



Leadership Tips and Tools

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Oh those conflicts! They can take their toll on us, our teams, our departments, and our colleges. We avoid them! We get caught in them! We wish they would just go away!

Much has been written about conflict. The focus is often on “dealing with difficult people.” The language of this approach communicates a self-fulfilling prophecy. When our attitudes and behaviors follow this thought process we have a tendency to frame conflict in a negative way and our behaviors toward others follow in a predictable manner.

Consider coaching! Think of conflict situations as productive coaching conversations!

One of our leadership goals must be to help each member of our team contribute at their maximum performance level. Coaching is essential in helping us meet this leadership goal. Coaching is a helping relationship! Faculty and staff have potential that can be developed through a focused coaching relationship. This focused relationship needs to include conversations about issues that challenge individuals, our teams, and campus communities. Our conflicts over resources, issues, style differences, work behavior, needs, and expectations will persist unless we find a way to manage them productively.

Coaching is a method of conducting a one-on-one relationship in which the coach empowers and helps others be more successful. Coaching relationships provide the opportunity to develop skills through a series of planned work-based conversations and activities.

Leaders as coaches provide support, guidance, and advice to help those on their team and in their college to achieve personal and professional goals, as well as, improve the performance of the organization. This issue of *Leadership Tips and Tools* is devoted to...

Tips & Tools for Conflict Challenges

Our goal here is to capture some key tips and tools to turn conflict challenges into meaningful dialogues and helpful coaching. Each of us has the knowledge, skills, and the interpersonal integrity to be successful in these conversations. Our teams need a leader who will care enough about them to coach them to improved performance, regardless of the performance issue. We can engage in challenging conversations and help our co-workers and team be self-motivated and productive. In the end, successful conversations on challenging issues may be the greatest opportunity for enhancing the overall performance of our teams and our colleges. Following are tips and tools to help you with challenging conversations and conflict situations.

TIPS

It's the RELATIONSHIP! Whenever we think about conflict or challenging conversations, remember that most of us will be in the relationship long after the conflict issue is forgotten. Remember to do all you can to foster a positive and productive relationship, especially during conflict and challenging conversations.

Deal with IT! Avoiding conflict allows it to grow and contaminate the team and community. Conflict issues won't solve themselves. Avoiding challenging conversations tends to reinforce negative performance patterns. As leaders we owe our co-workers, our teams, our community, and ourselves the opportunity to work in a productive caring environment where issues, as they arise, are discussed and managed.

Keep DIGNITY intact! Our deepest need is to be understood and to be treated with respect and dignity. Conflict is often personified with negative, one-up behaviors. "Because I have the power and position to make you..." will not leave the other person—or us—with our dignity intact. Respect the dignity of every person, especially during challenging conversations.

TRUST! The secret of keeping and motivating staff really boils down to communication and building trust. Emails, voice mails, and memos are all effective methods of communication, yet they don't necessarily develop trust. It is difficult to develop and maintain trust electronically. Coaching is a trust-based relationship. If we are to help those with whom we work move to more productive and positive performance we must build trust, maintain it through on-going face-to-face communication, and honor it during challenging conversations.

LISTEN! As you begin challenging conversations remember to listen. Open the communication. Pay attention. Seek to understand. Help the other person "feel heard." Validate feelings. If necessary, let them vent. Then, navigate the conversation to focus on the issues, facts, behaviors, and outcomes. Hear them out. Assure the other person you are listening.

PARAPHRASE! Help the other person know that you are paying attention and hearing the thoughts AND feelings beneath their concerns. Paraphrase their comments. Check your perceptions of the situation, behaviors, and feelings with the other person. Put the feeling and facts that you are hearing in your own words and check them with the other to make sure you understand what they are saying. Acknowledge their point of view, even if you do not agree with it. Coaching requires a foundation of understanding and "feeling heard." The best way to get that foundation is through listening and paraphrasing.

FEELINGS are not negotiable! We feel what we feel. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. Feelings are feelings! If we saying, "Just calm down" or, "You should not feel that way" we are discounting the other person. They feel what they feel! Hear them out. Help them sort out their feelings. Remember that anger is often a substitute expression for hurt, embarrassment, frustration, sadness, stress, fear, poor self-esteem, or a lack of knowledge. Listen long enough to hear the feeling beneath the anger.

Take TIME to talk! Take time to talk through conflict issues. One of the most valuable resources we have in our organizations—in our lives—is time. Taking time to hear the other person opens the communication and provides the opportunity for the coaching conversation that can help the other person move forward.

BE succinct! While taking time to talk, be succinct in your own communication. Long and ambiguous statements tend to lose the other person. We appear to be “robbing” the conversation. We risk “shutting down” the conversation when we go on, and on, and on. . . Paraphrase, give non-committal acknowledgements, and make sure your communication is concisely stated and to the point.

Stay OPEN! Be mindful of your nonverbal behavior. Use appropriate body language, facial expressions, and eye contact. Always handle conflict conversations face-to-face and in private. Sit down. Stay calm, even if you are seething, feel hurt, embarrassed, or feel like you are being attacked. Do not take it personally. Cut your emotional puppet strings. If you feel like flying into a rage... fly into a calm. Never raise your voice. Calm the conversation with a soft voice.

