

Conflict Resolution and Difficult Conversations



OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, participants will be able to:

- Identify common types of workplace conflict
- Become familiar with the Conflict Resolution Model
- Become aware of considerations for difficult conversations
- Prepare for difficult conversations



Method(s) of Instruction

Small group and dyad practice, individual review of handouts

Facilitator's Note: This session should be facilitated by an experienced supervisor with knowledge of conflict resolution and difficult conversations principles.



INSTRUCTIONS

1. Welcome participants and review the objectives.
2. Facilitate discussion about conflict (slides 3–4).
3. Review the Conflict Resolution Model, having difficult conversations, and managing emotions (slides 5–9). Distribute “8 Tips for Difficult Conversations” and “12 Tips for Handling Difficult Conversations” to participants.
4. Ask participants to suggest some phrases that may help resolve a conflict (slide 10). After participants make suggestions and they are discussed, distribute “10 Phrases That Can Solve Any Work Problem”.
5. Interactive practice using the Conflict Resolution Model. Ask participants to pair off, and facilitate activity as indicated on slide 11.
6. Wrap up. Close the session by having participants share their final thoughts and take-away messages related to conflict and difficult conversations.



Estimated time

1 to 2 hours (depending on discussion time)



Key Concepts

Supervision, conflict, conflict resolution, difficult conversation



Materials

- Computer with internet access and projector

- PowerPoint slides

Handouts

- 8 Tips for Difficult Conversations
- 10 Phrases That Can Solve Any Work Problem
- 12 Tips for Handling Difficult Conversations
- Conflict Resolution Model

Conflict Resolution and Difficult Conversations

SLIDE 1

Conflict Resolution and Difficult Conversations

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SLIDE 2

Review the objectives.

Learning Objectives

- To identify common types of workplace conflict
- To become familiar with the Conflict Resolution Model
- To become aware of considerations for difficult conversations
- To learn how to prepare for difficult conversations

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SLIDE 3

Facilitate a group discussion with these two questions.

Discussion

- What is conflict?
- Is conflict a bad thing?

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SLIDE 4

Think about conflicts that you experienced in the past week—work or personal. What caused the conflict? Ask participants to share with the group.

Discussion

- What are examples of workplace conflict?
- What are the underlying causes of the conflict?

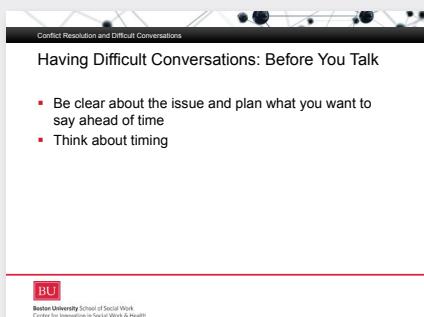
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Conflict Resolution and Difficult Conversations



SLIDE 5

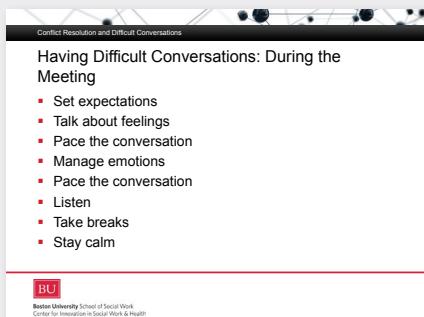
Review the conflict resolution model and emphasize the importance of identifying common interests, brainstorming possible solutions with your employee, and making sure that solution addresses each party's interests.



SLIDE 6

Review the slide. Ask participants to provide some examples.

