Confronting Difficult Topics

In long-term collaborative work, difficult topics and situations will almost inevitably arise. Difficult situations could emerge from the group’s work itself, such as one person strongly objecting to a decision made by the group, but could also be more personal, such as a member feeling that he or she is treated unfairly by the rest of the group. To preserve the group’s ability to work productively together, these kinds of issues must be dealt with directly, rather than allowed to fester. The following sections describe ways to proactively address difficult issues.

General Guidelines for Confrontation

These seven guidelines for confrontation (adapted from Maxwell, 1995) outline the basic steps for addressing a challenging situation.

1. Conduct the discussion as soon as possible.
2. Focus on the behavior or action, not the person.
3. Be specific.
4. Give the person an opportunity to respond, and grant him or her the benefit of the doubt.
5. Avoid sarcasm and absolutes such as always and never.
6. Attempt to develop a mutual plan to address the problem.
7. Affirm the person.

Remaining Civil

Remaining polite and civil during difficult discussions is essential for keeping the discussion productive, reaching a solution, and maintaining positive relationships between participants. The following four aspects of civil interaction (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002) can keep debates from becoming too heated, emotional, or hurtful.

1. Identify your motive: Be honest with yourself and others about the issue at hand. When confrontations break out unexpectedly, they often seem to be about a surface issue but are really about a different underlying problem. To start a productive conversation, explicitly identify the problem you want to discuss.
2. Make it safe: Be proactive to prevent defensiveness and hurt feelings. First, express appreciation and respect for other people in the discussion. Second, establish shared purpose—often, two people with differing opinions have the same end goal in mind. Third, use structured responses to express a balance of positive and negative statements; for example, “I don’t want you to feel as though I’m attacking or discrediting your ideas—you have a lot of really great ones—but I do want you to know that I feel like my ideas are automatically rejected because I’m the newest member of the team.”
3. Master your own emotions: Make an effort to prevent emotional reactions. State facts about what happened and then state how those events made you feel instead of blaming another person or speculating about someone else’s opinions or motivations.
4. **Work to understand others’ perspectives**: Listen actively to opposing viewpoints. Assume that the other person has good reasons and good intentions behind what he or she says and does. Try to reach mutual understanding rather than forcing the other person to see things your way.

**Conflict Management Questions**

When discussing a controversial issue requires that a decision be made, it can be helpful to take a structured approach. The following six conflict management questions (Chadwick, 1995) frame the issue and lead the group toward the best possible outcome.

Allow everyone in the group to express their feelings and opinions in response to each question.

1. What are the issues surrounding this topic and how do you feel about it?
2. What is the worst possible outcome if we don’t address this problem? What is the worst possible outcome if we do address this problem?
3. What is the best possible outcome if we don’t address this problem? What is the best possible outcome if we do address this problem?
4. What beliefs and values are necessary for us to foster the best possible outcome?
5. What strategies and actions are you willing to take in order to foster the best possible outcomes?
6. What will be the evidence that we are fostering our best possible outcome?

**Negotiation**

If two sides are at odds with each other and need to reach consensus, they can negotiate. The following six negotiation steps (Johnson & Johnson, 2005) involve sharing information before inventing new options (which might include elements from both sides) and coming to a mutually acceptable agreement.

1. Describe what you want.
2. Describe your feelings.
3. Exchange reasons for positions.
4. Understand the other person’s perspective.
5. Invent options.
6. Reach an agreement.

**Sources:**


