

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



INSTRUCTOR GUIDE

1-DAY COURSE – 6.5 HOURS

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DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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Published by HRDQ

2002 Renaissance Boulevard #100

King of Prussia, PA 19406

Phone: (800) 633-4533

Fax: (800) 633-3683

Web: www.HRDQ.com

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Version 2.0

Last updated May, 2008

ISBN 978-1-58854-465-0

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Instructional Design and Learning Philosophy

We are committed to providing the best core skills content possible for Instructor-Led Training (ILT). The following principles are applied in the development of programs:

Sound Instructional Design

All course content is developed using a variety of research techniques. These include:

- Brainstorming sessions with target audience
- Library research
- Online research
- Customer research (focus groups, surveys, etc.)
- Subject Matter Experts (SME)
- Interviews with trainers

Expert instructional designers create imaginative and innovative solutions for your training needs through the development of powerful instructional elements. These include:

- Learning objectives — effective tools for managing, monitoring and evaluating training
- Meaningfulness — connects the topic to the students' past, present and future
- Appropriate organization of essential ideas — helps students focus on what they need to know in order to learn
- Modeling techniques — demonstrate to students how to act and solve problems
- Active application — the cornerstone to learning — helps students immediately apply what they have learned to a real-life situation
- Consistency — creates consistent instructions and design to help students learn and retain new information
- Accelerated learning techniques — create interactive, hands-on involvement to accommodate different learning styles

Application of Adult Learning Styles

Adults learn best by incorporating their personal experiences with training and by applying what they learn to real-life situations. Our experienced instructional designers incorporate a variety of accelerated learning techniques, role plays, simulations, discussions and lectures within each course. This ensures that the learning will appeal to all learning styles and will be retained.

Course timing

Chapter One: Difficult Conversations — Where Do They Come From?

Type of Activity	Segment	Time
	Introduction: Can you top this?	40
	What makes a conversation difficult?	10
	The change cycle	15
	Why we avoid difficult conversations	10
	Misunderstandings and disagreements	15
	Confrontational language	10
	The escalation process	10



Reading



Written Exercise



Facilitation



Group Activity

Course timing (cont.)

Chapter Two: Crisis Prevention Strategies



Reading



Written Exercise



Facilitation









Group Activity

Type of Activity	Segment	Time
	Know your purpose	10
	Frame your message	10
	Approach confrontation without intimidation	10
	Use positive language	10
	Become listener-centered	15
	Be assertive	15
	Uncover hidden agendas	10
	Develop your "goodwill bank"	10



Course timing (cont.)

Chapter Three: “In the Heat” Communication Strategies

Type of Activity	Segment	Time
	A model for handling difficult situations	20
	Commit to a solution	10
	Replace criticism with constructive feedback	10
	Handling criticism	10
	Sharing feelings in difficult conversations	20
	Anticipate typical responses to confrontation	15



Chapter Four: Performance Management Conversations

Type of Activity	Segment	Time
	Elements of a successful feedback session	25
	Being direct without being insensitive	10

Course timing (cont.)

Chapter Four: Performance Management Conversations (cont.)

Segment	Segment	Time
	Check in regularly	10
	Actions and reactions	10
	Top ten reasons that individuals reject feedback	5
	De-escalating emotions	10
	Coaching through resistance	10
	Dealing with resistant personalities	10
	Strategies to enhance quality performance	10



Reading



Written Exercise



Facilitation



Group Activity

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Course objectives

Successful completion of this course will increase your knowledge and ability to:

- Recognize problems before they become a crisis
- Handle sensitive issues to avoid escalation
- Diffuse difficult situations through appropriate communication
- Express urgency without panic
- Deliver bad news
- Create an environment that encourages problems to be surfaced instead of swept under the rug
- Express emotions appropriately and help others express their feelings appropriately
- Discuss negative feedback constructively
- Create an action plan for dealing with difficult conversations

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Review the course objectives with participants.

Note: The content of this program is geared toward difficult conversations, but not dangerous ones. Let participants know that if they ever feel unsafe, if they worry that they are dealing with a potentially violent person or situation, they should involve HR and/or any process that their organization has in place for handling threatening situations.

