**How to Navigate Difficult Conversations**

Because difficult conversations — personal or professional — can create discomfort, it’s common to avoid having them altogether. Of course, avoidance will most likely lead to exacerbation: The problem to be addressed will probably only get worse. The following steps can help you to navigate, rather than avoid, those conversations.

*Before a Difficult Conversation*

Take a step toward actually having the conversation by ***planning*** it in advance. Say to your mentee “I’d like to talk with you about..." and mutually agree on a time and a place for the conversation.  During difficult conversations, it can be challenging to remember to say everything you need to say, or to say it in the appropriate way.  ***Planning ahead*** is important so that a difficult conversation has the intended outcomes. You may want to use the steps below as a framework for your next difficult conversation:

* **Step 1:**Write an opening statement, naming the issue.
  + “I want to talk with you about the effect that [a specific behavior or situation] is having on [me, our family, the team].”
* **Step 2:** Select a specific example that illustrates the behavior/situation you want to change.
  + For example, yesterday…”
* **Step 3:** Own your emotions around this issue.
  + “I’m feeling [frustrated, embarrassed, not appreciated, etc.].”
* **Step 4:** Clarify what is at stake--if the situation continues as it is, what will be lost or gained?
  + “There is a great deal at stake. [A few sentences explaining what will happen if the issue is not resolved.]
* **Step 5:** Identify your contribution to this issue.
  + “I lost my temper” or “I haven’t spoken up.” or “I should have given you a heads-up…”
* **Step 6:**Name, don’t blame or complain: Explicitly state your wish to resolve the issue.
  + “I think the issue might be that…” and “I’d like to figure out how to make things better for all of us, perhaps by…”
* **Step 7:** Invite the other person to respond.
  + “What do you think?” or “How do you feel about this?”
* **Step 8:**Ask about the fact and feeling parts of what the other person says in response.
  + “What did you see happen when…?” or “How did it make you feel when…?”
* **Step 9:** Identify potential next steps for a resolution.
  + “This is what I understand now…” and “Here’s what I think we could next…”
* **Step 10:**Agree on a few specific follow-up actions and accountability measures.
  + “It sounds like we could try….” and “Let’s check-in at the start and end of each day…”

*During a Difficult Conversation*

A successful difficult conversation begins with how you navigate the physical and emotional space. Consider the following ‘ground rules’ or practices for effectively engaging in difficult conversations:

1. Opt for face to face when possible.
2. Sit, don’t stand, and stay at the same eye level.
3. Speak calmly and directly to the other person(s) and focus on the facts.
4. Approach the conversation with openness and a stated interest in solving the problem.
5. Use those world-famous “I” statements and clarify that you are speaking to your own perceptions.
6. Avoid words like “should,” “always,” “never,” “everyone,” “everything,” “no one,” and “nothing” — and never interrupt the other person.
7. Listen to the other person, rather than just waiting to speak your mind.
8. Don’t be afraid to clarify your understanding — use statements like “Could you please repeat that?” or “I’m not sure what you mean. Can you please help me better understand?”
9. Focus on just one topic at a time, and allow for the possibility of time-outs.
10. Connect any behavior changes to best practices and policies.
11. Carefully balance criticisms with positives
12. Use examples to describe how you’d like things to proceed differently in the future.
13. Assume the best —  The best of intentions and the best of possible solutions.