Strategies for difficult conversations

Developing the ability to transform people and relationships

Bob Liebau, MSEd, ATC, VATL, CWS
Associate Director of Campus Recreation,
Director of the Fitness Center and Wellness Resource Center
Communication works for those who work at it.

- John Powell
Wouldn’t it be great if...

• Friends and colleagues spoke with you in a truthful and candid way – all the time?
• You lived and worked in an environment of open dialog and mutual respect?
• You could promote a positive living and working environment?
What is a difficult conversation?
What is a difficult conversation?

• Difficult Conversation:
What is a difficult conversation?

• Difficult Conversation: (\textit{di-fi-kəlt kän-ər-sā-shən\}), noun
What is a difficult conversation?

• Difficult Conversation: (
\textit{\textbackslash{}d\textbackslash{}i-fi-k\textbackslash{}\textepsilon{}l t k\textbackslash{}\textepsilon{}n-v\textbackslash{}\textepsilon{}r-s\textbackslash{}\textepsilon{}-sh\textbackslash{}\textepsilon{}n}), noun, A discussion between two or more people
What is a difficult conversation?

- Difficult Conversation: (di-fi-kəlt kān-vər-sā-shən\), noun, A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high,
What is a difficult conversation?

• Difficult Conversation: (di-fi-kəlt kän-ʋər-sā-shən), noun, A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary
What is a difficult conversation?

• Difficult Conversation: (di-fi-kəlt kān-vər-sā-shən), noun, A discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong
Some common difficult conversations
Some common difficult conversations

• Ending a relationship.
Some common difficult conversations

• Ending a relationship.
• Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments.
Some common difficult conversations

• Ending a relationship.
• Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments.
• Asking a friend to repay a loan.
Some common difficult conversations

- Ending a relationship.
- Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments.
- Asking a friend to repay a loan.
- Giving the boss feedback about his/her behavior.
Some common difficult conversations

• Ending a relationship.
• Talking to a co-worker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments.
• Asking a friend to repay a loan.
• Giving the boss feedback about his/her behavior.
• Critiquing a colleague’s work.
• Asking a roommate to move out.
• Asking a roommate to move out.
• Talking to a team member who isn’t keeping commitments.
• Asking a roommate to move out.
• Talking to a team member who isn’t keeping commitments.
• Discussing a problem with sexual intimacy.
• Asking a roommate to move out.
• Talking to a team member who isn’t keeping commitments.
• Discussing a problem with sexual intimacy.
• Confronting a loved one about a substance abuse problem.
• Asking a roommate to move out.
• Talking to a team member who isn’t keeping commitments.
• Discussing a problem with sexual intimacy.
• Confronting a loved one about a substance abuse problem.
• Talking to a coworker concerning personal hygiene.
Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.

- Benjamin Franklin
What are the benefits to mastering difficult conversations?
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• Research done by the “Crucial Conversations” team has shown that strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power – the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.
Over 30 years of research done by the “Crucial Conversations” team has shown that strong relationships, careers, organizations, and communities all draw from the same source of power – the ability to talk openly about high-stakes, emotional, controversial topics.

"Crucial Conversations," VitalSmarts, Provo, Utah
www.vitalsmarts.com, authors: Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• So...
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

- By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
  1. Kick-start your career.
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
  1. Kick-start your career.
  2. Improve your organization.
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
  1. Kick-start your career.
  2. Improve your organization.
  3. Improve relationships.
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
  1. Kick-start your career.
  2. Improve your organization.
  3. Improve relationships.
  4. Revitalize your community.
What are there benefits to mastering difficult conversations?

• By mastering your difficult conversations you will...
  1. Kick-start your career.
  2. Improve your organization.
  3. Improve relationships.
  4. Revitalize your community.
  5. Improve your personal health.
• Immune Systems – research by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Dr. Ronald Glaser studied married couples (42 years average); compared those who argued constantly with those who resolved differences effectively.
Immune Systems – research by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Dr. Ronald Glaser studied married couples (42 years average); compared those who argued constantly with those who resolved differences effectively.

- Those who failed their difficult conversations had much weaker immune systems.
Immune Systems – research by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Dr. Ronald Glaser studied married couples (42 years average); compared those who argued constantly with those who resolved differences effectively.

- Those who failed their difficult conversations had much weaker immune systems.
- Weaker immune system = poorer health.
Life-threatening diseases – subjects with malignant melanoma treated with traditional treatments; divided into 2 groups; one group learned specific communication skills while the other did not, then dispersed for 5 years.
• Life-threatening diseases – subjects with malignant melanoma treated with traditional treatments; divided into 2 groups; one group learned specific communication skills while the other did not, then dispersed for 5 years.
  o Higher survival rate among those who learned to express themselves effectively (9% died versus 30% in the untrained group).
• Does the way you talk or don’t talk effect your body?
• Does the way you talk or don’t talk effect your body? Absolutely!
• The negative feelings we hold in, the emotional pain we suffer, and the constant battering we endure as we stumble through unhealthy conversations slowly eats away at our health.
• The negative feelings we hold in, the emotional pain we suffer, and the constant battering we endure as we stumble through unhealthy conversations slowly eats away at our health.

• Failed conversations never make us happier, healthier, or better off.
All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to say nothing.

