

**DIFFICULT
CONVERSATIONS
An Online Seminar**

**for
Capilano University**

**Prepared by
Naya Kee**

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Table of Contents

1. OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES.....	4
2. WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?.....	4
3. THE THREE CONVERSATIONS MODEL	5
a. The Basic Shift	5
b. The "What Happened" Conversation.....	7
c. The Feelings Conversation.....	9
d. The Identity Conversation.....	10
e. Prepare for the Difficult Conversation	12
4. RAISING ISSUES	13
5. ACTIVE LISTENING	14
6. CHECK INTERPRETATIONS.....	15
7. RESHAPE THE STORY	15
8. EVERYDAY CASE STUDIES	16
a. Responding to a co-worker's negative feedback.....	16
b. Gossip	16
c. Making amends.....	17
9. CASE STUDIES FOR COORDINATORS	18
a. Interpersonal conflicts among instructors.....	18
b. Student complaints	18
c. Staff performance issues	19
10. CASE STUDIES FOR MANAGERS	20
a. Staff Discontent	20
b. Between equals.....	20
c. Managing the Managers.....	21
11. CASE STUDIES FOR SUPERVISORS	22
Interpersonal conflicts among staff.....	22
i. First steps	22

ii. Performance issues.....	22
iii. Bringing them together	22
12. SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS	23
a. Why We Each See the World Differently.....	23
b. Handling Feelings So We Can Express, Not Vent, Them.....	24
c. Everyday Case Studies - Responses.....	25
i. Responding to a co-worker's negative feedback.....	25
ii. Gossip.....	26
iii. Making amends.....	28

1. OVERVIEW AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This online seminar offers perspectives primarily from the groundbreaking Harvard Negotiation Project book, *Difficult Conversations*, Stone et al, a succinct, profound and helpful resource.

You will learn:

- a. the "Three Conversations" and how this framework can inform your preparation for, and conduct of, any difficult conversation;
- b. five key skills to use in the difficult conversation;
- c. applications of this framework and these skills to typical workplace scenarios as well as situations handled by faculty coordinators, staff supervisors and managers.

This seminar has been presented numerous times to numerous groups. For those unable to attend a seminar, or those who want a refresher, we have prepared this online version.

Read through the materials. We have inserted several exercises and asked probing questions. There are [links](#) to additional materials. Be sure you reference the [links](#).

At the end you will find case studies and an opportunity to apply what you have learnt.

Enjoy!

2. WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

A difficult conversation is any conversation that we are anxious about having.



Raising sensitive issues with a colleague or supervisee, giving critical

feedback to an administrator, hearing negative comments about your work, asking for help. We find these conversations difficult because:

- painful feelings are at play: frustration, hurt, anger, anxiety;
- how we feel about ourselves is at stake: our self-worth, competence;
- how others see us is often an issue: have I embarrassed myself? will I come out of this looking like an idiot?
- fears about the future come up: will I make it worse? will I be able to work with this person again? what effect will this have on my career? my livelihood?
- the policy, procedural, role context can be complex.

A situation that is difficult for one person may be easy for another and visa-versa.

3. THE THREE CONVERSATIONS MODEL

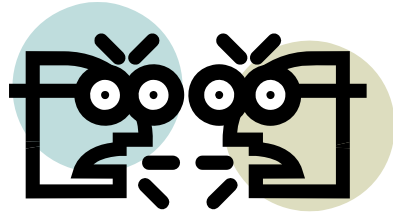
a. *The Basic Shift*

Navigating with skill through a difficult conversation first requires, for most of us, a basic shift in our mindset. The *Three Conversations Model* pinpoints the mindset (the goals and assumptions) that leads us to the behaviour that results in a *Battle of Messages*. We will explain the differences between the *Battle of Messages* and the *Learning Conversation*.

