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CONFLICT AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

A Leadership Competencies Laboratory

Brent D. Ruben and Christine Goldthwaite

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of organizational life within colleges and universities, and one of our greatest tests as leaders is the way we think about and respond to conflictful situations. Problems related to conflict occur in relationships, workgroups, teams, departments, and schools and at the institutional level. Many definitions of conflict have been offered. One general and quite useful classic description is “an incompatibility of interest between two or more persons giving rise to struggles between them” (Simons, 1974). Recognizing that “incompatibilities” may be “real” and tangible, or symbolic and conceptual (Ruben, 1978), we suggest modifying the definition to “any perceived incompatibility of interest between two or more persons giving rise to struggles between them.” Conflict can be triggered by competition over scarce resources, contradictory points of view about organizational priorities, conflicting values, differing perspectives on particular ideas, contentious responses to future plans, disagreements about aspects of day-to-day operations, reactions to a written or spoken message, or any of a number of other events, circumstances, or perceptions.

One of the particular challenges for leaders with regard to conflict pertains to the tendency to view conflict in negative terms, as a struggle, fight, incompatibility, or problem that must be solved or eliminated (Ruben, 1978). Indeed, conflict can “feel” uncomfortable depending on the way it is understood in a particular situation. But even when conflict seems and feels negative, it can have many positive qualities and can lead to beneficial long-term outcomes if leaders allow themselves to approach these circumstances with a neutral, even positive outlook and a commitment to find benefits in

the situation. These benefits could be a more informed solution to a problem, more constructive collaboration among colleagues, an enhancement in perspective, or personal learning by the parties involved. The point is simply that neither the conflict nor potential outcomes are inherently negative or positive, but rather ultimately depend on the way a leader frames and addresses the situation (Ruben, 1978).

As is so often the case, determining whether to attach a positive or negative valence to a particular circumstance is very much a matter of interpretation and sensemaking. Without becoming overly philosophical, we can say that neither problems nor their interpretation exist fully formed or defined in the world; rather, we define them as we make personal sense of the events we encounter. Just as communication processes play a role in determining what we will regard as a potentially positive or negative circumstance, communication is also extremely important in the way we interact with others in these situations.

Much of what has been written under the heading of “difficult conversations” deals with circumstances that are potentially conflictful, potentially negative, and often emotionally charged, where the challenge as a leader is to constructively frame the situation and to address it in a way that results in positive and productive outcomes.

In formal and informal situations of all kinds, topics emerge that may be difficult for leaders and colleagues to address. This difficulty may be attributed to the sensitivity of the topic, strongly held opinions, intense emotions, or a history of challenging or conflictful communication. The core difficulty may also arise from recognized power differentials among the individuals involved, the high stakes surrounding a particular issue or set of issues, and often some combination of these factors.

Difficulty in Personal Interactions

It has become a widely accepted truism that conversations regarding topics such as religion and politics can be problematic, especially among individuals with strong convictions or competing perspectives on the subject. These topics can even become contentious among close family and friends.

One remedy often suggested is to avoid controversial topics altogether. Avoidance can be an effective strategy, but it seems unfortunate that otherwise close friends and colleagues cannot have constructive conversations on such topics and that the selected approach for dealing with these difficult matters is to avoid them entirely. In these and other circumstances, a strategy of avoidance can contribute to a context that is superficial, unproductive,

and uncomfortable for all involved. Take for example a situation where friends of opposing political orientations are in the same room watching news programming on a channel recognized for partisan reporting, or when colleagues in a group discussion at work begin to exchange views on a senior leader who is liked and admired by some of those present yet disliked and disrespected by others. Predictably, messages will resonate in a confirming way with some but lead to a strong negative reaction by others, and vice versa. One person's truths may be another's fiction, and efforts to discuss controversial or contentious topics have the potential to easily spiral out of hand and lead to troublesome outcomes.

