

Having Difficult Conversations

ABOUT CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SERVICES AT UND

The University of North Dakota partners with Emily Holth, professional conflict management consultant, to provide conflict management services to UND faculty, students and staff.

As members of a university community, people are encouraged to express themselves freely and there are times when that expression leads to conflict. Holth, founder and owner of Sustainable Solutions, a Grand Forks firm specializing in workplace mediation, coaching and team development, provides people with a confidential service where they can feel safe in speaking about difficult situations, complaints or inquiries. Holth and her firm Sustainable Solutions are independent from UND and can therefore offer neutral guidance to those seeking advice on how to manage through conflict.

- **Consider contacting Emily at Sustainable Solutions if you:**
- need an independent, impartial and confidential person to listen
- prefer to make an informal inquiry about an issue, rather than ask through formal channels
- seek guidance on interpreting a situation, policy or procedure
- feel treated unfairly
- encounter a problem that requires an outside party to help facilitate a constructive conversation

Through this partnership, members of the UND community have access to world-class conflict management services. Emily is available for appointments both on and off-campus.

Learn more about us by contacting us at:

www.sustainablesolutionsgf.com

Phone 701-261-6805 Email: emily@sustainablesolutionsgf.com

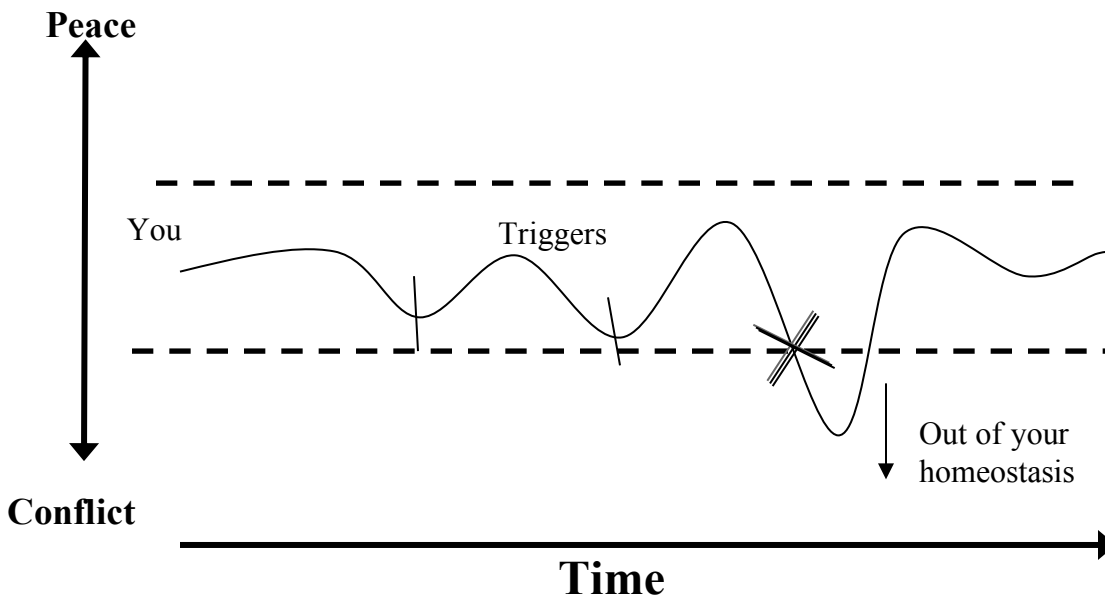
HOMEOSTASIS AND CONFLICT

Conflict can take us out of our homeostasis, disrupting our comfort zone and our balance between peace and conflict.

Walter Cannon, who was the first person to discover the stress response, believes that it is this strain on the body that causes us to experience stress and come out of our homeostasis. In order to regain our balance or equilibrium we may need to increase positive activities (e.g., sleep, exercise, diet) or decrease negative activities (e.g., reduce stress or stop smoking) in order to get our body back within our predetermined set points.

Similar to our physical body's attempt to stay in homeostasis, we believe that we have a mental and emotional homeostasis. That homeostasis is our ability to maintain a balance between peace and conflict. It's our comfort zone where we are best able to live out our beliefs and values.

