

# 904WARD

## The Construct of a Conversation

Every conversation, especially difficult conversations, are comprised of three layers. This essentially means you are having three conversations in one. It is important to understand all three to effectively navigate challenging conversations.

**Layer One: What Happened** – Every story has at least two perspectives, and it is important to understand yours in this layer. Sort out what happened by asking a few questions: How do you see the situation? Where does your story come from (information, past experiences, rules)? What do you think you know about the other person's viewpoint? What impact has the situation had on you? What might their intentions have been? What have you each contributed to the problem? *The key to this layer is presenting facts without blame or absolute truths.*

**Layer Two: How We Feel About What Happened** – Emotions rule this layer, and they tend to run strong in difficult conversations. Explore your feelings and ask yourself: What bundle of emotions am I experiencing? *The key to this layer is checking your emotions so that they are not steering the conversation.*

**Layer Three: How the Incident Intersects With or Threatens Each Person's Identity** – Everyone has a self-image they are trying to protect that is comprised of the intersection of several identities. That self-image can often feel threatened in difficult conversations, so it is necessary to ground your identity by walking through these questions: How does this situation threaten me or have the potential to shake up my sense of identity? How do I see myself (ie, I'm a Black woman, I'm a queer cisgendered advocate, I'm a long-term employee, I'm the boss, I'm loyal)? What do you need to accept to be better grounded?

## Steps to Have Effective Difficult Conversations

**Prewrite** – Developing mutual trust and understanding provides a solid foundation for having difficult conversations. When challenging conversations arise, it will be easier because your colleagues will be less likely to assume negative intent. Improve your emotional IQ by projecting warmth and demonstrating competence; colleagues are more likely to trust you if they know you care and you know what you're talking about. Building a culture of feedback also makes these conversations more normative and difficult conversations feel less like an attack.

### **Before the Conversation:**

- 1) Walk through the three layers of conversation.
- 2) Check your purposes and decide whether to raise the issue.
- 3) If you decide to proceed, make a list of the points you want to cover but don't make it a script.
- 4) Anticipate potential questions and objections that might be raised.

### **Starting the Conversation:**

- 1) Check your emotions; check your assumptions.
- 2) Timing is everything – for both parties.
- 3) Keep it private; choose your setting carefully.
- 4) State your intentions; don't sugarcoat it.

### **During the Conversation:**

- 1) Be specific; cite examples.
- 2) Stay calm and respectful.
- 3) Approach the solution collaboratively, not as a directive.
- 4) Give the other party time to absorb what has been said; everything doesn't have to be solved right now.
- 5) End on a positive note.

### **Additional Steps for Managers:**

- 1) Be consistent.
- 2) Have a witness, especially if it involves disciplinary or corrective steps. Unless the staffing level makes it unavoidable, it should not be a peer (an HR role is preferable).
- 3) Keep it confidential.

### **Receiving the Conversation:**

- 1) Be an active listener; truly try to hear what your colleague is saying and feeling.
- 2) The conversation is not about your comfort. Do not deflect or dissuade discussions because the topic is uncomfortable for you.
- 3) When you start to feel defensive, stop and ask yourself why. Do not lean into it.
- 4) Don't engage in "whataboutisms" or take the conversation to places of comparison.
- 5) Make your objective to clearly and coherently represent your position and perspective, not to change anyone.
- 6) Ask yourself: am I trying not to be wrong or am I trying to be better?

### **Post Conversation:**

- 1) Contemplate issues raised in the discussion and consider why the person has the views they do. Issues are easier to address if you understand where they originate.
- 2) Don't insist that people give you credit for your intentions.
- 3) Loop back to the person to review the situation, next steps, and any follow-up that is needed.

### **A Few Extra Tips**

- 1) **Expect more** – People tend to rise or lower to the level of performance that is expected of them. Make sure you have high expectations and communicate those expectations regularly.
- 2) **Be human first** – Begin tough conversations with your human side. Checking in on a person goes a long way toward discovering the real reasons behind actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Ask and listen like a person and you'll learn more.
- 3) **Address behaviors, not attributions** – This gets back to specifics. Address the specific things you want changed, not your evaluation of it. "You need to be more sensitive" is not as helpful as "The last three times you spoke to me, you raised your voice and did not acknowledge any good in the work I did."
- 4) **Have conversations more often** – The first one is the hardest (usually). However, find out how your colleagues like to communicate and have regular conversations using preferred styles which will help improve communication as a whole.
- 5) **Seek opinions and educate yourself** – Reach out to HR professionals and people in the field of challenges you might be facing. Watch videos, participate in trainings, get mentors, and find ways to improve your feedback loop so that you are building your skills and knowledge base.