- Eli Wiesel, Novel Laureate
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

• We can do one of three things:
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

• We can do one of three things:
  1. We can avoid them
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

• We can do one of three things:
  1. We can avoid them
  2. We can face them and handle them poorly
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

- We can do one of three things:
  1. We can avoid them
  2. We can face them and handle them poorly
  3. We can face them and handle them well
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

• But we’re usually at our absolute worst.
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

- But we’re usually at our absolute worst.
  - We raise our voice or yell
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

• But we’re usually at our absolute worst.
  • We raise our voice or yell
  • We withdraw
How do we typically handle difficult conversations?

- But we’re usually at our absolute worst.
  - We raise our voice or yell
  - We withdraw
  - We say things we later regret
Why do we behave so poorly?
Why do we behave so poorly?

• We’re designed wrong.
Why do we behave so poorly?

• We’re designed wrong.
• We’re under pressure.
Why do we behave so poorly?

• We’re designed wrong.
• We’re under pressure.
• We’re stumped.
Why do we behave so poorly?

• We’re designed wrong.
• We’re under pressure.
• We’re stumped.
• We act in self-defeating ways.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• Both parties should first attempt to resolve the problem between them before involving other people.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• Both parties should first attempt to resolve the problem between them before involving other people.
  o This shows respect for the other person and trust in the professionalism of the relationship and ability of both parties to do what it takes to have an effective working relationship.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• It is the responsibility of the first party that notices the conflict to bring it to the attention of the other person ASArP.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• It is the responsibility of the first party that notices the conflict to bring it to the attention of the other person ASArP.
  o We can never assume that another person realizes the effect their behavior is having on others.
Difficult conversation principles (two person conflicts)

• It is the responsibility of the first party that notices the conflict to bring it to the attention of the other person ASArP
  - We can never assume that another person realizes the effect their behavior is having on others.
  - Out of respect for the person and the organization, issues should be dealt with ASArP to prevent feelings from festering and negative habits from continuing at the cost of inhibiting effective work habits.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• Review and follow the guidelines as closely as possible:
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• Review and follow the guidelines as closely as possible:
  o No difficult conversation should be approached with raw emotions.
Difficult conversation principles
(two person conflicts)

• Review and follow the guidelines as closely as possible:
  o No difficult conversation should be approached with raw emotions.
  o Careful planning and consideration of consequences and reactions should be done before the meeting.
Difficult conversation action steps
(two person conflicts)
Difficult conversation action steps (two person conflicts)

1. Assess the anger level.
Difficult conversation action steps (two person conflicts)

1. Assess the anger level.

2. Arrange to have a meeting – agree on an appropriate environment: time and place.
Difficult conversation action steps (two person conflicts)

1. Assess the anger level.
2. Arrange to have a meeting – agree on an appropriate environment: time and place.
3. Have the conversation – remember the language tips.
Language tips
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
Language tips

- Avoid “you” statements.
- Focus on behavior, not the person.
Language tips

- Avoid “you” statements.
- Focus on behavior, not the person.
- Focus on actions, not intent.
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
• Focus on behavior, not the person.
• Focus on actions, not intent.
• Watch body language.
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
• Focus on behavior, not the person.
• Focus on actions, not intent.
• Watch body language.
• Be descriptive and specific.
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
• Focus on behavior, not the person.
• Focus on actions, not intent.
• Watch body language.
• Be descriptive and specific.

• Come prepared with data.
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
• Focus on behavior, not the person.
• Focus on actions, not intent.
• Watch body language.
• Be descriptive and specific.
• Come prepared with data.
• Practice active listening skills.
Language tips

• Avoid “you” statements.
• Focus on behavior, not the person.
• Focus on actions, not intent.
• Watch body language.
• Be descriptive and specific.

• Come prepared with data.
• Practice active listening skills.
• Ask open and closed questions to clarify points.
Difficult conversation steps
Difficult conversation steps

1. State the issue to be addressed in an objective manner.
Difficult conversation steps

1. State the issue to be addressed in an objective manner.
2. Talk about the different perspectives you are both coming from.
Difficult conversation steps

1. State the issue to be addressed in an objective manner.
2. Talk about the different perspectives you are both coming from.
3. Talk about the impact on you.
Difficult conversation steps

1. State the issue to be addressed in an objective manner.
2. Talk about the different perspectives you are both coming from.
3. Talk about the impact on you.
4. Take responsibility for your contribution.
Difficult conversation steps

5. Describe feelings, not judgments or accusations.
Difficult conversation steps

5. Describe feelings, not judgments or accusations.

6. Talk about identity issues.
Difficult conversation steps

5. Describe feelings, not judgments or accusations.
6. Talk about identity issues.
7. Ask the other person to follow steps 2-6 as well as to ensure that both parties have clearly expressed their feelings and reactions.
8. Both parties should then state what would be the desired outcome for them.
Difficult conversation steps

8. Both parties should then state what would be the desired outcome for them.

9. Create a goal that combines these two desired outcomes.
Difficult conversation steps

8. Both parties should then state what would be the desired outcome for them.
9. Create a goal that combines these two desired outcomes.
10. Brainstorm ways to reach this goal.
Difficult conversation steps

8. Both parties should then state what would be the desired outcome for them.
9. Create a goal that combines these two desired outcomes.
10. Brainstorm ways to reach this goal.
11. Develop concrete action steps to achieve this goal.
12. Agree on a time and place to meet to check progress and relationship — if there are other issues that need discussing, start this cycle over with new clarification.
The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel, and misrepresentation.

- C. Northcote Parkinson
Thank you

Questions?