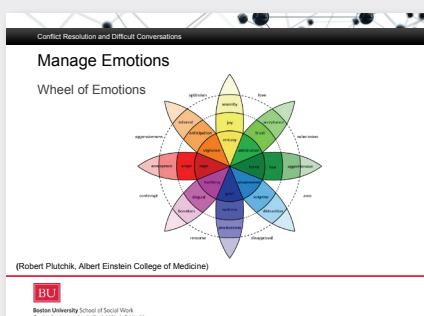
To prepare for the conversation, you need to ask yourself two important questions: "What is the behavior that is causing the problem?" and "What is the impact that the behavior is having on you, the team or the organization?" You need to reach clarity for yourself so you can articulate the issue in two or three succinct statements. If not, you risk going off on a tangent during the conversation. The lack of focus on the central issue will derail the conversation and sabotage your intentions.



SLIDE 7

Review the slide.

Ask for examples.



SLIDE 8

When we think about our emotions, we tend to think of them solely as states of feeling. For example, we may describe happiness as the state of feeling joy or pleasure. Psychologist Robert Plutchik states that there are eight basic emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, anticipation, anger, and disgust. Plutchik created the wheel of emotions, which illustrates the various relationships among the emotions.

Discuss the range of emotions and how they are on a continuum.

Ask participants how these emotions might impact having a fruitful conversation? Ask them to provide examples.

Conflict Resolution and Difficult Conversations

SLIDE 9

Review the slide.

Having Difficult Conversations: Some Common Pitfalls

- We fall into a combative mentality
- We try to oversimplify the problem
- We don't bring enough respect to the conversation
- We lash out – or shut down
- We make false assumptions about our counterpart's intentions
- We lose sight of the goal
- We arrive with our mind already made up

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SLIDE 10

Ask participants if they can provide some sample phrases?

Examples could include:

- I didn't realize this was going on, so tell me more.
- I want to listen to your point of view, but I can't do it when you are yelling at me.
- I understand your point of view, but I see it differently.
- I will incorporate your thoughts going forward.
- Both of us need to put more effort into this if it's going to work out.
- Why don't you agree with me?
- Since we can't seem to agree, can we continue talking about it another day so we can think of more solutions?
- Let's see what we can do to make sure it doesn't happen again.
- What can I do to improve communications so this does not happen again?
- What can I do next time to make this less difficult for you?

Distribute the handout 10 Phrases That Can Solve Any Work Problem and review.

SLIDE 11

Interactive practice.

Review the instructions on the slide.

Distribute the Conflict Resolution Model handout. Give partners 20 minutes to practice. Then have people share their "ah ha" moments with the larger group.

Practice Using the Conflict Resolution Model

- Think about a conflict/difficult conversation that you experienced in the past couple weeks—work or personal. What caused the conflict?
- Pair up with a partner and share your example. Briefly discuss who, what, when, and where.
- Share what worked and didn't work in handling the conflict.
- Talk about how this situation might have been resolved in a better way.
- Share thoughts with the whole group.

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SLIDE 12

Thank participants for their contributions.

Ask them to share key ideas and final thoughts.

Wrap Up

- What are the take home messages?
- Parting thoughts?

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8 TIPS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Standing up for yourself can be really difficult, but it's an important part of an honest, trusting friendship.

BEFORE

PLAN

Plan what you want to say ahead of time. Think about what you'd like to cover, and the words you'd like to use. If it helps, text yourself with a few pointers to keep in mind.

THINK ABOUT TIMING

Pick a good time. Approaching them when they're busy or in a group of people may not be a great idea.

DURING

SET EXPECTATIONS

Let them know what you expect of them while you talk. For example, "I have some things to say, and I'd really appreciate it if you wait until I'm finished to respond."

TALK ABOUT FEELINGS

Don't blame.

Avoid statements like:

"You don't respect me."
"You're always talking about me behind my back."
"I can't stand it."

PACE THE CONVERSATION

If you throw a whole bunch of information or questions at them all at once, they might get overwhelmed or miss some of what you are trying to say.

LISTEN

Try to understand what is being said.

Try statements like:

I feel really hurt and upset when you say things like ...

Can you see why I would find that hurtful?

TAKE BREAKS

If the conversation stops being productive (if you are going over the same points again and again), it's okay to take a break. You can always try again later, after you've had some time to think.

STAY CALM

Yelling does not help you to get your message across.