Difficulty in Professional Interactions

Difficult communication situations are relatively common in workplace contexts, and often issues arise that *must* be addressed; avoidance may not be a viable option. Such situations may occur in one-to-one conversations, group meetings, and organizational settings. The classic example of a difficult conversation arises when an individual must share information that is likely to be regarded as negative or potentially upsetting. This can occur, for example, where unwelcomed test results must be discussed with a patient or student, or when, as a leader, bad news about a hoped-for promotion must be conveyed, a critique is needed to address a pattern of deteriorating performance, or behaviors judged to be inappropriate or unprofessional must be confronted.

Analogous situations arise when a leader needs to communicate difficult messages to a workgroup or department, such as when a leader judges the performance of the unit to be substandard, or when that leader has been told by superiors that matters of concern must be addressed with the workgroup or department. Conflicts that a leader must address may also arise due to interpersonal incompatibilities, task disagreements over what needs to be done, or process disagreements related to responsibilities for completing work within groups or teams (Jehn, 1997). More broadly, leadership challenges also occur when delivering difficult messages regarding significant organizational issues. These may include topics such as anticipated mergers, budget cuts, plans to outsource core services, or other changes that affected parties will likely find troubling.

Thinking in terms of educational and academic health care environments in particular, if left unaddressed—or addressed in a less than ideal manner—these kinds of situations can damage the educational climate, employee morale and engagement, and workplace productivity, and may ultimately

have an adverse impact on organizational effectiveness or the experiences of beneficiaries (Overton & Lowery, 2013).

Preparing for Difficult Conversations

There are concrete steps leaders can take in preparing for difficult conversations that will help to improve the chances for a positive outcome. The principles of strategic communication can be helpful for engaging in these types of discussions (Ruben et al., 2017). The model that follows, adapted for the context of engaging in difficult conversations, is one such guide that might be useful for formal leaders or those seeking to influence the outcomes of a difficult conversation.

What Is at Stake?

First, for the individual contemplating how to approach a difficult conversation, it is important to determine what is at stake for the organization and the individuals involved. How might a difficult conversation advance important organizational aspirations, standards, and principles? How might the conversation affect employees' dedication to the organization and their work? In what ways will the interaction influence the employees' perception of the leader? What precedent does the selected approach set for addressing future difficult topics in a candid and constructive manner? Are there personally sensitive or identity issues that may be playing a role in the situation for one or more individuals? How might the handling of sensitive matters affect the experiences of beneficiaries—students, patients, or visitors, for example—and their view of an organization or its faculty and staff? Gaining clarity on what is at stake will provide a rationale for the discussion and serve as a guide in preparing for a difficult conversation.

Who Is the Audience?

A second step is to consider who should be included in the conversation. Is this a matter that should be taken up with one individual, several individuals, a workgroup, or an entire department? What benefits and liabilities may result from engaging a larger group in the discussion, and in what ways should the presence of a broader audience influence one's approach to the conversation? Is there a relevant history of communication with this individual or group that should be considered? What power or role differentials exist, and how should one take account of these factors in preparing for and engaging in the conversation? How important is the cultivation of long-term relationships with this individual or group? Each of these considerations can be important to the way one thinks about and

prepares for a challenging conversation and to the short- and longer term success of the communication event.

What Is the Goal?

Goals provide an essential guide for difficult conversations because they have the potential to shape the way the interaction unfolds. It is therefore critical to clarify goals and desired outcomes prior to the start of the conversation and to continually remind oneself of your intentions as the conversation progresses. Particularly when problematic topics are being addressed or when emotions are heightened, having clearly defined goals and predetermined outcomes in mind can contribute to the ways in which one navigates the conversation.

While the goals may seem rather obvious, there are often many nuances to consider. For example, initiating a conversation intended to solicit input and gain an understanding of a topic of concern to the other party would be quite different in approach and messaging than one where the aim is to share a list of concerns with others. Regardless of the purpose for the conversation, it is important to remind oneself that every communicative interaction has both a relational and informational dimension (Watzlawick et al., 1967), and both require consideration. While the primary goal may be to deliver a difficult message that involves a series of facts, a no less important goal may be to preserve or strengthen—or at least not further damage—a relationship. In an organization where many legal or regulatory considerations are in play, upholding policies or procedures may need to take priority. Even in highly regulated environments, however, the longer term foundation for a commitment to policy adherence is reinforced through attention to relational communication.