The Battle of Messages

When we're anxious about an approaching conversation we often think we know all we need to know about the situation. We want to get the other person to admit we're right and agree to our solution. What usually results is a *Battle of Messages*. The other person is not so quick to agree. They have their own point of view and desired outcome and proceed to counter ours with theirs, much to our frustration. The content of the interaction becomes:

"I'm right." "I'm right." "I'm right." "I'm right."



The prospect of resolution recedes ever further as frustration builds and each person becomes more convinced of the other's lack of interest and understanding.

A Learning Conversation

In a *Learning Conversation* curiosity is key. We realize that the other has a perspective that we don't fully know or understand, that we can't read their mind, that to be viable the outcome must involve a dialogue and emerge from understanding rather than capitulation or domination.

A *Learning Conversation* does not mean giving up your point of view, it means that yours is as important as theirs, and visa-versa. Even when you're giving bad news and there is no room for negotiation, you can be curious about and understanding of the other's perspective.

The ability to have a *Learning Conversation* develops as we integrate the mindset in the *Three Conversations* model that follows.

Sorting Out the Three Conversations

A helpful way to understand what is going on in a difficult conversation is to divide it into three parts:

- The "What Happened" Conversation
- The Feelings Conversation
- The Identity Conversation

b. The "What Happened" Conversation

This conversation has three parts:

- The **Truth** of what happened
- The **Intentions** of the people involved
- **Who is Responsible** for the situation



The inherent challenge of the "What Happened" Conversation is that the situation is more complex than *either* person can see. See [Why We Each See the World Differently](#) for further discussion.

THE "WHAT HAPPENED" CONVERSATION

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p>Truth Assumption: I know all I need to know to understand what happened.</p> <p>Goal: Persuade them I'm right.</p>	<p>Assumption: Each of us is bringing different information and perceptions to the table; there are likely to be important things that each of us doesn't know.</p> <p>Goal: Explore each other's stories: how we understand the situation and why.</p>
<p>Intentions Assumption: I know what they intended.</p> <p>Goal: Let them know what they did was wrong.</p>	<p>Assumption: I know what I intended, and the impact their actions had on me. I don't and I can't know what's in their head.</p> <p>Goal: Share the impact on me, and find out what they were thinking. Also find out what impact I'm having on them.</p>
<p>Blame Assumption: It's all their fault. (Or it's all my fault.)</p> <p>Goal: Get them to admit blame and take responsibility for making amends. (Or take all the responsibility and move on quickly.)</p>	<p>Assumption: We have probably <i>both</i> contributed to this mess.</p> <p>Goal: Understand the contribution system: how our actions interact to produce this result.</p>

From Difficult Conversations, Stone et al.

EXERCISE:

Study the chart above then answer these questions:

1. How do I treat people when I enter a conversation with the goals and assumptions set out under *A Battle of Messages*?
2. How do I react when I am treated this way?

3. What would my behaviour be if I were able to shift to the assumptions and goals of the *Learning Conversation*?
4. How might my results change?

c. *The Feelings Conversation*

The challenge here is that the situation is emotionally charged.



If feelings are not expressed, they have a way of leaking, or even exploding, into the conversation. It is often hard to listen when we have not yet expressed our feelings. The drawbacks of avoiding feelings are inevitable. The drawbacks of sharing them can be much reduced by the skills and approaches set out in [Handling Feelings So We Can Express, Not Vent, Them.](#)

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p>Assumption: Feelings are irrelevant and wouldn't be helpful to share. (Or, my feelings are their fault and they need to hear about them.)</p> <p>Goal: Avoid talking about feelings. (Or, let 'em have it!)</p>	<p>Assumption: Feelings are the heart of the situation. Feelings are usually complex. I may have to dig a bit to understand my feelings.</p> <p>Goal: Address feelings (mine and theirs) without judging, blaming or attributing negative intention. Acknowledge feelings before problem-solving.</p>

From *Difficult Conversations*, Stone et al.

