

Managing Challenging Interactions

(Adapted for the CFE Faculty Leadership Workshop Series Fall, 2011)



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Program Agenda

Objective

To provide a method for communicating in difficult situations including

- clarifying situations
- generating possibilities
- gaining commitment to action
- giving appropriate support

Activities

- Exploring a model of interaction
- Identifying the elements of an effective conversation
- Review of Effective Conversation Model
- Practice using the Conversation Guide

What is an issue or question that you would like to have addressed or answered in this program?

Effective Conversations

Have you been involved in a difficult conversation that you think was well handled?

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What was said and done in that conversation? What was the result?

<i>What was said and done</i>	<i>Results</i>

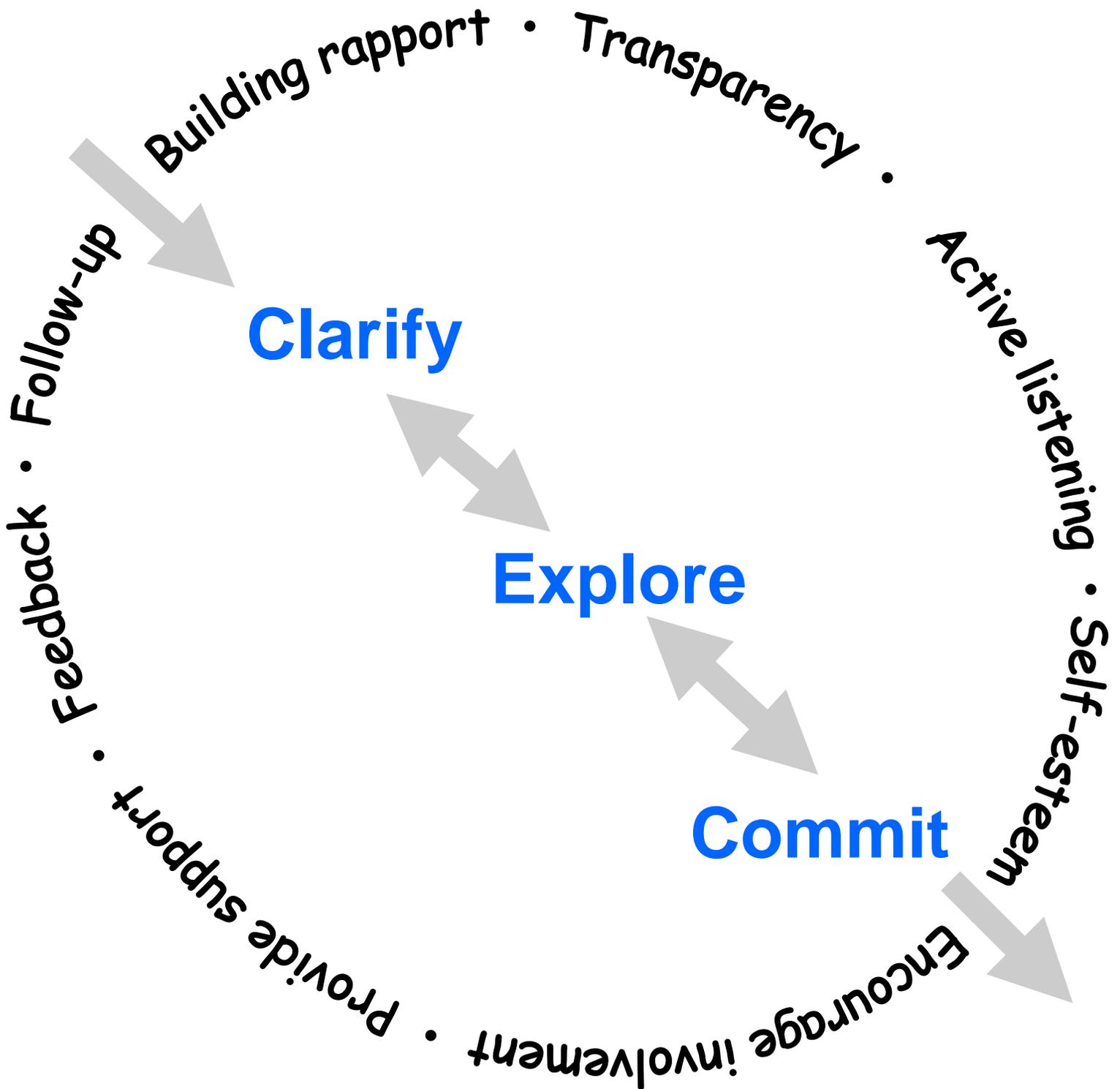
What would you consider the elements of an effective conversation held on difficult topic?