So, how does this relate to conflict? When we experience conflict (e.g., a difficult conversation) it upsets our balance. We typically can handle stress within reasonable limits, but similar to our body's reaction to an injury or illness, conflict can take us out of our homeostasis. Many of us avoid difficult conversations because they could cause conflict and this conflict disrupts our balance. **When we are out of our homeostasis we typically feel: uncertain, unsure of what to do, not in control, frustrated, angry, least able to listen and take the perspective of another person, self-absorbed, least able to problem solve and least able to live out our values.**



WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

A difficult conversation is **anything you find hard to talk about** (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999). It usually involves **high stakes, different opinions and strong emotions** (Patterson et al., 2002). Anytime the issues at stake are important and the outcome is uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed or about the people with whom we are discussing it, there is potential for us to struggle with the conversation. A difficult conversation is usually challenging for both the speaker and the listener because it typically involves giving and receiving an unpleasant message.

When we face difficult conversations, we can do one of three things:

- Avoid them and suffer the consequences
- Face them and handle them poorly
- Face them and handle them well

Do you have a tendency towards silence or aggression? **Silence tendencies** include masking problems, avoiding difficult conversations and withdrawing. **Aggressive tendencies** include trying to control behavior, labeling, manipulating and attacking.

1. What difficult conversations have you had in the past or need to have right now?
2. What made or will make them difficult or challenging for you?
3. What are your fears/barriers in having difficult conversations?
4. If you have had a difficult conversation in the past, how did it go? If it went well, what made it successful?

If we don't address our barriers in having difficult conversations, we:

- ▶ Increase our tendency to judge the behavior of others
- ▶ Decrease our ability to have needed difficult conversations
- ▶ Attribute negative intentions to a person's behavior
- ▶ Decrease our ability to affect a positive change in other's behavior

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

1. Accept 3 Things About Yourself

You make mistakes. If you can't admit to yourself that you sometimes make mistakes, you'll find it more difficult to understand and accept the legitimate aspects of another person's story about what is going on for him or her. When you hold yourself to an all-or-nothing standard, even a small mistake can seem catastrophic and almost impossible to admit. One reason we are reluctant to admit mistakes is that we fear being seen as weak or incompetent. Yet often, people who take the possibility of mistakes in stride are seen as confident and secure, whereas those who resist acknowledging even the possibility of a mistake are seen as insecure and lacking confidence.

Your intentions are complex. Sometimes we get anxious about upcoming difficult conversations because we know that our past behavior was not always motivated by the best intentions. By being honest with yourself about the complexity of your motivations, you have a better chance of staying on your feet if the accusation of having bad intentions arises. And you can respond in a way that is genuine: "As I think about it, some of what you're saying makes sense. My impatience towards you may in part stem from my own needs in this project. I don't think that is the only reason for us to talk today, but I acknowledge that I had some intentions for this project that weren't clear to you."

You have contributed to the problem. A crucial step for grounding yourself in difficult conversations is assessing and taking responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem. This is not easy to do and can keep you from having difficult conversations. You may fear what the other person will confront you with. You have two choices: try to tiptoe through the conversation hoping that nothing is said about how you may have contributed to the problem with the other person or you can work through this issue in advance and admit/accept your contributions to the problem.



How have you contributed to this problem?

2. Talk To Yourself and Prepare

Ask yourself:

- How is the situation affecting me and my relationship?
- Is this conversation important? Remember, if it is important to you it is worth your time to have the conversation.
- Is the situation something I can let go of and it won't impact our relationship?

If you have determined that you need to have this conversation, consider:

- **Timing and Time.** When is the best time to have this conversation for both you and the other person? Generally, the conversation should be as near the precipitating event as possible. Don't "hit and run". While your comment may help you feel a little better ("At least I've said something"), it makes the person feel defensive and frustrated. *A good rule to follow is:* If you're going to talk, then really talk. And if you're really going to talk, you can't do it on the run. You need to plan a time to talk. You should be explicit about wanting 10 minutes or an hour to discuss something that is important to you and the other person. You can't have a real conversation in 30 seconds and anything less than a real conversation isn't going to help.
- **Homeostasis.** Where are you? Where is the other person? Remember, we don't communicate as well or hear the other person as well when we are out of our homeostasis. Allow some processing and cooling-off time between the event and the conversation.
- **Letting go of trying to control a person's reactions.** We tend to want to avoid the extra pressure during a difficult conversation of a bad reaction from the other person. "I don't want to get her upset, and I especially don't want her mad at me." As a result, you may hold as one of your primary goals getting through the conversation without the other person having a "bad" reaction. There's nothing wrong (and plenty right) with not wanting to hurt someone or wanting them to like you even after you convey a tough message. Yet holding that as a primary purpose in the conversation leads to trouble. Just as you can't change another person, you can't control his/her reactions – and you shouldn't try.