If you find yourself more on the *Battle* than the *Conversation* side when it comes to how you feel, you can negotiate with your feelings to open up your perspective by answering the questions in [Prepare for the Difficult Conversation](#), below.

d. The Identity Conversation

This is the most subtle level of the difficult conversation. There is no need to verbalize this process; it is a conversation we have with ourselves about what the conversation means to our sense of self.



The challenge here is that difficult conversations often threaten our identity. It is not unusual to have a fragile, all-or-nothing sense of self where we see ourselves as either all good or all bad, totally competent or incompetent, loveable or unloveable. This plays out in difficult conversations in many ways. For example, accepting negative feedback with good grace or curiosity is impossible if acknowledging any limitation or mistake flips us into feeling terrible about ourselves. We dread any conversation in which negative remarks may be made about us. Virtually all difficult conversations come with this risk.

Conversely, we may be the ones who need to pass on some constructive criticism. An all-or-nothing self-image may constrain us here as well, as hurting someone else's feelings in any context may undermine our sense of being a good person and flip us into judging ourselves as cold and heartless.

Growing out of an all-or-nothing self-image is a matter of developing a balanced, realistic perspective on who we are. An important attribute to

bring to any difficult conversation is an understanding and genuine acceptance of our limitations.

The Identity Conversation

A Battle of Messages	A Learning Conversation
<p>Assumption: I'm competent or incompetent, good or bad, lovable or unlovable. There is no in-between.</p> <p>Goal: Preserve my all-or-nothing self-image.</p>	<p>Assumption: There may be a lot at stake psychologically for both of us. Each of us is complex, neither of us is perfect.</p> <p>Goal: Understand the identity issues on the line for each of us. Build a more complex self-image to maintain my balance better.</p>

From *Difficult Conversations*, Stone et al.

EXERCISE:

Questions to contemplate:

- How do I react to critical feedback? Do I get angry or frustrated? Hurt? Fearful? Frozen? Avoidant? Curious? Does the source, tone, context, or content affect my reaction? How? What identity issues might be activated here?
- How do I feel about giving critical feedback? Fearful? Reluctant? Vacillating and uncertain? Calm? Confident? What identity issues might be activated here?

e. Prepare for the Difficult Conversation

Use the *Three Conversations* charts to both prepare for the difficult conversation and as a guide to the content of the difficult conversation.

Considering the following questions before the conversation will stimulate your curiosity, invite insight, and encourage a shift from the assumptions and goals of the *Battle of Messages* to the mindset of the *Learning Conversation*.



Multiple Stories

- What's my story?
- What's my story missing?
- What do I think their story is?

Impact/Intent

- What were my intentions?
- What was the impact of their behaviour on me?
- My guess about their intentions?
- Might the other person have acted unintentionally or from multiple and conflicting intentions?
- My guess about the impact of my behaviour on them?
- Does any of this shift how I feel?

Contribution

- What did I contribute to the problem?
- What did they contribute?

Feelings

- What feelings underlie my judgments?
- What might they be feeling?

Identity

- How does this situation threaten my identity?

4. RAISING ISSUES

How you raise an issue can set off a *Battle* or initiate a *Learning Conversation*. This template (often referred to as assertiveness) shows how we can skilfully set the stage for the latter.

- **TIME, PLACE, TONE:** private, sitting down, ample time, amicable.

Jon, do you have a couple of minutes? I'd like to talk to you about something. Let's take a coffee into my office.

- **THIRD STORY:** name or describe the topic/situation as an impartial, third person would.

I want to discuss how our morning office routines have been going lately.

- **INVITE TO PROBLEM-SOLVE:**

I want to let you know how I see it and hear from you too. Then let's see where we can go from there.

- **OBSERVATIONS:** describe the behaviour/situation concretely and specifically, without blaming or negative judgment.

I noticed that you came in about 15 minutes late for work three times last week.

- **IMPACT:** describe the impact this behaviour/situation has had on you/others and the reasons for the impact. This may (and usually should) include feelings.