10 Phrases That Can Solve Any Work Problem

By Barry Moltz, Shafran Moltz Group (March 19, 2013)

Conflicts are an inevitable part of running a small business. In fact, effectively resolving conflicts within your company can actually build a strong and diverse team that will keep fresh ideas and creativity flowing. If everyone agrees with the boss's point of view, your company's direction and efforts will get stale fast. That being said, too much conflict isn't desirable either. To achieve the delicate balance, you need to have the skills to intervene when a healthy debate goes awry.

Here are 10 phrases that can be used to solve any problem you're having in your office:

1. **“I didn’t realize this was going on, so tell me more.”** Many times, pleading ignorance is a good place to start to diffuse any situation. Begin to listen and stop talking! This will project an empathy that every angry person wants to hear. Remember, this empathy should never be confused with agreement.
2. **“I want to listen to your point of view, but I can’t do it when you are yelling at me.”** This sets the ground rules and prevents the situation from getting out of control. No one who wants respect will sit there and be screamed at by an employee.
3. **“I understand your point of view, but I see it differently.”** After listening to their viewpoint, it is acceptable now to firmly disagree and outline reasons for your opinion as the leader. Don’t be bullied into agreeing in that moment and changing a decision.
4. **“I will incorporate your thoughts going forward.”** This leaves open the possibility that their point of view will be incorporated in any action you take going forward. At the same time, it doesn’t commit you to actually take any particular action.
5. **“Both of us need to put more effort into this if it’s going to work out.”** By including yourself, you take responsibility for resolving the conflict with the other person. It becomes something you can work on together and can start to foster teamwork.
6. **“Why don’t you agree with me?”** This directly confronts the employee to find out what the core issue is. Sometimes exposing his or her real reason can assist in resolving the conflict more quickly.
7. **“Since we can’t seem to agree, can we continue talking about it another day so we can think of more solutions?”** This unlocks the stalemate and encourages a new perspective. Many times, a conflict can’t be resolved in the initial discussion. Pushing to resolve a conflict in one meeting can be counterproductive.
8. **“Let’s see what we can do to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”** You accept that the initial outcome was not satisfactory and shift the discussion to explore how this won’t happen again.



9. **"What can I do to improve communications so this does not happen again?"** This focuses the conflict on the process and not the people, which is critical for resolution. When a conflict gets personal, it's much more difficult to solve.

10. **"What can I do next time to make this less difficult for you?"** This is a very smart tactic, where you as a leader do not change your point of view or outcome, but ask the employee what can be done to make it less painful for them. This makes "the medicine easier to swallow."

Have you been able to successfully dissolve a conflict and solve a work problem? How did you do it?

Excerpts from 12 Tips for Handling Difficult Conversations

By Bruna Martinuzzi, Presentation Skills Training, Author, Columnist AMEX OPEN, Clarion Enterprises Ltd. March 25, 2013

We all have an inner voice that tells us when we need to have a difficult conversation with someone—a conversation that, if it took place, would improve life at the office for ourselves and for everyone else on our team. The consequence of not having that uncomfortable conversation is costly. A CPP Inc. study of workplace conflict reveals that employees in the U.S. spend roughly 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict. Thirty-three percent of employees report that the conflict led to personal injury and attacks, and 22 percent report that it led to illness and absence from work. Ten percent report that project failure was a direct result of conflict.

Handling the difficult conversation requires skill and empathy, but ultimately, it requires the courage to go ahead and do it. The more you get into the habit of facing these issues squarely, the more adept you will become at it. If you're unsure of how to best approach a crucial conversation, here are some tips to guide you:

1. Be clear about the issue.

To prepare for the conversation, you need to ask yourself two important questions: "What exactly is the behavior that is causing the problem?" and "What is the impact that the behavior is having on you, the team or the organization?" You need to reach clarity for yourself so you can articulate the issue in two or three succinct statements. If not, you risk going off on a tangent during the conversation. The lack of focus on the central issue will derail the conversation and sabotage your intentions.