When having a difficult conversation rather than trying to control a person's reaction, adopt the "**And-Stance**". You come into a conversation with the purpose of talking about a person's unauthorized overtime, letting the person know what policy this violates, letting him know the impact it has on the department, *and* giving him space to feel however he feels. This gives you control over everything you can control and gives the other person space to react however he needs to react. Try not to measure the success of a difficult conversation by whether or not the other person gets upset or mad.

- **Preparing for another person's response.** Instead of trying to control a person's reaction, *prepare* for it. Take time in advance to imagine the conversation. Instead of focusing on how badly it may go, focus on what you can learn about how the other person might respond. Is she likely to cry? Yell? Shutdown and not talk? Pretend everything is fine? Attack your position or character? Consider how you will best respond to these reactions.

In thinking about the person you need to have this conversation with, what can you expect from this person when they hear your message?

3. Having the Conversation

We recommend that you work for *mutual understanding* in difficult conversations. Not mutual agreement, necessarily, but working towards a common outcome in the conversation and a better understanding of each other's stories, so that you can make informed decisions (alone or together) about what to do next. Keep the following **three purposes** front and center in your mind when having a difficult conversation:

- **Learn the other person's story.** Explore the other person's perspective on the issue. Encourage the other person to tell his or her story. What information does she see/have that I missed or don't have access to? What past experiences influence her? What is her reasoning for why she did what she did? What were her intentions? How did my actions impact her? What does she think I am contributing to the problem? What is she feeling? What does this situation mean to her? What's at stake for her?
- **Express your views and feelings.** Share your story with the other person. Express your position and feelings to your own satisfaction. Say what is important for you to say about the problem/issue. What are your intentions? What is your reasoning? What does the situation mean to you? What is at stake for you? What information do you have that the other person may not know? What are your views/conclusions based on? Where do they come from?

Don't present your story as "the truth" – which can create resentment and defensiveness in the other person and lead to arguments. Facts are facts and everything else is everything else. It's important to be vigilant about the distinctions when having difficult conversations. It's the difference between: "Yelling in the workplace is unprofessional and just plain wrong" and "My view is that yelling in the workplace is not helpful to your co-workers or to you."

- **Problem-solve together.** Given what you and the other person have each learned, what would improve the situation going forward? Are there common purposes behind each of your needs? Can you brainstorm creative ways to satisfy both of your needs? Where the needs conflict, can you ensure a fair and workable way to resolve the conflict? Avoid casting the other person as "the problem." Invite them to be a partner in deciding how to best deal with the issue, "Let's work on how we can best..." "I wonder if it's possible to do...What do you think?"

4. Getting Started

One way or another, if you are going to have a difficult conversation, you have to start by saying *something*. We recommend that you start by describing – without judgment – the situation/problem and to describe that situation/problem as a difference between you and the other person. You don't have to know what the other person's story entails at this point to note a difference in your opening statement. All you need to do is acknowledge that it's there; that there are probably lots of things you don't understand about the other person's perspective, and that one of the reasons you want to talk is that you want to learn more about his point of view.

Your opening statement might go like this: “I wanted to talk with you about your work on the project lately. My sense is that you and I see this situation differently. I'd like to learn more about how you're seeing it and share how I'm seeing it. I hope together we can figure out how to best handle this issue.”



Write your sample opening statement:

5. During the Conversation – Speaking Effectively

- **Be descriptive, specific, clear and direct** about the situation and the other person's behavior. Give specific examples for the other person to consider. Use the “***Me-Me And***” ***technique*** which connects two aspects of what you think or feel, such as “I feel badly for how rough things have been for you, *and* I'm feeling disappointed in you.” Or use the “***Don't/Do***” ***technique*** which addresses the other person's conclusions and confirms your real purpose/intention, such as “I *don't* want you to think I'm saying that I can't count on you. I find you to be quite reliable. I *do*, however, have concerns over what happened with yesterday's deadline.”
- **Start with what matters most.** Say upfront what is at the very heart of the issue for you: “For me, what this is really about is...” All too typical of difficult conversations is that we say the least important things, sometimes over and over again, and wonder why the other person doesn't understand what we really think and are concerned about and why nothing changes.

