Difficult Conversations

Tips and Techniques for Survival
Do Your Homework

• Find out the facts first
• Find objective evidence wherever possible
• Plan the beginning
  – Develop and practice opening remarks to set the stage
• Plan the middle
  – Anticipate reactions and plan responses
  – Be prepared to adapt to new information
• Plan the end
  – Plan how to gracefully end the conversation too!
Know Your Body

• Use appropriate body language
  – Sit openly
  – Gesture openly
  – Use eye contact

• Use appropriate tone
  – Keep your voice calm and level
  – High pitches excite; low pitches calm

• Power amplifies gestures and tone
Separate the Person from the Problem

- The person is not the problem
  - If this person was not doing this thing it would not be a problem
  - If another person was doing this thing it would still be a problem
There is No One Truth

- Every person experiences a situation differently
- Every person’s experience is THEIR truth
- In my family are four sisters
  - I am the only one who has three YOUNGER sisters
  - I am the only one who experiences it that way
  - Neither of us is lying when I say there are three YOUNGER sisters in our family and Beth says there are three OLDER sisters
Their Emotion is Not Your Emotion

• Amygdalas manage emotion
  – Know your Fight or Flight symptoms
  – Fight/Flight response cuts off cognitive thinking

• Emotion ripples through the herd
  – Don’t let their emotions become yours

• Recognize and articulate your reactions
  – Articulating can keep the cognition channel open

• Visualize your immunity
  – Words flowing by you instead of hitting you
  – Listening through a bubble
Peel Back Anger

• Anger is a defensive reaction to fear or pain
  – Not just physical
  – Could be pain or fear of embarrassment, criticism, wounded ego
• People experience themselves from the inside and others from the outside
  – They feel their fear or pain in their inside; we can’t
  – We see the anger directed outward; they can’t
• People feel righteous because they are feeling the fear or pain and not seeing the outward emanating anger
• Get to the source of their anger; find their inner pain
• Help them see what their anger looks like on the outside
• Just because they feel justified doesn’t make it OK
Crying is Just Like Sneezing

- Don’t be afraid of crying
- Crying is just a physiological reaction that causes bodily fluid to leak from the face
- Handle it the same way as sneezing
  - Hand them a box of tissues
  - Pretend you don’t notice that there’s stuff dripping
Know Your Outcome; Stick To It

• Have an outcome in mind
  – What needs to happen?
  – What needs to happen DIFFERENTLY?

• Whenever you lose the thread
  – Come back to the outcome
You Observe; They Interpret

- They’re the one on the inside; not you
  - You can tell them what you see from the outside
  - Let them tell you what’s happening on the inside
- To assume you know how to interpret their experience is to judge
  - Do not speculate on their intentions, beliefs, values, or anything you can’t observe
Just the facts, Ma’am

• Stick to specific, observable, work-related facts
  – “I see by the time sheets that you have missed a lot of work lately. You missed 7 days in the last month and 8 days in the previous month.”

• Show the impact of the problem
  – “Your unexpected absences cause our service to be disrupted since Fred has to leave his work to cover your station. I would like to talk to you about this issue and come up with a plan to improve your attendance.”

• If personal problems are the cause
  – Compassion is a virtue that you may exercise
  – But stick to work-related facts and effects
  – Your job is to uphold the standard of conduct and the cost-effective stewardship of taxpayer funds—not solve personal problems or enable poor performance
One at a Time

- Deal with one issue at a time
- Mixing issues opens the door to:
  - Feeling attacked
  - Dodging one issue with another
  - Really bogging down the conversation
Listen and REFLECT BACK

• Summarize back what you heard them say
• Adopt their point of view momentarily
• Try to feel their feelings
• Avoid the trap of False Reflection
  – “I understand”
  – “I hear what you’re saying”
  – “I know all that”
• *People need to know they’ve been heard*
Be the Advocate Not the Judge

• Most people (thankfully) are uncomfortable being the judge of the employee
• Pretend you’re their attorney
  – You know the performance standard
  – You’re there to help them stay within it
• Let the organizational standard be the judge
• With one hand hold the bar, with the other help them reach it
Let them Hash; Not Rehash

