

Difficult Conversations

Dealing with emotional obstacles

There are many ways people can block constructive outcomes during difficult conversations. Some of them are driven by different emotions based on what the person believes about the conversation or the issue. There are no universal solutions to these obstacles. They usually rely on you identifying the belief behind the feelings and helping the person see things differently.

In difficult conversations obstructive behaviours can also be a strategy to avoid the issue or at least delay dealing with it. In this case you have to focus on keeping the conversation on track and resolve the beliefs as the conversation proceeds. It may even happen that as you show your determination to keep on track that the other person will adapt their thinking and look for better strategies to cope with the issue.

Here are some notes to help you reflect on your options for working through these obstacles. These are not universal solutions but some ideas to encourage you to think about how you will handle obstacles in difficult conversations.

Acknowledge feelings

1. Address the feelings being expressed by acknowledging them but don't try to 'solve' them. Incorporate them into the conversation as a factor to be considered.
2. Identify how fulfilling performance expectations can address the issues that generate the feelings.
3. Accept any feedback about what you are doing by noting it and saying you will spend some time thinking it over after the current issue is addressed.
4. Be willing to use the 'broken record' technique both to acknowledge how the person feels and the need to address the current issue.
5. Be ready to take a break if the person (or yourself) needs to calm down. But resume in 10 minutes or ASAP so you don't teach people that an emotional outburst is a button they can press to shut down any conversation they don't like.
6. If necessary use authority to make clear that the issue must be addressed. Make clear that you have to do your job as a supervisor, which is to clarify expectations and performance requirements and be accountable about these to your own boss.

Some responses to common feeling families

Most emotions belong to one of these families. Any of them can get the conversation off track so you may need ways you can respond.

Happy Acknowledge the relief or satisfaction they feel at addressing the issue. Remain grounded without letting a wave of relief and goodwill cloud the issue and make it easy to avoid difficult issues.

Sad Acknowledge the disappointment or deflation. Encourage the person to address the issue by showing your dedication and confidence that by dealing with the issue in a practical way it can be resolved.

Angry	Acknowledge the anger or frustration, recognising their belief that they shouldn't have to face this issue. Hear their objections and reassure them that your goal is to resolve the issue so everything can settle down and people can get back to good work and outcomes.
Afraid	Acknowledge that the issue might be intimidating or threatening. Share your conviction that you can work with them to build a solution that will safely resolve the issue.
Confused	Recognise that they find the issue baffling or inconsistent. State clearly your commitment to clarify it and deal with it in a clear, step by step way.
Confident	Acknowledge their confidence that they can manage the issue. Explain clearly that you still need to work on the issue with them so you can feel confident it will be resolved and can answer to your supervisor.
Uncertain	Recognise that they are unsure whether they can deal with the issue. Reaffirm your commitment to work on it with them until a workable solution is developed and in place.
Disgust	Recognise that they don't want anything to do with the process of dealing with the issue. Reassure them that you mean no harm and that you will proceed in a calm and considerate way that doesn't avoid the issue, that respects their integrity and develops a workable solution.

When people respond to the topic as catastrophic news

Sometimes dealing with issues can seem catastrophic to people even when the issue seems easily solved by the supervisor. Here are some of the common responses to catastrophic news and some ideas about responding to them.

Denial	Provide information that shows why the topic is relevant.
Anger	Recognise their anger and show your commitment for a positive and fair outcome, but one that addresses the issue.
Bargaining	Be clear about what is negotiable (eg. how to achieve a solution) and what is not (eg. expectations about what is to be achieved).
Depression	Recognise this is not the preferred situation for anyone and show your confidence that issues can be resolved.
Acceptance	Engage the person to build a solution that is specific, can be tracked and is achievable so they can succeed in meeting expectations.