2. Know your objective

What do you want to accomplish with the conversation? What is the desired outcome? What are the non-negotiables? As English philosopher Theodore Zeldin put it: A successful conversation "doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards." What are the new cards that you want to have in your hands by the end of the conversation? Once you have determined this, plan how you will close the conversation. Don't end without clearly expressed action items. What is the person agreeing to do? What support are you committed to provide? What obstacles might prevent these remedial actions from taking place? What do you both agree to do to overcome potential obstacles? Schedule a follow up to evaluate progress and definitively reach closure on the issue at hand.



3. Adopt a mindset of inquiry.

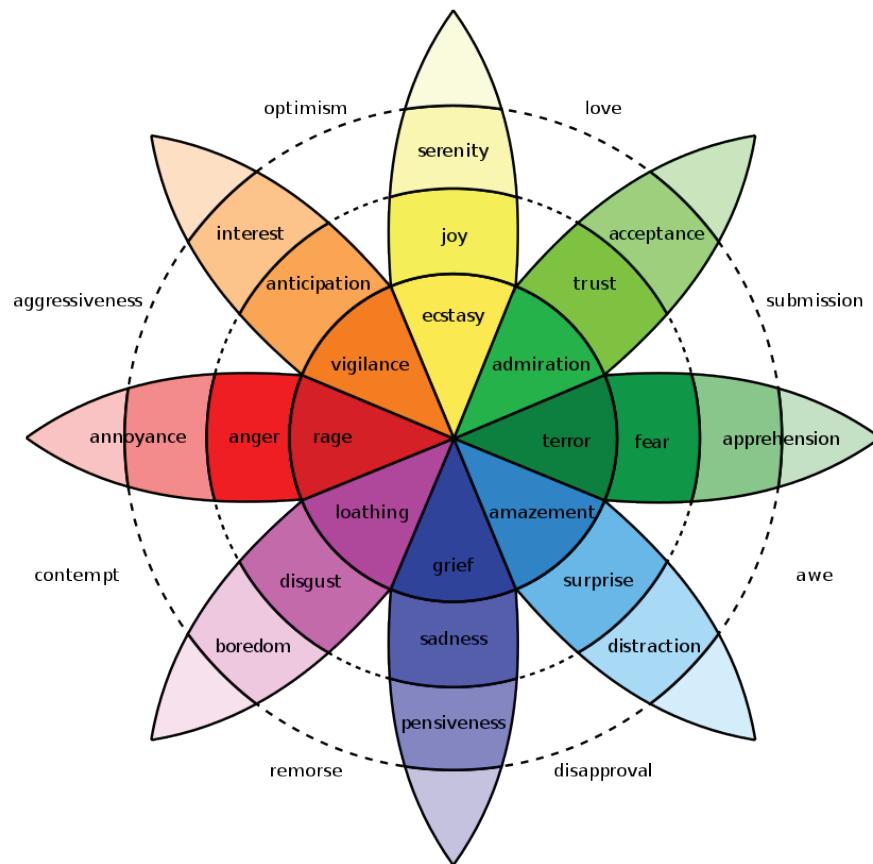
Spend a little time to reflect on your attitude toward the situation and the person involved. What are your preconceived notions about it? Your mindset will predetermine your reaction and interpretations of the other person's responses, so it pays to approach such a conversation with the right mindset—which in this context is one of inquiry. A good doctor diagnoses a situation before reaching for his prescription pad. This applies equally to a leader. Be open to hear first what the other person has to say before reaching closure in your mind. Even if the evidence is so clear that there is no reason to beat around the bush, we still owe it to the person to let them tell their story. A good leader remains open and seeks a greater truth in any situation. The outcome of adopting this approach might surprise you.