Chapter One



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS — WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Ice breaker activity: Have participants share their worst stories about having difficult conversations — either conducting one or being on the receiving end of one. Have participants create a “top ten” list, or, vote on the #1 worst experience, and give that participant a small prize.

Introduction: This chapter covers all the “bad stuff” that goes along with difficult conversations — reasons behind them, different ways we deal with them, how we make them worse, etc. The second chapter will look at general principles for improving the process of having difficult conversations, and the third chapter will look at a process for handling difficult conversations.

Conversational stress activity: See instructions in Trainer Supplement.

Introduction: Can you top this?

Write a brief description of your worst experience with a difficult conversation at work — either conducting one or being at the receiving end.

Why was the conversation so difficult? What outcome were you hoping for? What actually happened?

Conversational stress activity

Your final three statements:

Your team's final three statements:

What makes a conversation difficult?

- Fear
- Conflict
- Surprise
- Change

Assess your sensitivity to change

Instructions: Gauge your personal response to change by rating yourself in each area below. Put a checkmark the column that best describes your personal response to change.

Change-related indicators	Low	Average	High
Need for consistency			
Need to be conventional			
Anxiety about the unknown			
Preference for accepted standards			
Need for control			
Self-confidence associated with the familiar			
Self-esteem associated with established situation			
Need for security			
Tendency to resist change			

Fear: Especially of the unknown—not knowing how the other person will react, of hurting someone’s feelings, of being hurt, of threatening your own or other’s self-esteem or identity, etc.

Conflict: Few people enjoy conflict, and many go out of their way to avoid it. **NOTE:** Many people try to avoid having difficult conversations by using e-mail or voice mail. That is not a solution. Difficult conversations should be conducted face-to-face.

Surprise: Catching someone off guard (or being caught off guard) can make what could have been a smooth conversation difficult. Be certain to schedule a time to talk, when possible.

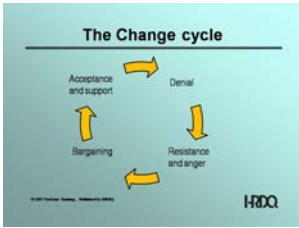
Change: Is a biggie—it can be hard to initiate and hard to accept, and many difficult conversations revolve around having to make a change.

Activity: To gauge your sensitivity to change, take a few minutes to read the indicators and mark where you fall in each area.

The idea isn’t that you must have a low score in all areas. The point is to gain more insight and understanding into the reasons behind your reactions to change.

Additionally, ask participants to note the behaviors they’ve noticed in their department or on their team. Use an “X” to differentiate team ratings from individual ratings. Debrief the activity by processing responses from the group. Understanding others’ points of sensitivity can help you structure conversations to be less difficult.

Briefly discuss the cycle to show that in difficult conversations, people may be in different stages of the change cycle, which will affect how the conversation will go.



Denial: People are often shocked or surprised when change occurs, even if they had a suspicion it was coming.

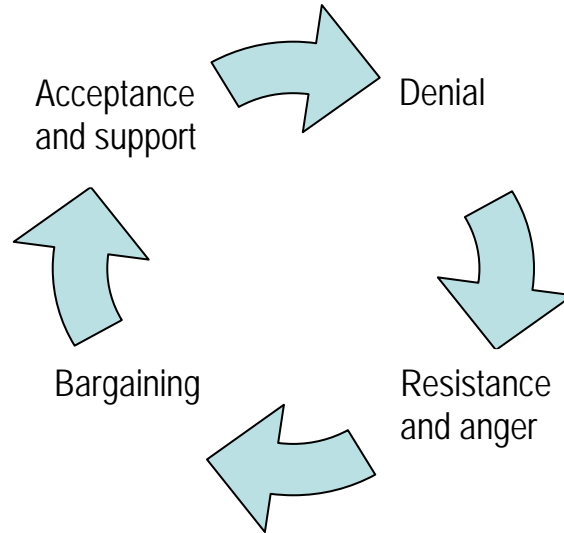
Resistance and anger: There is a natural resistance to change. The familiar is more comfortable. It's easier. It's what people know.