- **Only speak for yourself.** Use “I” statements instead of “We” statements as much as possible.
- **Avoid using “always” and “never”.** “Why do you *always*...?” “You *never* ...” These two words have serious drawbacks: they are rarely accurate so they invite an argument over the question of frequency and they make it harder for a person to consider changing their behavior because they suggest that change will be difficult or impossible. The key is to communicate in a way that invites and encourages a person to consider new ways of behaving, rather than implying he or she is a jerk and it’s too bad there’s nothing she can do about it.
- **Observe non verbal communication.** Watch for a person’s nonverbal communication - it can tell you a lot! A person says he’s “fine”, but his tone of voice, facial expressions and body language say he is not fine. Tell him what you see in a neutral way. Comment on his level of emotion or intensity of his reaction, “You seem very frustrated when I talk about...”; “I notice whenever I talk about this issue you seem sad and hurt.”
- **Stay in the moment.** Be alert to what is happening moment-by-moment in the conversation. Focus on the here and now of the conversation.
- **Encourage clear communication** by *reflecting* back what you hear, *checking in* with a person and asking *open-ended questions*.
 - **Reflection** is when you say back to a person what you believe they have just expressed, using language that is close to the person’s own. A good reflection captures both the substance and the emotional tone of what the person has said, without parroting. *Usually the reason someone repeats himself/herself in a conversation is because he/she has no indication of being heard and understood.* If you notice that a person is saying the same thing over and over again, take it as a signal that you need to either use better reflections or reflect back more.
Examples:
 - “What you seem to be saying is...”
 - “It sounds as though...”
 - “Let’s see if I’ve got this right. You’re upset because...”
 - “You mentioned that there is not enough time. Can you say more about that?”
 - “It sounds like this situation makes you feel very anxious and untrusting.”
 - **Questioning** is usually done with open-ended questions that encourage reflection, elaboration, dialogue and deliberation.

Open-ended questions give a person broad latitude in how to answer. They elicit more information than yes/no questions. They allow a person to direct his/her response toward what is important.

Examples:

- “What would you like me to understand about that?”
- “What would a reasonable compromise look like to you?”
- “How would you like things to be?”
- “What would you be willing to do?”
- “How would that work for you?”
- “How do you see it differently?”
- “What impact have my actions had on you?”
- “Can you say more about why this is important to you?”

- **Checking in** is a way to help you and the other person gain clarity about the situation and it allows the other person to correct or confirm your reflections. It gives a person the chance to say “No, that’s not quite what I meant. What I really meant was...” Sometimes our reflections contain assumptions or judgments about what a person is saying. Check-ins allow a person to make their story clearer.

Examples:

- “You’ve said you’d like to... Is there anything else?”
- “Where do you want to go from here?”
- “Have I got it right about how you feel about this?”

Risky Communication: You may want to avoid....

- **Making assumptions.** You may have an idea about what’s going on for a person, but you have no way of knowing for sure until you ask.
- **Judging a person** and what he or she is saying by:
 - Criticizing – “That was simply WRONG.”
 - Blaming – “This is all your fault.”
 - Diagnosing – “You know what your problem is?”
- **Offering solutions** by:
 - Ordering – “You need to fix that right away.”
 - Threatening – “If you don’t do this, I won’t help you.”
 - Moralizing – “You should apologize to her.”
 - Excessive Questioning – “When did it happen?” “Are you sorry?” “What did you say then?” “Wow, do you regret saying that?” “What did he do then?”
 - Advising – “Here is what I think you should do...”
- **Avoiding concerns** by:

- Diverting – “If you think that’s bad, let me tell you what happened to me!”
- Logical Argument – “If you keep saying that kind of stuff to Susan, you can expect this treatment.”
- Reassuring – “You have the tools to handle this. You’ll deal with it and get over it.”

