

Clemson University Ombuds Office

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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"I can't move on until this is addressed."

STEP 1: Examine your motives.

Why are you having this conversation? What do you want to accomplish? Could your goals be met any other way? Be prepared to share your motives with the other person.



STEP 2: Prepare for the conversation.

- List all your concerns, and then organize them into what you should share, what you should save for later, and what you should keep to yourself.
- Make it a learning conversation. Move from message delivery to sharing information and asking questions to learn. Move from "I already understand" to "Help me understand."
- Adopt the "And Stance." Both our stories can make sense at the same time. Understanding someone else's story doesn't mean giving up our own.
- Separate the intentions behind their words and actions from the impact those words and actions had on you. Ask about what you don't know.
- Imagine how they will respond to each point. Roleplay if possible.

STEP 3: Separate the three different conversations.

- The What Happened Conversation:** What happened here? How do you interpret it? What did you intend? What impact did their words and actions have on you?
- The Feelings Conversation:** How do you feel about this? What needs are behind those feelings?
- The Identity Conversation:** What does this situation say about you? How has your identity been threatened?
- Map what you know and what you don't:

Conversation	What you know (and can share)	What you don't know (and can ask about)
What Happened		
Feelings		
Identity		

You might not talk about all three conversations, but it is helpful to think through what is going on in all three dimensions.

STEP 4: Start the conversation and reduce defensiveness.

- Verbalize your goals for the meeting at the beginning. If things go off track, remind them of your goals.
- Invite them into a dialogue. Let them know you want to hear their perspective.
- If you want them to be honest with you, be honest first.
- Validate what you hear. You don't have to agree, but show them you hear them and are taking them seriously. *"I'm hearing you say..." "From your perspective..."*
- Reframe everything from me v. you to us. v. the problem: *"How can we work together to improve this?"*
- Use neutral language and the passive voice: *"I'm struggling with..." I feel disrespected..."*
- If they start to get defensive, call it out: *"I can hear you defending yourself, and I want to remind you that I am not trying to attack you. My goal is to figure out how we can work together..."*

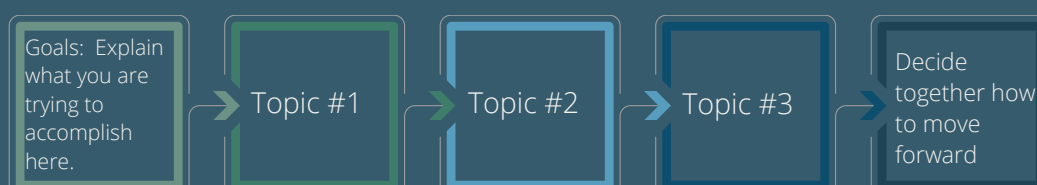
STEP 5: Make a request

- When a, I feel b, because I need c; therefore, I am requesting d. (a. Observation, b. Feeling, c. Need, d. Request.)
- NOT: "You are always late. You need to show up to our meetings on time."
- Better: "When you were late to our last three meetings, I felt frustrated because I need to be efficient with my time. Therefore, I request that you prioritize being on time to our meetings in the future."
- Ask what they need from you.

STEP 6: Come to a resolution

- Determine where to go from here. *Despite everything that happened, how can we move forward?*
- Avoid having the same conversation in the future. *How can we prevent this from happening again?*
- Develop some shared expectations. *What can you expect from me? What can I expect from you?*
- Hold each other accountable. Schedule a follow up meeting to check in about what you have discussed and what you have asked of each other.

Model for the Conversation



For each topic:

- Share examples
- Express your perspective.
- Ask about their perspective.
- Make a request or express an idea about how to move forward.
- Ask if they have any requests of you.