When you do that, it means that Jane has to answer the phones and deal with students at the same time and in one way or another we all get behind. We're all getting frustrated.

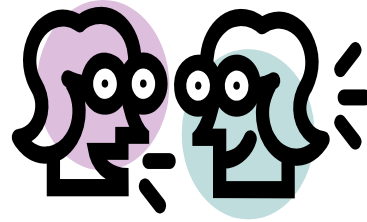
- **ASK OPEN QUESTIONS:**

What's your perspective on this?

OR IN VERY SIMPLE MATTERS, MAKE A SPECIFIC, CONCRETE REQUEST

5. ACTIVE LISTENING

- PARTICULARLY WHEN
RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE
FEEDBACK



The key goal of this skill is to communicate an open, curious, non-judging, caring mindset, the mindset of the *Learning Conversation*.

➤ **ACKNOWLEDGE CONTENT BY PARAPHRASING THEIR MESSAGE**

I want to make sure I understand. You ...

➤ **ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS - SHOW YOU UNDERSTAND**

I can see that this has been frustrating for you.

➤ **ASK OPEN QUESTIONS**

What else would you like me to know about this?

How did that impact you?

How did you feel about that?

What was your intention there?

➤ **ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR LIMITATIONS AND ACTIONS**

➤ **APOLOGIZE IF APPROPRIATE**

➤ **COMMIT TO CHANGE IF APPROPRIATE**

EXERCISE:

Imagine how you would react if someone to whom you had just given some negative feedback responded in this way.

Questions to contemplate:

- What would you conclude about their level of maturity?
- What would you conclude about their willingness and ability to understand the problem and work to improve?
- How would you feel about your ongoing working relationship?

6. CHECK INTERPRETATIONS

Underlying this skill is a key element of the mindset of the *Learning Conversation* that our interpretations of events, actions and even words may not be what the other intended by them (see [Why We Each See the World Differently](#)). Rather than taking our interpretations of another's actions or statements as the final word on the subject, we check them out with the other.

- **OBSERVATION:** *I noticed that you haven't been saying much in the meetings lately*
- **INTERPRETATION:** *So I thought that maybe you weren't happy with something that was going on.*
- **OPEN QUESTION:** *How are the meetings going for you?*

7. RESHAPE THE STORY

Our "story" is how we see the situation. In difficult situations, the story often takes the shape of victim-perpetrator-rescuer. Helping someone reshape their story can shift them from this limiting script, the script that underlies the **Battle of Messages** (*I'm right and good. You're wrong and bad. Things have to change the way I want them to.*)



- **HELP PEOPLE TO EXPAND THEIR STORY** to include other perspectives, e.g., what they think others might be thinking/feeling, what they might have contributed to the situation, and what their story might be missing?
- **PROBE FOR AND REINFORCE COUNTER-EXAMPLES:**
 - times when the current difficulties did not and do not dominate the situation;
 - things they appreciate about each other/the situation.

- **PROBE FOR RESOURCES:** Ask what has helped them most to handle this situation.
- **REFRAME DISCONTENT AND COMPLAINTS AS DESIRE FOR IMPROVEMENT:** For example, when someone says *I am totally fed up with all the noise in the front office*, you reframe and say, *You'd like more peace and quiet*. The focus shifts from the past and complaining to the future and problem-solving.

8. EVERYDAY CASE STUDIES

a. Responding to a co-worker's negative feedback

You and Jane work together in the front office of a busy division. She takes you aside and asks if you have a few minutes to talk to her privately about something. You agree. The two of you go into a private area and sit down. She shares that she is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with your attacking and griping about the other people you work with. In fact, she finds it upsetting and unethical. She admits that she has been putting distance between you to avoid her discomfort. She would like to work things out as she values a relaxed working environment.

- What are some reactions you might have (assumptions, goals) that would create behaviour that would lead to a *Battle of Messages*?
- What sorts of questions might you ask that would help bring about a *Learning Conversation*?

