

Making Conflict a Conversation

Disagreements are inevitable and we encounter conflict on a regular basis. A simple dispute can quickly turn into a heated argument which can only make things worse. Let's see how we can turn that confrontation into a respectful conversation for a more productive outcome.

Prepare for the discussion

Before you sit down with someone to address a concern, it's important that you organize your thoughts and feelings, and that you understand your underlying reason for doing so. The following tips will help not only to lessen any anxiety you may have about an impending confrontation, but they will also ensure you're better positioned for a successful outcome.

– **Identify the issue**

Take a moment to process the issue for yourself and sort through any emotions. Write down what's bothering you and why, and how it makes you feel. Doing this before you engage in a conversation is not only cathartic, but also helps you plan for the best way to articulate the points you want to make and communicate the facts of the situation.

– **Identify your feelings**

Sort through the way you feel before confronting someone. Are you disappointed? Are you angry? Are you hurt? Are you both angry and hurt? Knowing how you feel, and what prompted those feelings, may help you separate the feelings that relate to the issue at hand from those that are due to past situations. This may help to reduce emotional intensity during the conversation, which can allow for a more constructive message delivery.

– **Identify the changes you seek**

Based on your experience, connect your feelings to a behavior you'd like to see changed. If you felt upset because a colleague went behind your back, think of how to best express that, and then name the change in behavior you'd like to see. For example, *"I'm upset because you complained to leadership about me without bringing up the concern with me first. If you have an issue with me, please come to me first to discuss it."* Or perhaps there's someone who keeps interrupting you and you feel hurt. You might say, *"I feel slighted when you interrupt me during meetings. Would you be willing to make an effort to limit the interjections?"* While your requests may be rebuffed, your clarity and calmness in delivering the message offers the best chance for success.

– **Identify the right time to talk**

Choosing the right moment to address an issue with someone is essential and can make or break a successful outcome. Hold off on addressing issues until:

- You've gone through the steps listed above to prepare for the conversation
- Emotions have settled enough for a rational, productive discussion
- There's adequate time to sort through the matter constructively
- You have an agreed-upon place to meet and speak privately

Ensure a successful conversation

Once you're face-to-face with the other person, keep the conversation on track and running smoothly with the following:

- **Use /statements.** Begin your sentences with *"I"* rather than *"You"* to avoid coming off as accusatory. Doing this communicates that you take some of the responsibility for what's being discussed, as opposed to sounding like you're making everything the other person's fault.
- **Listen.** Listen as the other person speaks and repeat it back to them to ensure you understand what they're trying to convey. For example, *"What I hear you saying is _____. Do I have that right?"*
- **Stick to the current issue.** Try to keep the focus to one topic and avoid bringing up the past. If the conversation starts to get sidetracked, steer it back to the issue at hand and agree to discuss other matters at another time.

- **Keep it respectful.** Be sure to give the other person time to respond and that they do the same for you. Avoid talking over one another and don't allow the conversation to involve insults, rude language, or disrespectful behavior. If this starts to happen, it's time to end the conversation.
- **Refer to your notes.** There's nothing wrong with bringing your written thoughts to the meeting as a reference. Having your notes on hand ensures you say everything you intend to and that none of your points get overlooked.

Difficult conversations are just that—difficult. By turning conflict into a conversation, you can resolve the issue more effectively and avoid unnecessary tension and resentment. For more guidance on how to address conflict and disagreements with confidence, call the EAP any time, day or night, to speak with a licensed counselor.

The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to eligible federal employees at no cost.

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