4. Manage the emotions.

Most of us were likely raised to believe that emotions need to be left at the door. We now know that this is an old-school approach that is no longer valid in today's work environments. It is your responsibility as a leader to understand and manage the emotions in the discussion. The late Robert Plutchik, professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, created a Wheel of Emotions to show that emotions follow a path. What starts as an annoyance, for example, can move to anger and, in extreme cases, escalate to rage. We can avoid this by being mindful of preserving the person's dignity—and treating them with respect—even if we totally disagree with them. In some cases, you may have to respond to a person's tears. It is helpful to acknowledge the tears rather than ignoring them, offering the person a tissue to provide an opportunity to gather his or her thoughts, and recognizing that the tears communicate a problem to be addressed.



WHEEL OF EMOTION (Robert Plutchik, Albert Einstein College of Medicine)



5. Be comfortable with silence.

There will be moments in the conversation where a silence occurs. Don't rush to fill it with words. Just as the pause between musical notes helps us appreciate the music, so the periodic silence in the conversation allows us to hear what was said and lets the message sink in. A pause also has a calming effect and can help us connect better. For example, if you are an extrovert, you're likely uncomfortable with silence, as you're used to thinking while you're speaking. This can be perceived as steamrolling or overbearing, especially if the other party is an introvert. Introverts want to think before they speak. Stop talking and allow them their moment—it can lead to a better outcome.



6. Preserve the relationship.

A leader who has high emotional intelligence is always mindful to limit any collateral damage to a relationship. It takes years to build bridges with people and only minutes to blow them up. Think about how the conversation can fix the situation, without erecting an irreparable wall between you and the person.

7. Be consistent.

Ensure that your objective is fair and that you are using a consistent approach. For example, if the person thinks you have one set of rules for this person and a different set for another, you'll be perceived as showing favoritism. Nothing erodes a relationship faster than perceived inequality. Employees have long-term memories of how you handled situations in the past. Aim for consistency in your leadership approach. We trust a leader who is consistent because we don't have to second-guess where they stand on important issues such as culture, corporate values and acceptable behaviors.

8. Develop your conflict resolution skills.

Conflict is a natural part of human interaction. Managing conflict effectively is one of the vital skills of leadership. Have a few, proven phrases that can come in handy in crucial spots.

9. Watch your reaction to thwarting ploys.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, Sarah Green lists nine common mistakes we make when we conduct a difficult conversation. One of these mistakes is how we handle thwarting ploys, such as stonewalling, sarcasm and accusing. The best advice is to simply address the ploy openly and sincerely. As the author says, if the ploy from your counterpart is stubborn unresponsiveness, you can candidly say, "I don't know how to interpret your silence." Disarm the ploy by labeling the observed behavior. (See handout of Nine Common Mistakes)

10. Choose the right place to have the conversation.

Calling people into your office may not be the best strategy. Sitting in your own turf, behind your desk, shifts the balance of power too much on your side. Even simple body language, such as leaning forward toward the person rather than leaning back on your chair, can carry a subtle message of your positive intentions; i.e., "We're in this together. Let's problem solve so that we have a better



workplace." Consider holding the meeting in a neutral place such as a meeting room where you can sit adjacent to each other without the desk as a barrier. Don't exclude the coffee shop.