[Link to suggestions from the author](#)

b. Gossip



You have heard through a friend on faculty that another instructor has been asking some faculty and students what they think of your work. You and this instructor have not had a particularly warm relationship. You are not aware of anything specific that she might be concerned about. While you are a union member and have been at the University for many years, you feel threatened by this reported behaviour and would like to get to the bottom of it.

- How might you skilfully raise this issue with the instructor? Try writing a script for this following the *Raising Issues* template.
- How might you go about managing your feelings ahead of the meeting?

[Link to suggestions from the author](#)

c. Making amends

The other day Frieda had simply had enough of the irritating communication style of her co-worker, Fred. They work in the same office area so they are exposed to each others' conversations on a regular basis. From Frieda's perspective Fred is uncooperative, argumentative and negative. In department meetings Frieda has let everyone know that she doesn't like this type of communication but her experience is that Fred eventually starts up again. This time, Frieda raised her voice to Fred and let him have it.

Even an issue that Frieda had said a year ago had been resolved to her satisfaction came out as a grievance. It's a few weeks later and the two of them have only spoken when they could absolutely not avoid it. Frieda knows in her heart that nothing will shift unless she tries to make amends, but she hasn't brought herself to break the ice. In the meantime, they are both more or less miserable at work.

- What are some thoughts and beliefs that might be holding Frieda back?
- What is Frieda's story missing?
- Write Frieda a script using the Raising Issues Skill.

[Link to suggestions from the author](#)

9. CASE STUDIES FOR COORDINATORS

a. Interpersonal conflicts among instructors

You have received an email from Nora, one of the instructors in your department, asking you to speak with Allan, also a colleague in your department, and tell him to stop being so disrespectful and rude to the newer members of the faculty. Nora uses the terms “bullying” and “hostile environment” to describe the situation. You are aware of some ill-humour in Allan’s behaviour, particularly towards less assertive faculty members, but this is how he has behaved for 10 years and he has a loveable side too. He is also an excellent and dedicated teacher. Part of you is sympathetic to Nora and other faculty and part of you thinks they should be able to defend themselves. You stood up to him very emphatically years ago when he went after you and he backed off.

- Assuming that you would first meet with Nora face to face, what sort of questions would you ask? What would you encourage her to do?
- If Nora declines to meet with Allen, what are some of your options for further action?

See the options arrived at from the [Difficult Conversations for Coordinators Seminar I held in February 2007](#) (HR website).

b. Student complaints



Four students who you have taught before come to you and tell you that their instructor, Rex, a colleague in the department you coordinate, regularly uses sarcasm and ridicule towards students. They give you several recent specific examples. All say that they feel discouraged and intimidated and that they are afraid to raise this directly with the instructor for fear of a negative impact on their marks.

- What would you do in this situation?
- If the instructor totally denied all the students' accounts, what are your options?

See the options arrived at from the [Difficult Conversations for Coordinators Seminar I held in February 2007](#). (HR website)

c. Staff performance issues

Estelle, a staff person for your department, tends to engage faculty and other staff in personal chat at her desk on a regular basis. It is not unusual for students and even faculty to wait up to three minutes to get her attention. When she does focus on responding to requests and inquiries, she is excellent. In addition, she needs to be closely supervised on moderately complex tasks otherwise she loses track and misses steps. You would like to see improvement. Your predecessors did not take any action over the 4 years that Estelle has been in the position.

- What would you do in this situation?

See the options arrived at from the [Difficult Conversations for Coordinators Seminar I held in February 2007](#). (HR website)

10. CASE STUDIES FOR MANAGERS

a. Staff Discontent



Your observation is that Sandra is a good worker and always finishes her tasks, but she arrives late because she frequently has difficulty with her childcare arrangements and when she goes on breaks she often takes extra time because she is a smoker. Other staff in the office have told you that they feel Sandra is a favourite. Even though she is the most productive staff member in your view, her lateness and long breaks are creating resentment and an "if she does it so can I" atmosphere in the department.