All of these create real barriers to effective communication with people. They are **high-risk responses** when a person is interacting under stress and feeling triggered. These types of responses often make a person feel misunderstood, unsafe and defensive (judging); manipulated, coerced, demeaned, anxious, dependent and resentful (offering solutions); unheard, unimportant and feelings diminished (avoiding).

Rather than helping a person become clearer about what is important and more confident in their capacity to deal with the issue, these high-risk responses diminish a person’s sense of power and self-worth. They foster resentment, defensiveness, withdrawal and/or dependency and inhibit problem solving ability. They also tend to block the feelings of a person who is then less likely to express their true feelings or concerns to you.

Unfortunately, most people (approximately 90%) use these responses when discussing an issue/problem/conflict with another person. *Fortunately, we can “unlearn” these old bad habits.*



6. During the Conversation – Listening Well

Listening well is one of the most powerful skills you can bring to a difficult conversation. It helps you understand a person and it helps that person understand you. Listening well can transform a difficult conversation into a constructive, positive and helpful conversation. And it is very difficult to move a difficult conversation in this direction until a ***person feels heard and understood.***

Listening well requires a ***shift in goals from persuasion and winning to learning.*** To do this you stop trying to persuade or force a person to do better and focus instead on helping that person *choose* to do better. And you do this by listening, reflecting, asking open-ended questions and acknowledging his/her feelings. You shift your internal stance from “I know what you’re all about” to “Help me understand you.”

When a person is not listening, you may think it is because he/she is stubborn or isn’t really trying or just doesn’t care. So you may try to break

through that by repeating what you've been saying, trying new ways to explain yourself, talking more loudly and forcefully and so forth. On the face of it, these would seem to be good strategies. But they're not. Why? Because in the great majority of cases, **the reason a person is not listening to you is because they do not feel heard by you.** And the way to help a person feel heard is by putting in the effort to listen to what they have to say, and perhaps most important, by demonstrating that you understand what the person is saying and feeling.

The most obvious benefit of listening well is a better understanding of another person. But there is a second, more surprising benefit as well. Listening to another person helps them listen better to you. **When a person feels heard, he or she is much more able to hear you and understand your perspective.**

7. After the conversation

Allow a person time to process what was discussed during the difficult conversation. Allow yourself to reestablish your homeostasis and allow the other person to reestablish theirs.

Schedule a follow-up conversation. Most difficult conversations are not just a single conversation. Follow-up conversations ensure that positive actions and results are happening and are on course. They also provide opportunities for you and the other person to check in and see how things are going for both of you; how both of you are feeling about things.

***Remember: Practice, Practice, Practice**

Most of “how” we communicate comes from old habits. Learning new habits requires practice. Find ways to role-play, to try on the skills. Choose one skill at a time to work on, such as listening ‘in the moment’ or reflection. Once you have mastered that skill, choose a new one. Make a commitment to practice and change.



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS CHECKLIST

1. Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

- Understand and accept that we all make mistakes
- Be honest about all of your intentions regarding the other person
- Assess and take responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem
- Be aware of where your homeostasis is and the other person's homeostasis is
- Choose a good time to have a difficult conversation
- Set aside a sufficient amount of time to really talk with the other person
- Let go of trying to control a person's reactions – use the “And Stance” technique
- Focus on what you can learn about how a person might respond in a difficult conversation and consider how best to respond to those reactions

2. Having the Conversation

- Prepare your opening statement - describe, without judgment, the situation and note differences between you and the other person
- Learn the other person's story
- Tell your story
- Problem-solve together

3. During the Conversation – Speaking Effectively

- Be descriptive, specific, clear and direct – Use the “Me-Me And” technique or the “Don't/Do” technique
- Start with what matters most
- Only speak for yourself and avoid using “always” and “never”
- Observe nonverbal communication
- Use reflections, open-ended questions and check-ins
- Stay in the moment
- Don't make assumptions or judge a person and what he/she is saying
- Don't offer solutions by ordering, threatening, moralizing, advising
- Don't avoid a person's concerns by diverting, logical arguments or reassuring

4. During the Conversation – Listening Well

- Shift your goals from persuasion and winning to learning about a person
- Stop trying to persuade or force a person to do better
- Help a person choose to do better
- Listen, reflect back, ask open-ended questions and acknowledge his/her feelings

5. After the Conversation

- Allow a person some time to process what was discussed
- Schedule a follow-up conversation