

Challenging Conversations

Dealing with difficult people and conflict resolution

Dealing with difficult people and trudging through challenging conversations is something most people will encounter at one point or another in their working career. As school leaders, the audiences you encounter vary on a regular basis, leading to additional challenges. Therefore, it's important to have valuable skills to resolve conflict and manage challenging conversations, should they arise. As a leader of your school community of students, staff and parents, this is an ideal skill to showcase solutions for success.

Be Direct

During a conflict or difficult conversation, remember to address the issue attentively and with immediacy. Take a moment to collect your thoughts and record notes related to the concern at hand. Ensure you can articulate the issue clearly with the individual or group.

Investigate

Confirm that you have gathered all related facts regarding the concern or complaint and have verified the information with all parties involved. Moving towards a resolution, remain clear and upfront in your objectives with any conversations.

Be Aware of the Location

If you find yourself intercepting a conflict situation, it may be necessary to remove the individual or persons of concern to another place until tensions can cool and conversations can take place. Doing so may help to resolve a troubling situation faster.

Check Emotions

No matter how difficult it may seem, make sure you check your emotions at the door. Some situations may seem personal, but it is important to remain objective and leave your perspectives out of the conversation. Always deal with the problem, not the person.

Listen Actively

It is vital that you practice active listening. Make sure you have properly rephrased the challenge during your conversation to verify your understanding. If you are unsure, then ask for further clarification if needed. Remain open to being corrected or redirected.

Be Action-Oriented

Always try to focus on solution-oriented conversations when it comes to addressing concerns, not problem-oriented ones. If you have time, make a list of clear action items that can be discussed during the conversation.

Choose Appropriate Language

Useful responses in difficult situations include

- "We may agree to disagree. Let's move on."
- "You're entitled to your opinion."
- "Thank you for coming in and working with us to resolve..."

- “Yes, I can see how you see things.”

Be Consistent

No matter the situation, it is important as a school leader to lead with consistency when it comes to challenging situations or conversations. Address each opportunity with a uniform approach that will also put others at ease. Take time to review your specific board policies and procedures regarding protocol when it comes to conflict resolution, harassment or safe schools. The Code of Conduct applies to all participants involved in the school system (students, parents or guardians, volunteers, teachers and other staff members) on school property, on school buses or at school-authorized events or activities.

Sources: Handbook for School Leaders, www.openforum.com, The Principal as Leader of Challenging Conversations