- As the manager of this area, how would you handle your first conversation with Sandra about these issues?

b. Between equals

You have had several heated disagreements in meetings with Myra, a colleague and peer, over issues you both care a great deal about. It's gotten to the point where you expect things to get positional and confrontational with her and, somehow, they are getting there faster these days. It is not uncommon for both of you to use words like "ridiculous", "out of line", and "fanciful" when describing each other's contributions to discussion and to go on at length to oppose and discredit each others' point of view. You find yourself mentally replaying the debate on your drive home and thinking up even better arguments to meet her points. Your social contact is not as relaxed as it once was.

While you can hold your own in a discussion and generally enjoy debate, you're beginning to wonder if this dynamic between you and Myra is turning into a chronic stress for everyone involved, particularly the others at these meetings. You see that what may have been a useful airing of diverse

perspectives has become rancorous and personal for you and you would like to talk to Myra as a start at turning this dynamic around.

- How would you prepare for this conversation?
- How would you handle it?

c. Managing the Managers



One of your "sub-managers" (supervisors, coordinators, division chairs) has come to you at their wits' end. There are two people in their area of responsibility that are in conflict--again. Over the two years that there have been periodic eruptions he has tried several things, including:

- Listening to the individuals when they come in with complaints about the other and giving them advice on how to handle the situation on their own.
- Holding a business meeting with agenda items that are concrete and lend themselves to problem-solving so that the antagonists get a taste of cooperation and normalcy.
- Staying positive, not playing favourites and maintaining "business as usual".

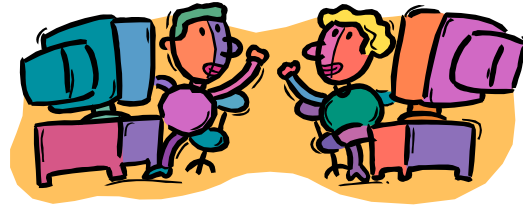
None of these strategies has made a fundamental difference. In a couple of months someone is back in his office with another story of disapproval of and frustration with their colleague.

As you talk, it becomes clear that the two people vary considerably in their values and beliefs around work and communication.

- What other suggestions do you have for this manager?

11. CASE STUDIES FOR SUPERVISORS

Interpersonal conflicts among staff



i. First steps

You have received an email from Nora, one of your supervisees, asking you to speak with Jim, a co-worker and also your supervisee whose desk is about eight feet from hers. She reports that Jim is disrespectful and rude to students and faculty. She is also being driven crazy by Jim's loud voice. You have observed that when Jim is busy with a task and is interrupted by a request from faculty or students, he can be abrupt and impatient. He is certainly louder and more exuberant than Nora.

- What, in general terms, are your desired outcomes?
- What are your options?
- What would you do first?
- If you decide to do a meeting first: who should be there? How would you handle it? What skills would you need to use?

ii. Performance issues

You believe that it is your responsibility as supervisor to give Jim guidance based on your observations of his problematic job performance.

- How would you handle your first one-on-one meeting with him? What skills would you need to use?

iii. Bringing them together

You're not sure if you should bring them together after you have communicated with Jim about the performance issues.

- What are your fears about doing so?
- What is likely to happen if you don't?
- What are the potential benefits of bringing them together?
- How would you handle such a meeting?
- How would you follow up? What would you do if a flare-up happened a few months later?

12. SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

a. *Why We Each See the World Differently*

[Notes from Difficult Conversations, pp 32-43]

We each have different information because:

- we notice different things based on who we are and what we care about, e.g., kid and dad at parade, for the boy it was a parade of trucks, for dad, the majorettes made the biggest impact
- we each know ourselves better than anyone else can - we know our internal experience, we know the details of our experience - the other cannot possibly have access to all the information that is important and known to us about the situation

We have different interpretations of the same information

- we are influenced by our unique past experiences—for example, a wife whose family of origin would collapse into chaos when feelings were discussed wants to avoid such discussions with her new husband as she interprets them as crises. He, on the contrary, comes from a family where feelings were shared in a caring way and interprets them as occasions for positive intimacy.
- we apply different implicit rules—for example, watching TV for 2 hours a day may seem like “very little” to one person and “way too much” to another.
- our conclusions reflect self-interest - for example, a business school study on business evaluation found that the sellers valued it at $x + 30\%$, the buyers at $x - 30\%$ and the independent evaluators at x .

b. Handling Feelings So We Can Express, Not Vent, Them

[Notes from Difficult Conversations, pp.91-107]

Too often we confuse being emotional with expressing emotion clearly. They are different. You can express emotion well without being emotional, and you can be extremely emotional without expressing much of anything at all. Sharing feelings well and clearly requires thoughtfulness (p.102).



i. Find your feelings

Explore your emotional map. Which feelings do you believe are OK to have and express, which are not? e.g., anger is OK, gratitude is not OK.

- accept that feelings are normal and natural
- recognize that good people can have bad feelings
- learn that your feelings are as important as theirs
- find the bundle of feelings behind the simple labels
- find the feelings lurking under attributions of intentions, judgments and accusations

ii. Negotiate with your feelings: by going over [Prepare for the Difficult Conversation](#).

iii. Don't Vent - Describe Feelings Carefully

- **frame feelings back into the problem**---if feelings are the real issue, then you need to address them - they don't need to be rational to be expressed - can preface by saying that you're not sure they make sense
- **express the full spectrum of your feelings**
- **don't evaluate - just share** - express feelings without attributing intention, judging or blaming
- **don't monopolize**, both can have strong feelings at the same time
- **say 'I feel'**

iv. The importance of acknowledgment

- **convey** that what they have said has made an impression on you, that their feelings matter to you and that you're working to understand them
- **avoid** the short circuit "You're right. What can I say?"

c. *Everyday Case Studies - Responses*

i. Responding to a co-worker's negative feedback

You and Jane work together in the front office of a busy division. She takes you aside and asks if you have a few minutes to talk to her privately about something. You agree. The two of you go into a private area and sit down. She shares that she is becoming increasingly uncomfortable with your attacking and griping about the other people you work with. In fact, she finds it upsetting and unethical. She admits that she has been putting distance between you to avoid her discomfort. She would like to work things out as she values a relaxed working environment.

- **What are some reactions you might have (assumptions, goals) that would create behaviour that would lead to a *Battle of Messages*?**

Assumptions that will create behaviour that will lead to a *Battle of Messages* include:

- I feel hurt, therefore she meant to hurt me. That makes her an unkind and untrustworthy person.
- I feel angry, therefore she meant to make me angry. That makes her a nasty and untrustworthy person.
- I feel under pressure, therefore she is trying to control me. That makes her a domineering and untrustworthy person.

Goals that will create behaviour that would lead to a *Battle of Messages* include:

- I need to persuade her that my behaviour is fine, justifiable and right and does not need to change.
 - I need her to see that she has misjudged me.
 - I need her to hear about the things she does that I don't like before I will be willing to discuss this any further.
 - I will listen to her complaints, agree to whatever she wants and get away as quickly as possible.
- **What sorts of questions might you ask that would help bring about a *Learning Conversation*?**
- I want to make sure that I really understand you here. It's pretty clear you are experiencing my behaviour as attacking and complaining. Could you give me some examples?
 - Can you tell me anything more about that?
 - I understand that you have been avoiding me because of your discomfort around this. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about how you've been feeling?
 - I'd like to share my perspective on this situation. How would it be for me to respond at this point?

ii. **Gossip**



You have heard through a friend on faculty that another instructor has been asking some faculty and students what they think of your work. You and this instructor have not had a particularly warm relationship. You are not aware of anything specific that she might be concerned about. While you are a union member and have been at the University for many years, you feel threatened by this reported behaviour and would like to get to the bottom of it.