Thinking through one's goals prior to every difficult encounter can be challenging or time-consuming, but this stage is particularly critical when planning to engage with individuals who may be reluctant to speak candidly on a given topic, or with those who have lesser or greater positional power. In addition, an important secondary goal is for leaders to handle difficult conversations in a way that models an approach to leadership communication that would hopefully be emulated by colleagues when they are dealing with comparable situations.

What Is the Plan of Action?

Step 4 focuses on the actual planning of the conversation. Formulating the action plan requires a determination of one's intended message and the selection of an appropriate venue or medium for the conversation given the identified goals. For example, should the message be primarily

informative, simply conveying the facts related to a decision, or should the message also explain the underlying rationale? Should the message include a persuasive appeal designed to influence listeners to change their perspectives or behavior? Is the message designed to solicit information, or is a two-way exchange of perspectives most appropriate given the identified goals?

This stage also involves a consideration of the most effective channels for the circumstance, whether it be an email, an informal, spontaneous hallway conversation, a town hall meeting, or a formally scheduled one-on-one meeting in one's office. For example, if a message is likely to stir emotions, a face-to-face setting is generally most appropriate, despite the potential for triggering open conflict and the need to respond more quickly and extemporaneously than might be required if the conversation took place via email or memo. If the matter is likely to be highly contentious or potentially litigious, it may also be important to follow up with written confirmation of key points from the conversation and to consider having a designated witness or security personnel present to provide a third-party account of what transpired in the meeting, and in extreme cases to assist with tensions that may arise in the moment.

How Did It Go?

An important step often overlooked by leaders is to reflect on the outcomes of the discussion. Important questions to consider during this stage are as follows: How would you describe the process, tenor, and outcome of the meeting? How would others involved in the process summarize the conversation? What follow-up steps are required? How should this discussion be documented in cases of potential grievances or litigation? What might be done differently in the future to address this kind of problem if it were to occur again? How can this kind of situation be prevented from developing (e.g., set clearer expectations, stay closer to the process)? What personal and/or professional leadership lessons can you take away from the situation? Identifying a colleague who can be a helpful sounding board, coach, or mentor with whom to confer in this debriefing stage can be extremely beneficial.

These five steps can be valuable as a guide for leaders. The fast-paced nature of the contemporary workplace is such that we may have the tendency to move immediately into difficult conversations without adequate planning related to the rationale, goals, or most appropriate communication infrastructure for the encounter. As Ruben et al. (2016) are careful to note, "While strategic communication practices do not guarantee the absence of undesirable outcomes for leaders, such practices certainly lessen their likelihood of occurrence and their severity if and when they do occur" (p. 202).

Communication Strategies for Difficult Conversations

There are a number of specific communication strategies that can be helpful in addressing and managing conflicts and other difficult situations in a productive manner. Various authors (Dowling, 2008; The Ohio State University, 2019; Stone et al., 1991) offer advice and suggestions, such as the following:

- **Create a positive climate.** At the outset of a difficult conversation, endeavor to create a climate where all parties feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings without fear of being immediately criticized or attacked. Be proactive and clear in expressing your desire to have a constructive interaction. Demonstrating mutual respect and taking a problem-solving stance helps to create a positive environment (Patterson et al., 2002).
- **Focus first on areas of potential agreement.** Promote shared respect and a sense of mutual purpose. Identify values, perspectives, and “high-level” themes on which all parties can agree that will serve as the foundation for the conversation prior to engaging in the specifics. Focusing first on shared values and goals generally provides a useful point of entry to the discussion. From those areas of shared perspective, the conversation can move to topics where there will be predictable differences of opinion or sources of potential conflict or concern. To the extent that these difficult topics can be described in relation to common values or goals, there is often a greater likelihood of mutual understanding and, ideally, increased receptivity.
- **Listen carefully and actively.** An effective and nonjudgmental focus on the ideas and words of others—rather than your own reactions—is essential, though often quite difficult to achieve. Helpful techniques include asking clarifying questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing what you think you heard the other person say before offering a response of your own.
- **Focus on perspective-taking.** Engage in listening efforts with the goal of understanding the situation from the other person’s point of view. How do they see it? What information and arguments are they incorporating into their perspective? How do they construct their point of view and arrive at the conclusions they do? This understanding is important in its own right for clarifying others’ viewpoints, and it can also be helpful in formulating the most effective response to the situation. Moreover, the act of listening conveys a level of respect that fosters the best possible climate for the subsequent discussion of points of disagreement.

- **Avoid accusations, defensiveness, generalizations, and attributions of motives or implied blame.** Rather than engage in a discussion of one another's motives or the history of disagreements about a given problem, it may be more productive to focus instead on goals, current topics, and a path forward for the future. Consciously avoid tendencies to overreact verbally or emotionally to particular "hot-button" or trigger phrases that may be used by others. Often the best approach is simply to ignore potentially annoying words or phrases (Cherniss & Roche, 2020). Endeavor to steer clear of personal sensitivities and concerns that are not central to the issue at hand.
- **Distinguish between facts and stories.** Focusing on facts, while minimizing personal accounts, narratives, and stories that refer to feelings, perceptions, and attitudes, tends to keep the conversation on track and helps to steer clear of emotional responses and reactions.
- **Minimize the use of contentious words and phrases.** Avoid using words or terminology that might be lightning rods and that could trigger a knee-jerk reaction in others. Also, suppress your own tendencies to react to particular words of others in a reflex-like manner, focusing instead on the more general concepts behind the words.
- **Adopt "Yes, and" rather than "Yes, but" framing.** Often the simple decision to use "and" rather than "but" can help to create constructive conversations rather than generating defensiveness. For example, a much more positive climate is established by a phrase such as, "I can understand and agree with your first point, *and* I would like to hear more about your thinking about the second point" rather than "I like your initial point, *but* the second point is unclear."
- **Expect the unexpected.** Assume that the conversation may not proceed exactly as you had hoped. Anticipate points of possible difficulty while also developing contingency strategies and alternative messages. For example, think about how to deal with silence or hostile responses. Generally, the best approach is to remain respectful, be mindful of your goal(s), stay on message, and remember that you always have the option to defer parts of the discussion to a later time if you choose. If you decide to select this option, you create an opportunity to gather additional information or consider alternative approaches, messages, or venues/media. There may be times when remaining respectful and calm is particularly difficult, especially when others are not exhibiting these same behaviors. Indeed, it may even become necessary to indicate that a person's comments and manner are inappropriate and to reschedule the conversation to provide the individual an opportunity to collect their thoughts

and moderate their emotions to ensure the session will be more constructive for all involved.

- **Plan how you will close the conversation.** Generally, this should include a summary and an expression of appreciation for others' willingness to have a constructive/civil discussion of the situation or problem, acknowledging that you understand it was not necessarily easy to do, and indicating your desire for positive future interactions on this and other subjects. There are situations where achieving one's goals will not be possible, and it may be necessary to step away, defer final action, or plan to continue the discussion at a future time. Also, be prepared to revisit the conversation in the future of a problem persists. If extreme personal sensitivities, allegations, and concerns surface, and particularly if they may have regulatory or legal implications, it may be important to put the conversation on hold and defer follow-up until there has been an opportunity to consult with individuals who are appropriately trained or who occupy official university-assigned roles in human resources or other responsible departments.