Take a BREAK! If you feel like you are about to lose control, take a break! Use the 24-hour rule: take 24-hours and then return to the conversation. If the other person is “out of control” take a break and suggest a time to get together to “revisit” the conflict conversation.

Value SILENCE! If you don’t know what to say—don’t say anything at all! Use silence. If you know that you are about to say something that you might later regret, don’t! Remember the communication principle of irreversibility: Once the communication has taken place it can’t be taken back. Silence can be a calming strategy. Slow the pace, be reflective, use silence and you will model those behaviors for the other person. Peaceful silence is critical in challenging conversations. Silence allows each communicator to “catch their emotional breath” and reflect on issues and feelings before moving forward.

TOOLS

MER (Minimal Effective Response): Too often we just want to “get it *all* out on the table.” Not a good idea! It is best to go with our Minimal Effective Response. Plan ahead for conflict coaching conversations. If the conflict is long-standing and multi-faceted, decide what you can work through in one conversation. Decide on one or two challenging issues and deal with them. If other issues come up, table them. Don’t try to manage all issues in one conversation. “Swiss Cheese” the conflict and open the possibility of using positive movement forward in one area as the spring-board for success in others. Hold with the Minimal Effective Response.

Relationship Reminders: Find something good about the person’s contribution to the team, student learning, the department, or the college. Remind them about it. Find something that you personally value in your relationship with them. Tell them. Be sincere. No matter how difficult or challenging the conversation, there is always something positive to say to get the conversation started. Relationship reminders help us frame the conversation by first thinking through and finding something positive to share. Relationship reminders help the other person know that we value them, recognize their contributions to the team, and appreciate what they do for the college.

GROW (Goals, Reality, Options, and Wrap-up): Use the following four-step agenda after you have taken time to talk and clarify issues and feelings. Use GROW to move coaching conversations forward. The GROW cycle helps us stay focused and move the conversation forward without getting derailed or side-tracked. GROW helps the learner understand the specifics of what to do and how to “grow” in their behaviors and performance.

- ◆ **Goals:** Identify the GOAL that you hope to achieve through this conversation. Ask the other person to identify their goal. Work to reduce the gap between the two. If this is a difficult conversation requiring immediate change, you will want to identify the goal based upon the team, department, college, or

professional criteria. Some goals will be non-negotiable. If this is the case, it is your responsibility as a leader to articulate the goal clearly so that the other person understands. Remember to state the goal using your most supportive and caring interpersonal communication. Even if this coaching conversation is the result of dysfunctional, unproductive, or negative behavior, treat the other person with dignity and respect. Your leadership goal is to use this coaching conversation to help the other change their behavior in a positive way.

- ◆ **Reality:** State the REALITY of the situation, behavior, issue as you see it. Again, if this is a difficult conversation, you must state the reality clearly. The reality may be in policy, performance achievement, or goals for the team. It is your responsibility as a leader-coach to be clear AND kind. Again, state the reality in a supportive and caring way. It is only when the other person clearly understands the goal and the reality of the situation that they will be ready, willing, and able to move to generating workable options for managing or solving the conflict or challenging situation.
- ◆ **Options:** During the OPTION phase of the coaching cycle, the coach and other person both brainstorm ways forward. The coach's role is to stimulate ideas from the other person based on observations, reports, and needs all of which are anchored in the GOAL and the REALITY. It is not the responsibility of the coach to prescribe options. In fact, the more you tell the other person what to do as an Option, the less likely they are to do it. As a leader and coach encourage the other to seek their own answers. We know that people own what they create. Take time to talk and encourage the other person to generate their own Options. If they can not identify strategies, performance targets, or behaviors to move forward, the coach can offer suggestions. Don't prescribe! Offer suggestions and encourage the other person to choose the options that they are willing to implement.
- ◆ **Wrap-Up:** Coaches move others forward! After the coach helps the other person choose an option and commit to action, the coach needs to make sure to WRAP-UP the coaching conversation. As a coach, encourage others to walk through or role-play their plan of action. This allows you to check for a clear understanding and clarify, if necessary. This is the time to practice the new behaviors under the careful guidance of the coach. Wrap-up the coaching conversation by reaffirming the coaching relationship. Set a time to observe the new behaviors in action or meet to discuss performance success.

SHIFT THE FOCUS: As the conversation moves to GROW, take out a piece of paper and direct the conversation toward the paper. Write down the Goal. Write down the Reality. Ask the other person to share a couple of Options. Write them down. Write yours down, if you have one to suggest. As you discuss the options, make appropriate notes. Note the option that is selected for movement forward. Wrap-Up the coaching conversation and set a time to get back together to assess performance success. Note the time on the piece of paper. When you shift the focus from the individual to the piece of paper, you decrease defensiveness and increase the quality of actionable choices.

Managing conflict through coaching provides support, guidance, and advice to help those on our team and in our colleges to achieve their personal and professional best. We can transform our conflict challenges into meaningful dialogues and offer helpful coaching. We need to show our colleagues and teams that we care enough about them to coach them to improved performance, regardless of the nature or challenge of the performance issue.