1.
2.
3.

What others were mentioned in the session?

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Effective Conversation Model



Clarify the Situation

Here are some suggestions for getting the difficult conversation started.

State the purpose of the conversation

While it may seem obvious at first, stating the purpose of the discussion is one of the most important elements of a successful conversation. Often times both parties will agree on the topic of discussion, but not be on the same page in terms of which aspects or elements of the topic are being discussed.

Identify the importance of the conversation, impact or benefits to person, team, or organization

It is also important that everyone understands the importance of the discussion. Making sure that everyone is clear on how the discussion relates to overall objectives and how the topic impacts everyone involved is a key part of getting buy-in and full participation. Stating very clearly in direct and simple language the impact of the discussion on the organization and people involved will ensure that the conversation gets off on the right foot.

Fact finding: Seek and share information about the topic of conversation

One of the most important elements of the fact finding stage is the art of asking good questions. The best questions are inviting and open-ended, seeking information and allowing the person to give a full response in their own voice.

When clarifying a situation, try not to make assumptions about the situation. Rather, invite the person to tell you as much information as they know from their perspective.

Identify issues and concerns

In any given topic of conversation, different people might have different perspectives on the topic that they have their own issues or concerns about. Be sure to ask each person involved what their concerns are. A lot of information can be gathered about the topic at hand with this simple and important step.

Clarify the Situation: Martha

Martha is an associate professor in the unit you lead. Because of the recent cutbacks she has taken on a heavier teaching load. She is a diligent and hard worker who often goes the extra mile to meet the needs of students and the department. She also leads major research study. However, there are some indications that the administrative work related to the study is not getting done. Two of the planned focus groups were not held on schedule and some people working with her on the study have mentioned that she seems stressed out, and harassed lately. You decide it would be helpful to talk with her about the situation.

What specifically do you want to discuss?

Why is it important?

What is the objective for this conversation?

How do you feel about the situation?

Explore Possibilities

Moving the conversation from being stuck to a consideration of engaging possibilities involves exploring perspectives, creating choices, and setting the conditions for engagement.

Opportunities and challenges

Because of stressful conditions, we may not see the possibilities of a situation. The “flight-fight response” that is typical in times of stress may cause us to be over-pessimistic or limited in our views. At these times it is good to have some questions ready that are likely to get the conversation beyond “the stuck place.” Examples of these questions are:

- If this were working out in an ideal way for you, what would be happening differently?
- What are the factors that are hindering you from the situation better?
- If we could change anything in the situation what might that be?
- If other people were behaving differently in the situation in order to make things better, who would be doing what?
- Are there some untapped resources you could draw on?

Idea generating: allow creativity and build commitment

We can generate more perspectives by simply asking, “What is another way of looking at this that would work for us?” We can even use metaphors or images that provide creative material for additional perspectives. If this problem were a movie what would the title be? How might we re-write the ending?

Brainstorming is another approach, e.g., let’s generate ten ideas for improving this situations without worrying about whether they are practical right away, and then look back at whether any might actually work.

Mapping is a useful technique for illuminating relationships between ideas or concerns or responsibilities. Drawing a picture of the problem sometimes produces an unexpected insight.

Eventually, the individual you are working with will need to choose a solution—one we’ve been discussing, a combination of ideas, or even an entirely new perspective that came out of the exploration. In building commitment, it is crucial that the individual feels he or she is influential in their choices.

How and when to add your own ideas

Once a person has begun to generate ideas and suggestions to solve the problem, they are beginning to be unstuck. If you are the coach or supervisor of that person, you can support promising directions by being encouraging. You can offer to help in ways that make sense given your position and theirs. However, by following their initiative you “don’t take over the problem” and assume their burden. The goal is empowerment with support. Waiting until you see the other person taking initiative before adding your ideas and suggestions is a good way to move toward this goal.