Helpful Openings

Beginning a difficult conversation can be particularly challenging. Author Judy Ringer (2019) offers a number of possible opening lines that may be useful, modeling an approach that emphasizes the use of "I" statements:

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)? If the person says, "Sure, let me get back to you," take the lead in getting back to them if they do not follow-up.
- I think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas about how to _____.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

Communication Style and Style Flexibility

Over the course of a lifetime of experiences, each person develops a unique communication style—a customary, preferred, and natural approach for relating to the many situations and people they encounter (Ruben, 2021b; Ruben & Stewart, 2020). Communication styles are habits of practice. They serve as default guides in our interactions in social and professional settings.

Typically, communication styles operate in the background of our experiences. As such, they are seldom a subject for reflection. This lack of conscious attention can be a problem for leaders—actually, for anyone striving to be as successful as they can be in social and professional situations. If individuals could assume that their default communication styles were always effective and well-received, regardless of the goals, situations, or persons with whom they were interacting, there would be no problem. As discussed in the previous chapters, however, so often personal, social, and professional effectiveness depend on an individual's ability to apply analytic and communication competencies to evaluate a situation, their own goals, and the communication styles of those with whom they are interacting, and then to select their approach accordingly. Various tools and techniques, including many of those related to emotional intelligence, are available to assist with the self-reflection and awareness-raising for leaders (Cherniss & Roche, 2020). One tool designed specifically for this purpose is the Communication Style Inventory (Ruben, 2021b).

While a reflective and strategic approach to communication style can always be an asset to leaders and others in professional settings, it is particularly essential when dealing with conflict and difficult conversations. Some leaders, for example, naturally use an outgoing, highly verbal style in their dealings with others, while others may customarily use a more passive and restrained interpersonal style, due either to preference or apprehension about speaking in social situations. Each approach has its assets and liabilities, depending on the situation at hand. In a low-stakes situation, a reserved, moderated response may be a very reasonable approach, enabling one to avoid conflict and solidify a foundation of goodwill for future situations. On the other hand, an emergency or crisis is likely to call for greater expedience, assertiveness, and tenacity. That said, an overly expressive and assertive approach in a crisis situation can exacerbate tensions and may trigger unhelpful emotional responses. Developing the ability to analyze situations, determining how others with whom you are interacting are likely to deal with particular events, and being well-informed about your own communication style—and then consciously selecting an approach based on that knowledge—can be extremely helpful for preparing for difficult conversations. While generalizations can be problematic, it is helpful

to be mindful that some common responses to challenging and conflictual situations should be avoided if at all possible. These include (a) avoiding and failing to engage with the issue; (b) passively yielding to another's position; (c) accepting an outcome that is wholly incompatible with one's goals; and (d) remaining overly rigid in one's position. Every effort should be made to prevent these outcomes.

Each person's communication style is highly individualized, falling somewhere on a spectrum that ranges from an internalizing approach at one end to an externalizing approach at the other (Ruben, 2021b; Ruben & Stewart, 2020). Each end of the spectrum defines an extreme. An internalizing style is characterized as being less verbal, reserved, and indirect, and an externalizing style is highly verbal, blunt, and dominating. While there are assets associated with both styles, each also has liabilities (Ruben & Stewart, 2020). For example, someone with an internalizing style might be perceived as sensitive to others' needs and wants, an effective listener, and willing to compromise. Their style might also be interpreted as avoiding important issues and being slow to respond and overly sensitive, with the result of potentially limited or diminished impact. Someone with an externalizing style might be viewed as articulate, outgoing, and able to take charge, but also may be less aware of nonverbal cues, too quick to respond, or insensitive, with the result being damage to one or more relationships.

Leading difficult conversations requires individuals to be aware of their natural approach and to recognize another's style in order to develop flexibility, particularly when extreme styles intersect in difficult conversations. For example, if two individuals with an externalizing approach are engaged in a difficult conversation, escalating conflict may be likely, while at the other extreme, inaction may be the result of difficult conversations among two individuals with dominant internalizing styles. Knowing one's own natural or "default" style and making an effort to assess the style of others who will be engaged in a discussion is an important first step. More generally, striving to develop flexibility in one's own style as a way of adapting to the varying needs of situations and the styles of others becomes a very useful leadership competency to acquire.