11. Know how to begin.

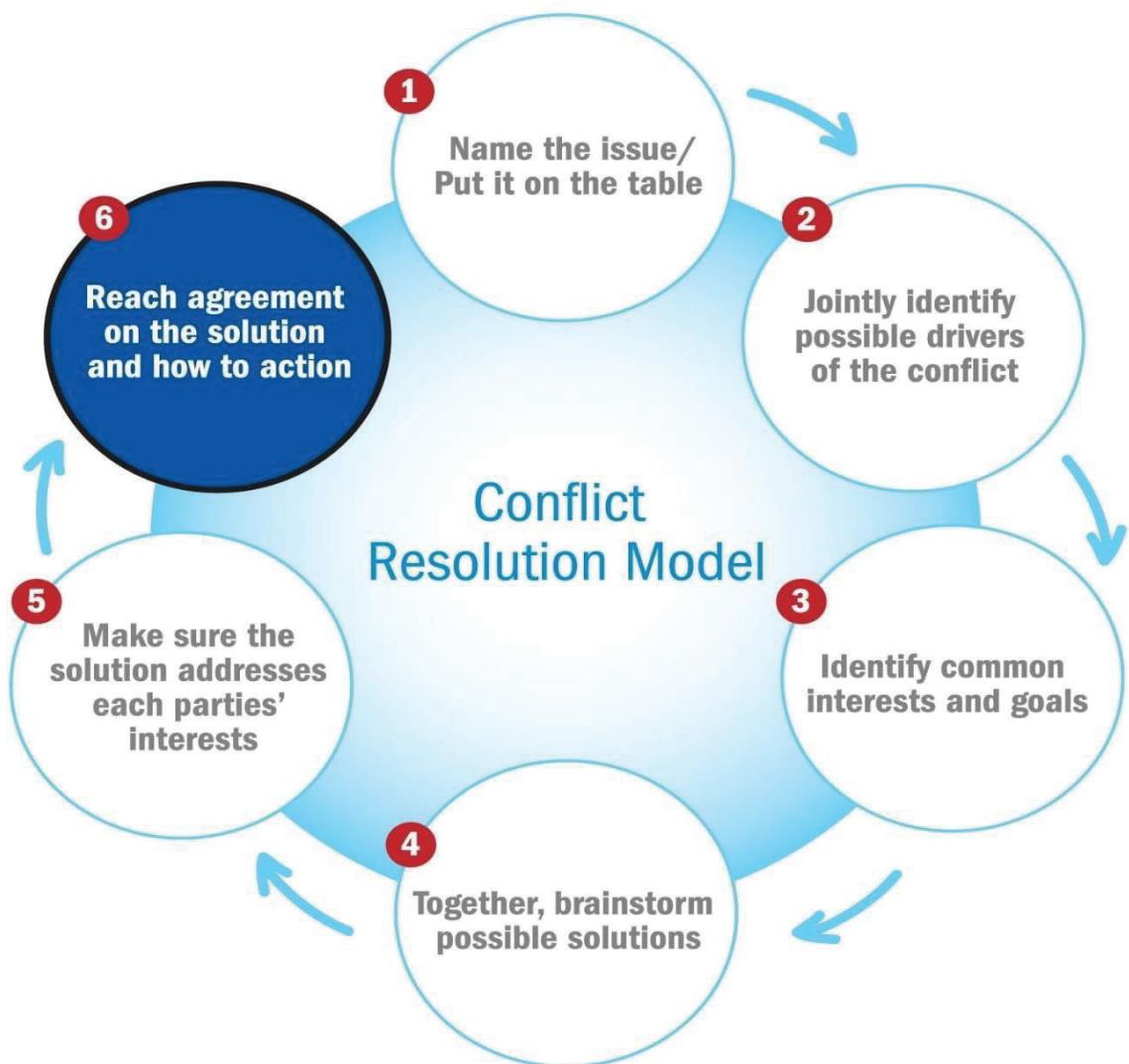
Some people put off having the conversation because they don't know how to start. The best way to start is with a direct approach. "John, I would like to talk with you about what happened at the meeting this morning when Bob asked about the missed deadline. Let's grab a cup of coffee tomorrow morning to chat." Or: "Linda, I want to go over some of the issues with XYZ customer and some concerns that I have. Let's meet tomorrow morning to problem-solve."

Being upfront is the authentic and respectful approach. You don't want to ambush people by surprising them about the nature of the "chat." Make sure your tone of voice signals discussion and not inquisition, exploration and not punishment.

12. Train other leaders on how to handle the difficult conversation.

There are dozens of good books written on this crucial topic, such as *Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most* and *Crucial Conversations: Tools For Talking When Stakes Are High*. Pick up two or three copies for your corporate library and encourage leaders in your organization to develop this important skill.

Conflict Resolution Model



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