

# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

During a career development experience, there may be times when conflict or concerns arise that need to be addressed with participants and/or hosts. In these moments, it is important to focus on creating a learning environment where the most progress can be made. Conflict can be part of any professional working environment, and participants and hosts should be equipped on how to handle these moments throughout their career. While a managing organization typically facilitates these conversations, the framework below can be shared with participants and hosts to encourage and support their abilities to engage in these conversations together.

The following stages are for all involved to consider. Difficult conversations are best facilitated when they are not delivered as a top-down conversation, but rather a collaboration among all involved to reach a resolution. It is flexible and up to the group who begins the conversation and shares their story. During the conversation, pay attention to any possible derailments, including defensiveness, changing the topic, deflecting, and extreme emotion. These should be addressed in a gentle and respectful manner that supports individuals to feel comfortable expressing themselves, but also redirects to the conversation and topic at hand.

## STAGE 1: PREPARE

- Clarify your purpose and interests in this conversation. What do you want to accomplish?
- Determine the learning, sharing, and problem solving that you want as a result.
- Focus on the main message(s) that you want to share to discover what is important to you.

## STAGE 2: LEARN THE OTHER'S STORY

- Be interested in and curious about what's important to the other person. Ask questions.
- Acknowledge the feelings behind the issue/concern raised by the other person.
- Establish areas of mutual purpose and interest.

## STAGE 3: SHARE YOUR STORY

- Share your story as your own experience, not as a fact.
- Consider how you might have contributed to the situation and acknowledge this.
- Invite the other person to ask questions about your experience and perspective.

## STAGE 4: PROBLEM SOLVE TOGETHER

- Have a conversation about the process so far and what has been shared.
- Focus on what has been mutually shared to be important and continue to be curious.
- Build on one another's ideas to determine what is fair and appropriate.

## STAGE 5: AGREE

- Be open to compromise, i.e. the possibility that what you wanted to accomplish might not be where you end up.
- Adapt expectations and make adjustments intentionally and thoughtfully.
- Decide how to decide together. In conversation, continuously reflect on and summarize where you are headed.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kegan, R. and Lahey, L.L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., et al. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin Books.

## INSIGHT

When engaging in difficult conversations, expect to move back and forth between stages 2 and 3, since those involved may need more time to process before moving on. The goal is to build a shared understanding that ultimately leads toward an agreement on how best to move forward.