951) 827-3213