Explore Possibilities: Martha

Now that you've clarified the situation with Martha, it's time to explore possibilities.

Before you begin the conversation, what are the opportunities and challenges in this conversation or the underlying situation?

Opportunities	Challenges

During the conversation, what are some of the possible ideas, approaches, or solutions to the situation that could be generated?

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Commit to Action

What will be done

Agree on what specifically will be done. Be clear and check for understanding.

Who will do what

Agree on who will be responsible for what. Be clear about the initiative the other person will take and what, if anything, you have agreed to in support.

When it will be done

Agree on when you will next check-in to see how the follow-up is going.

Confirm how to measure progress

Seek agreement on what the best measure to use in this situation. A good question to ask in this regard, is: "If we are successful, how will we see that success. When will that show up?"

Agree to needed resources or support

Reiterate what the person can expect for you in terms of additional support in this situation. Be clear about any conditions or timing for what you are providing.

Follow up in writing

It might be useful, to confirm in a followup email what was agreed to and what is expected. Remember though, that anything you put in an email could become a public document.

Have a back up plan

It is often useful to have a back up plan if this approach does not work. This might include a check in if early results are not forthcoming, or stronger measures to solve the problem.

On the other hand, if things go well, how might you acknowledge, and reinforce problem-solving effort that took place?

Commit to Action: Martha

Now that you've clarified the situation with Martha and collaboratively explored possibilities, what actions and commitments are both of you prepared to make?

Before you begin the conversation, consider the following questions.

What hopes do I have for outcomes for this conversation?

How much flexibility do I have around these desired outcomes?

How will I know whether the person has accomplished the task or is achieving the desired results after the conversation? How will progress and success be measured?

Interpersonal Elements

The Interpersonal Elements create a supportive environment to conduct an effective conversation.

Building rapport – Make connections with the people you are in conversation with.

- Put people at ease
- Make eye contact
- Use language they can understand

Supporting self-esteem – Maintain or enhance self-esteem by putting emphasis on what the people can achieve and what skills and ability they bring to the table.

- Focus on facts
- Respect and support others
- Clarify motives

Acting with transparency - People will work harder for supervisors they trust. One of the easiest ways to build trust is to disclose information as is appropriate, to be “transparent.”

- Share the “whys” of a situation when possible
- Be honest. This will help build the trust needed for an effective conversation.
- Be clear about what you expect from the person and what you need in this situation, and why that is important

Listening for understanding – Being an active listener, engaged in hearing what is said by everyone in the conversation, will allow others to participate more fully with you in the conversation.

- Reflect what others say to let them know they are heard
- Acknowledging feelings in difficult conversations can diffuse negative emotions.
- Aim to understand and respond to both facts and feelings

Encouraging involvement – When your employees are involved in the projects of the department they will naturally feel more valued and committed. When you ask for help and allow people to be involved you show that you value their assistance and skills.

- Utilize good questions to get others ideas
- Consciously choose to get everyone involved
- Encourage responsibility through involvement

Providing support – Supporting the work others do *without removing responsibility* will help build ownership and commitment.

- Help others explore ideas, commit to tasks and complete projects
- Be aware of the “taking over” trap. Offer support and then allow the responsibility to stay with the other.

Following up – Make the time to loop back with your people following your conversation. This keeps the conversation and the forward movement ongoing. Waiting until there is a difficult issue to discuss can make for more challenging work relationships.

- Set a time for a follow-up meeting.
- Make an informal drop-in to make sure there is no confusion about tasks and that folks are receiving the support they need.
- Have regularly scheduled meeting times to keep the conversation going.

Providing feedback – Giving timely, specific, and balanced feedback offers growth and management opportunities. See **Providing Feedback** in a separate section below.

Without effective communication,

- assumptions replace facts
- confusion replaces clarity
- difficulties grow into crises
- trust and commitment are abstract values rather than realities

During interactions, people want to feel appreciated, listened to, understood, and involved. They want to know that you are open and honest with them and will support their efforts.

Addressing Dysfunctional Behavior

Approach privately. If at all possible, speak confidentially. Ask the employee to meet privately where you can both feel safe talking openly and honestly.

Empathize with the symptoms. Acknowledge that the employee is having a difficult time without undermining the need and importance of holding a challenging conversation. Clearly and factually name the behaviors you observe.