Bargaining: When it becomes apparent that the change isn't going away, people find a way to cope with it to some degree.

Acceptance and support: Once the change is successfully in place, support begins, even if it's very subtle.

Activity: Have participants fill in phrases or statements that reflect each part of the change cycle. Refer to the PPT slides for suggestions, if needed.

The change cycle

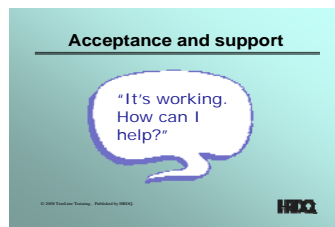
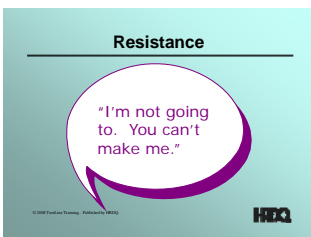
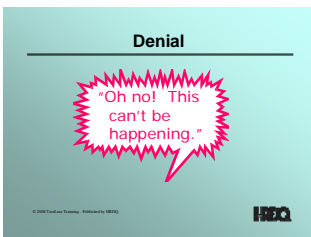


What denial sounds like:

What resistance and anger sound like:

What bargaining sounds like:

What acceptance and support sound like:



Denial: "Oh no! This can't be happening."

Resistance: "I'm not going to. You can't make me."

Bargaining: "Well, I'll go along if you ..."

Acceptance and support: "It's working. How can I help?"

Point: Knowing where people are in the change cycle can help you relate to them better.

Why we avoid difficult conversations

We're afraid we'll make the problem worse.

We don't want to feel bad.

We don't want the other person to feel bad.

We may hear things in the conversation about ourselves that we don't want to hear.

We and/or the other person may get emotional.

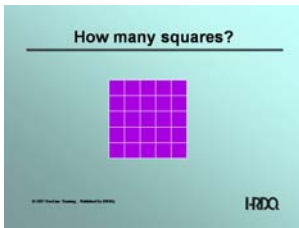
We're not sure how/where the conversation will end.

We fear the consequences, i.e., retribution.

Based on the previous couple pages, we've painted a bleak picture, and it is probably obvious why we avoid difficult conversations.

Activity: Based on participants' stories from the previous activities, develop general categories of difficult conversations. Suggestions: Giving a critical performance review, disagreeing with the majority in a group, owning up to a mistake, confronting disruptive or disrespectful behavior, saying "no" to someone (especially a boss), etc. Post them on flip chart paper and refer to them throughout the program. It's probable that many participants will come to the training with very specific difficult conversations they need to have, and you want to make certain they leave more confident about how to handle their particular situation.

Activity to introduce: Show the PPT and ask participants how many squares they see.



Allow several minutes and ask for answers. Compare answers from different people—they will see different numbers of squares. There is no “right” answer (however, the most they could see is 55). Point: If perceptions differ among people regarding a simple graphic, which causes misunderstandings, think of what misunderstandings can occur about an important issue.

Ask participants, “What percentage of disagreements do you think are caused by misunderstandings?” Answer: According to a 2003 survey, the average response was 71%. Point: Many disagreements (and therefore difficult conversations) can be prevented by simply making sure each person understands the other.

Review the information describing the differences among misunderstandings, negotiable disagreements, and non-negotiable disagreements.

Non-negotiable disagreement: Even when an issue falls into this category, there may be room for negotiation if each side probes for what is really important to the other side. Most people treat all disagreements as if they were in this category, when in fact, very few actually are non-negotiable.

Misunderstandings and disagreements

Misunderstandings and disagreements can lead to unnecessary difficult conversations. Separate the issue into categories:

Misunderstandings:

There is actual agreement, but one or both people were unclear or didn’t understand. With clarification, you realize you are in agreement.

Negotiable disagreements

There is no misunderstanding; you actually disagree. However, the disagreement can be resolved through negotiation—one or both sides willing to make an adjustment.