Building a Facilitative Culture and Climate for Difficult Conversation Success

Difficult conversations are made more problematic in organizations or relationships with a dysfunctional communication climate, or situations where there exists a culture devoid of mutual respect and shared purpose. Difficult conversations are far more likely to be productive when all involved parties

feel that it is safe to engage in dialogue, particularly when there are opposing opinions, strong emotions, and high stakes (Patterson et al., 2012). These realities point to the benefits of ongoing efforts to create a congenial, respectful, and supportive relational and organizational climate.

It is also the case that a climate characterized by defensive, demeaning, or destructive interactions will make it even more difficult to achieve positive outcomes when difficult conversations are needed. In a toxic communication climate, people are reluctant to engage and avoid candor in order to protect their identity and self-esteem. Armed with this insight, it is important that leaders continually work to create a climate where employees feel valued and “psychologically safe” (Edmondson, 1999). While this phrase has a variety of meanings, some associated with pejorative or politically oriented perspectives, the basic dimensions of the concept are quite important for leaders to keep in mind. As Edmondson (2019) notes,

Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed. They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something. They tend to trust and respect their colleagues. When a work environment has reasonably high psychological safety, good things happen; mistakes are reported quickly so that prompt corrective action can be taken; seamless coordination across groups or departments is enabled; and potentially game-changing ideas for innovation are shared. In short, psychological safety is a crucial source of value creation in organizations operating in a complex, changing environment. (p. xvi)

Edmondson also offers three strategies leaders can use to create a psychologically safe climate. These include creating shared expectations, encouraging individuals to voice their perspectives and concerns, and supporting and motivating continuous learning. For leaders, the implications are clear: Strive to be open, encouraging, respectful, constructive, and nonjudgmental in communication and encourage colleagues to do the same.

Conclusion

There are no magical formulas that assure success in difficult conversations. Nonetheless, thoughtful planning, focused engagement, and careful reflection following these conversations are strategies that can help to increase the

likelihood of productive and satisfying outcomes. As a leader, it is essential to be able to acknowledge and respond to disagreement and conflict in a constructive manner. Often, expressions of concern, criticism, or complaint can provide insights about ways to improve leadership and organizational practice. Those who give constructive voice to their concerns can be among one's most dedicated, well-intentioned, and helpful colleagues—rather than being troublemakers or sources of problems as one might assume. While difficult conversations are seldom a favorite pastime for leaders, they represent opportunities to clarify standards of performance, develop employees, promote candor, and most importantly, advance the quality of the organization, its culture, and its work.

For Further Consideration

How would you handle the following situations based on the ideas and suggestions presented in this chapter?

1. A memo outlining a new performance review and evaluation process was distributed to all leaders. The impact of this new program will be significant, and you expect it will cause great concern among your colleagues when they learn about it. You also have concerns and personally do not fully support the change as it is currently structured. The topic is an agenda item for the next meeting. How do you, as program director, introduce and handle the discussion at the meeting?
2. A junior faculty member in your department has complained to you about what is described as bullying behavior of a senior faculty colleague. As the department chair, you have informally discussed the issue with the senior faculty member, but he does not see that his behavior is a problem and instead suggests that his junior colleague should “toughen up.” Recently you have observed his hostile criticism of others in a faculty meeting, prompting the need for you to raise the issue of his behavior again. How would you handle this second communication that you expect to be “difficult”?
3. You are a recently recruited leader in a major unit within the institution. You were promised support of various kinds, and based on those commitments you have shared information with members of the unit and newly recruited faculty members. Nine months have

passed and only a few of these commitments have been realized. You are becoming deeply concerned about your ability to meet the expectations established when you were hired, the declining morale of new and continuing colleagues, and what you see as the very real possibility that you will fail through what seems like no fault of your own. You decide you must have a candid conversation with the person to whom you report, because the time to turn the situation around is limited. What is at stake, what are your goals, and what are your key talking points? What trigger words and phrases should be avoided? What is the ideal outcome from the conversation?