Address the root cause. Be persistent in searching for the fundamental issue; otherwise, the dysfunctional behavior will keep recurring.

Get agreement on a solution. Ask the employee to explicitly state what he/she understands and is willing to take responsibility for. Be sure to document the conversation accurately for future reference.

Four Case Studies

A. A senior member of the department is a strong researcher and effective teacher, however he tends to be overbearing in his interactions with colleagues and overly contentious in staff meetings. This behavior has gotten worse lately and several faculty members have asked you, as the incoming chair, to reign him in. You agree and you decide to have a meeting with him.

B. You think the best way to cut your budget as required this year is to eliminate the highest paid, longest serving SPA employee in your Center. Her pay is \$65,000 and with benefits this would give you a savings of almost \$80,000 on your next FY budget. In order to lay her off you would have to eliminate her supervisory job altogether and reassign his two direct reports to other managers. You would lose the position permanently but you have decided this is the best thing to do in this crunch time. General Counsel's office and OHR say you can do this. Now you have to inform her of your decision. You are not looking forward to this but you must do it soon.

C. The new postdoc in your lab seems to have the skills to be successful, but he has difficulty arriving and completing tasks on time. This is his first post doc. You wonder if he has a unrealistic view of the record of publication and the work ethic it will take to get a good position when the postdoc concludes two years from now.

D. You have been department chair for a year and a half, and for the first year your department manager was effective and efficient, if sometimes curt with faculty and students. Now you have had some complaints that faculty reimbursement checks are slow and you have noticed that she is coming in late and leaving early with no explanation. What else might be going unattended? It is unfortunate that an apparently good employee is now underperforming. How to talk with her about it?

What questions would you ask to **clarify** the situation?

What opportunities and challenges might be present?

What possibilities could you **explore**?

Given the possibilities that you generate, what actions and **commitments** could you expect?

What Interpersonal Elements might be relevant in your case?

Conversation Guide - *Example*

Clarify the Situation

What do I want to discuss?

Why is it important?

What is the objective for this conversation?

How am I feeling about the situation?

Explore Possibilities

What are the opportunities/challenges in this conversation or the underlying situation?

Opportunities	Challenges
•	•

Conversation Guide page 2 - *Example*

Commit to Action

What hopes do I have for outcomes for this conversation?

How much flexibility do I have around these desired outcomes?

How will I know whether the person/team has accomplished the task or is achieving the desired results after the discussion? How will progress and success be measured?

Interpersonal Elements

What do I know about the person I will be working with? What behaviors or characteristics of this person have I observed that might have bearing on this conversation?

What might be the best use of their particular strengths?

How can I best encourage the initiative of this person?

Conversation Guide

Clarify the Situation

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Why is it important?

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Appendix: Effective Feedback

Effective Feedback is...		
Specific	Timely	Balanced

Specific: When providing feedback, focus on the facts of what happened. Be able to state specifically **what** the person did, **how** the results were achieved (or not achieved), and **why** this is important.

If the feedback regards performance improvement, have specific examples of how the task could have been handled differently and what the desired outcome of the situation would be.

Timely: Try to provide feedback as close to the event as possible, without putting someone on the spot or giving corrective feedback in a public setting.

Balanced: It is just as important to provide positive feedback as it is to provide feedback for improvement. *Reinforcement* feedback encourages desired behaviors and is motivational.

Improvement feedback helps the person understand exactly what is expected, how the expectation was not achieved, and what they can do differently in the future.

When giving feedback in a specific situation, be clear about what kind of feedback is given and give *only* that feedback. Avoid lumping different kinds of feedback together at one time, which can be confusing. Is your intention the growth and improvement of the individual and their performance? If not, you might want to rethink why you are providing feedback in the first place.

When giving feedback during formal performance reviews, find both positive examples of behavior and performance that could be improved upon. Taking care to acknowledge the complexities of work helps the feedback sound well thought out and fair.

Consider the person who is receiving your feedback. Is this a person who is quite sensitive to negative feedback? How does this a person tend to hear feedback in general? Try to offer feedback in a way that the receiver is able to hear.

When you receive feedback, listen for trends in what you hear. If you hear the same message from different folks in a variety of ways, it might be a good place to focus your performance improvement efforts.