Ask: “What would it take for me to do what he/she wants me to do?”

Non-negotiable disagreements

There is no misunderstanding; you actually disagree, and each side has taken a firm stand regarding their absolute constraints. Usually a values difference is involved here.

Activity: Read the scenarios and decide if they are a misunderstanding or a disagreement, and what type of disagreement.

1. Two managers, Jamal and Whitney, are discussing whether or not the company picnic should be held at a water park. Jamal says that they could get a corporate discount making the event affordable for most people. However, Whitney believes that the extra insurance needed for the event will cancel any savings, making a local park a better venue for the picnic.

2. A manager and an employee are discussing the employee's performance. The manager says the employee's performance is below average; the employee believes it is fine.

3. Two team members have different ideas about what would motivate their team. One thinks a contest is a great way to generate healthy competition; the other says a contest won't work and will only create animosity among team members.

1. Disagreement/difference of opinion. If the manager's facts are correct, then the facts are clear.

2. Probably a misunderstanding: the employee probably is not clear on the expected performance.

3. Probably a misunderstanding because they agree on the goal (to motivate the team), just not on the means.

Have participants work in pairs or small groups to complete the activities on this page. Debrief by sharing ideas with the entire group.

Activity: Replace each blaming statement with a more effective response.
Possible answers:

"Were you aware that ...?"

"Can I have a moment to explain?"

"I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying ...?"

Activity: Replace each absolute statement with a more effective response.
Possible answers:

"It seems like ..."

"I've noticed several occasions when ..."

"Let's see if this time we can ..."

Reframing shifts focus away from name-calling and toward collaborative activities. For example, a typical response to "I can't trust you" is "Yes, you can." Better: "I want to be trustworthy. Help me understand what I need to do for you to trust me."

Typical response to "You always want things your way" is "No, I don't." Better: "I value your ideas. What am I doing that leads you to feel that way?"

Confrontational language

Nothing turns an ordinary conversation into a difficult one faster than using confrontational language. Confrontational language attempts to prove the other person wrong, focuses on the past, uses words and phrases that provoke the other person, includes direct or implied commands and demonstrates a sense of mistrust and lack of respect. It almost always leads to defensiveness and provocation.

Specific examples include:

Blaming statements

"If you had told me sooner ..."

"You're not listening to me."

"You're not making any sense."

Absolutes

"You always ..."

"You never ..."

"This is a total waste of time."

To counteract others' blaming statements or absolutes: reframe

"I can't trust you."

"You always want things your way."

The escalation process

Psychological changes

- Trust is broken and is difficult to re-establish
- Using selective perception: Looking for evidence to reinforce your judgments about the other person, and ignoring evidence to the contrary
- Moving from self-concern to getting even
- Moving from one issue to many or from a specific issue to general complaints
- Attempting to draw others into the conflict

Visible signs of escalation

- Change in vocabulary and/or tone of voice
- Abrupt mood shift
- Tightness in facial or neck muscles, facial flush and/or teeth clenching
- Physically or verbally acting out

Subtle signs of anger

- Chronic lateness or delays
- Gossip
- Sarcasm and back-handed compliments

How to de-escalate

- Respect the angry person's perceptions as real to him or her.
- Move the angry person to a neutral environment.
- Create a cooling-off period.
- Stay out of the angry person's physical space.
- Use a nonthreatening tone of voice and body language.

When confrontation language is not reigned in, communication breakdown is likely to occur, leading to escalation. At this point, both parties need to de-escalate before productive problem-solving can occur.

Obvious conflict behaviors

- Anger
- Irritability
- Demandingness and uncooperativeness
- Lack of concern for others

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Subtle conflict behaviors

- Hiding behind the rules
- Fueling the rumor mill
- Absenteeism
- Low productivity
- "Yes man" to the boss

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Selective perception examples: If you think the other person is a liar, you'll try to catch her in a lie. You'll never notice anything good that she does; if you see her talking to someone, you'll think she's gossiping about you.

Specific to general example: "You didn't complete the report by 3:00 as you promised" becomes "We can't work together."

