

# 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
  - “What else?” “What else?” “What else?”



# 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
  - **S**pecifics: mention details
  - **I**mpact: say WHY it was a good thing
  - **P**rompt: 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](mailto:salt@montana.edu), 994-3344, for classified
  - Deb Barkley, [dbarkley@montana.edu](mailto:dbarkley@montana.edu), 994-5326, for professional and faculty