

Coaching Key...Difficult Conversation Checklist

The Difficult Conversation Checklist is written for two colleagues who have a difference. Steps 1 and 2 are useful when you are experiencing a strong reaction to having a difficult conversation or when you feel that one person or yourself is more right than the other. Steps 3, 4, 5 are helpful guidelines for how to structure your discussion. Supervisors may adapt this to use when they are talking with 2 or more staff who are having differences.

Step 1: Sort out What Happened.

1. Describe what happened, recognizing it is your description of events not others.
 - Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? Theirs?
 - What impact has this situation had on you? What might their intentions have been?
 - What have you each contributed to the problem? This is the AND contribution rather than a blame contribution.
2. Understand **Emotions**.
 - Explore your emotional footprint, and the bundle of emotions you experience.
3. Ground Your **Identity**.
 - What does this conversation say about how competent I am?
 - What does this conversation say about who I am?
 - What does this conversation say about how likeable I am?
 - What's at stake for you *about you*? What do you need to accept about yourself to be better grounded?

Step 2: Check Your Purposes and...

...Decide Whether to Raise the Issue

1. **Purposes:** What do you hope to accomplish by having this conversation? Shift your stance to support learning, sharing, and problem-solving.
2. **Deciding:** Is this the best way to address the issue and achieve your purpose? Is the issue really embedded in your Identity Conversation? Can you affect the problem by changing your contributions? If you don't raise it, what can you do to help yourself let go?

Step 3: Start from the Third Story

1. Describe the problem as the **difference** between your stories. Include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion.
2. Share your **purposes and goals**.
3. **Invite** them to join you as a partner in sorting out the situation together.

Step 4: Explore Their Story and Yours

1. **Listen to understand** their perspective on what happened. Ask questions. Acknowledge the feelings behind the arguments and accusations. Paraphrase to see if you've got it. Try to unravel how the two of you got to this place.
2. **Share your own viewpoint**, your past experiences, intentions, feelings.
3. **Reframe, reframe, reframe** to keep on track. From truth to perceptions, blame to contribution, accusations to feelings, and so on.

Step 5: Problem-Solving

1. Invent **options** that meet each side's most important concerns and interests.
2. Look to **standards** for what *should* happen. Keep in mind the standard of mutual caretaking; relationships that always go one way rarely last.
3. Talk about how to keep **communication** open as you go forward.

See [Difficult Conversations Worksheet](#) to further examine Step 1 and Communication Skills

Stone, Douglas; Patton, Bruce; Heen, Sheila. 1999. [Difficult Conversations](#). N.Y., N.Y.: Penguin Books.