- **How might you skilfully raise this issue with Ralph? Try writing a script for this following the *Raising Issues* template.**

TIME, PLACE, TONE: *Ralph, do you have some time we could sit down together? I'd like to talk to you about something. It shouldn't take more than 15 minutes. [The two of you make a plan to meet in private for at least 15 minutes.] At the meeting:*

THIRD STORY: *I want to check in with you about something troubling I have heard.*

INVITE TO PROBLEM-SOLVE: *I want to hear your perspective and share mine and then let's see where we can go from there.*

OBSERVATIONS: *Madge told me that you had come to her last week asking about her impressions of my work performance. She also said she thought you might have been asking around to other people.*

IMPACT: *As you can imagine, this is troubling to me.*

ASK OPEN QUESTIONS: *I am, of course, wondering what your intentions are here and what has been going on?*

➤ **How might you go about managing your feelings ahead of the meeting?**

Going over the [Prepare for the Difficult Conversation](#) questions will help you defuse any feelings of anger, fear, betrayal, or hurt as it will surface the fact that you have only a tiny amount of information and the thoughts that are inspiring the feelings are at this point only suppositions and assumptions.

It's always helpful when preparing for a difficult conversation to think of at least three things you like and appreciate about the person you will be meeting with. This can temper your feelings of dislike and fear.

iii. Making amends

The other day Frieda had simply had enough of the irritating communication style of her co-worker, Fred. They work in the same office area so they are exposed to each others' conversations on a regular basis. From Frieda's perspective Fred is uncooperative, argumentative and negative. In department meetings Frieda has let everyone know that she doesn't like this type of communication but her experience is that Fred eventually starts up again. This time, Frieda raised her voice to Fred and let him have it. Even an issue that Frieda had said a year ago had been resolved to her satisfaction came out as a grievance. Its a few weeks later and the two of them have only spoken when they could absolutely not avoid it. Frieda knows in her heart that nothing will shift unless she tries to make amends, but she hasn't brought herself to break the ice. In the meantime, they are both more or less miserable at work.

➤ What are some thoughts and beliefs that might be holding Frieda back?

- Fred deserved it. He knows that kind of thing drives me nuts!
- It wasn't so bad. I've seen worse.
- I'm glad Fred is being so silent. It's finally peaceful around here.
- I don't know what to say.
- It's better to just let it blow over.
- He'll get over it.
- I'm afraid that he'd just blast me back.
- I can't admit I made a hurtful mistake because that would be admitting that I am a bad person—and I'm not!

➤ What is Frieda's story missing?

- The impact of her behaviour on Fred.
- Fred's intentions and point of view re his communication style.
- Her responsibility for her own behaviour, no matter how Fred has behaved.
- Her contribution to the current tense office environment.

➤ **Write Frieda a script using the *Raising Issues* skill.**

TIME, PLACE, TONE: *Fred, do you have some time we could sit down together in private? [Make a plan to meet in private for at least 15 minutes.] At the meeting:*

THIRD STORY: *I want to talk to you about my behaviour a couple of weeks ago.*

INVITE TO PROBLEM-SOLVE: *I want to clear the air and also hear your perspective and hopefully our work-life can start to improve from there.*

OBSERVATIONS: *I know I really came down hard on you that day. I raised my voice and even brought up an issue that when I'm not so triggered I know was resolved a long time ago for me. My behaviour was out of line and I regret it.*

IMPACT: *I imagine that it was quite difficult for you to be the target of that and that things have not been comfortable since.*

ASK OPEN QUESTIONS: *How's it all been for you?*

Note: Don't be too quick to apologize. Apologizing before we have heard and acknowledged the other person's story and feelings often comes off as dismissive and insincere. We have to be willing to sit in the fire of their hurt and anger before they will really take in the fact that we take responsibility for our actions and regret them. Accepting ourselves with our faults and mistakes will help us do this.