- Let people get it out of their system – then move on
  - Getting it out of their system feels good – they’ll want to keep doing it
  - OR you haven’t gotten to the bottom of it yet
- When you hear them start to circle back
  - Redirect to the future
  - OR peel another layer
Ask Questions

• **DO** assume that you DON’T know everything
• Ask questions to:
  – Hear their side first
  – Buy time
  – Avoid committing
  – Guide the conversation while letting them do the talking
• **KEEP** asking questions
  – Until you’ve gotten to the bottom of their feelings
Focus on the Future

• Talking about the past only
  – Rehashes
  – Focuses on the negative

• Move the conversation to the future
  – “What does it need to look like?”
  – “How can this work for both of us?”
  – “What options do you see?”
Don’t be Afraid of Dead Air Space

• Use pauses to:
  – De-escalate, slow down the conversation
  – Think before answering
  – Let them hear themselves
  – Let them feel the impact
  – Let them think before answering
Don’t say Don’t say Do

• If you only tell people what NOT to do, they still won’t know WHAT to do

• Whenever you correct—also redirect
  – Tell them the RIGHT thing to do
  – “Not this way, that way”
  – “When ______ happens, I want you to __________”

• It’s easy to correct, harder to redirect
  – You first have to think through the right thing to do
  – (that’s why you’re the supervisor)
It’s Not Personal

• Don’t attack them
  – Don’t make accusations—stick to observable (and therefore irrefutable) facts
  – Use “I” statements, not “You” statements

• Expect them to attack back anyway
  – They are attacking your role
  – It will still feel personal

• Don’t react, use your techniques
  – Reflect back their perception
  – Adopt their point of view
  – Pause to de-escalate
  – Ask questions
  – Visualize
Create the Path of Least Resistance

- People will do what’s easy and convenient
- Make it easy to do the RIGHT thing
- Make it unappealing to do anything else
Follow Through to get Follow Up

- Check back for progress
- Make sure any plans for change are being carried out
- Modify whatever isn’t working as hoped
- It’s a work in progress
- Train them that you will follow through and you expect action
Know Your Lines and Practice Them

• Learn good lines
  – How did you feel about that?
  – Tell me more about that.
  – What did that look like to you?
  – What does this need to look like?
  – How can we make this work for both of us?
  – I need you to….

• Trade them with your friends!
Exercises

Create a list of key talking points that you would include in the following difficult conversations. Take turns practicing these conversations:

- Employee gossiping about supervisor and others
- Excessive personal texting, checking Facebook or other inappropriate personal use of internet
- Employee layoff for lack of funds
All About Praise

• Never underestimate the power of praise
  – We are all just 12-year-olds in big skin
  – Our most basic need is to know we are significant

• Using someone’s name is subtle, impactful praise

• Catch them doing something right
  – Look for excuses to praise

• Lead with the carrot, not with the stick
A Little SIP Goes a Long Way

• The SIP of Praise
  — **Specifics:** mention details
  — **Impact:** say WHY it was a good thing
  — **Prompt:** Jump up out of your chair and go tell them

• Look them right in the eye and tell them they did good

• Don’t rush through the moment, let them savor it for a second

• They might squirm—but they won’t forget
Third-Party Praise

• Praise the person to someone ELSE
  – In front of them
  – Or behind them

• Let them know you sang their praises
  – “Hey I was bragging you up the other day because ____”
  – Send a note to the boss or grand-boss, copy them

• Relay praise from another
  – Ask the boss to send a note
Exercises

• Create several statements of praise for the employee in the following circumstances:
  – Taking initiative to do extra work
  – Regularly performing daily activities well and promptly
  – Good oral presentation to the work unit
  – Providing a creative solution to a difficult work problem

• When was the last time you praised someone?
  – Think of someone you can praise and why
  – Practice with your neighbor
Who You Gonna Call?

• For assistance with difficult conversations please contact your departmental HR rep or

  – Susan Alt, salt@montana.edu, 994-3344, for classified

  – Deb Barkley, dbarkley@montana.edu, 994-5326, for professional and faculty