Preparing for a Difficult Conversation in a Remote Environment
Break-out room shared document

Break-Out Room Activity 1:

Discuss your current practices for preparing for a difficult conversation:

- Write bullet points, plan what I want to say and make sure I have all information.
- Match the approach to the person; what is realistic for this person, check emotions, bounce off other colleagues
- Allow room for conversation
- Send info ahead to be transparent - Share an agenda to make sure they have ample opportunity to get ready and are less likely to feel surprised or ambushed.
- Ask others how they would approach a similar conversation; get other's perspective
- Do an internet search for different language and approaches to use
- Consider past interactions with that employee
- Take a deep breath. Typically, I want to make sure I gather all the information that is needed to address it.
- Talk to someone else if I need to process it or say a particular thing.
- Avoid, as much as possible, it being a surprise. There is a prior discussion, email, or context given for the purpose of the conversation.
- Map out what I would like to say, try to predict rebuttals, and think thoroughly about the conversation. Approach with as much curiosity as possible. What factors led to what happened? What is their perspective?
- Staff who need to have a difficult conversation with someone outside of the workplace: How can I help them talk through different questions? I try to avoid "you" and "your." For example, "I received a complaint about [this scenario] or [this incident]." Sometimes it might be easier to have the conversation over the phone than Zoom.
- Timing of the conversation is important. As much as possible, have the conversation when they are in a good mental state.

- Double check policy
- Trying to be more welcoming for a difficult conversation
- Run scenarios
- Practice how I want the conversation to go.
- Focusing on how you can help the subject with this conversation
- What can we agree on?
- Regular feedback means it is part of the schedule, not coming out of left field
- Not too much time to stress out about it, do not give documents during meeting because they will just read the document
- Ability to reschedule/follow-up if not resolved in time

Break-Out Room Activity 2:

Getting your motives right for a difficult conversation

- Some difficulty around preparing for the motives of the other person(s)
- It is not just a problematic situation that only affects that employee; it may affect colleagues, the work environment, etc. So, what is the effect of this situation on all aspects of the workplace.
- Sometimes I will ask, particularly if it is a complaint about "this person," "What would you like the outcome of this conversation to be?" Should it just be a conversation? Simple information from the person reporting it?
- Think about what the other person is thinking, try to get into their shoes. What created this situation in the first place? See myself as a person to help them through that. "Let's work together."

Other challenges, successes, and ideas -from the chat -ANSWERS are highlighted:

- I have had difficulty in conversing (in the past and no identifiers involved) with an employee with mental health issues. No amount of preparation helped.

  The EAP has organizational support resources which include help for supervisors dealing with difficult situations like this. For future help you may want to check in with Cascade Centers about this situation. Contact Jen Mirabile to discuss how to reach out to them.

- Making space for confidential engagement in remote conversations for employees whose normal workstation does not involve digital engagement - and addressing associated tech difficulties.

Having a difficult conversation with someone using new technology may not be the best option. We believe cell phone conversations can be just as effective.

Someone in my break-out room brought out the downside of over preparing, so that it seems scripted and like there is a specific agenda, with no room for two-way discussion.

Yes, we agree sometimes overpreparing for a difficult conversation can be a negative. We still believe it is important to have some notes with talking points about the conversation. But do stay open to hearing from the employee about their perceptions and ideas.

My challenge are the emotions. One employee does a lot of crying. I have had to reschedule several conversations because of this, also are there some tips for diffusing a conversation that takes a turn for the worse?

Here are the tips we talked about during the session.

- Do emphasize your intention to be helpful – having the conversation is important because we want to help them understand the expectations/policies.

- **Do not** criticize reactions or intentionally escalate the situation - acknowledge their feelings and try to reiterate the conversation will help both of you moving forward.

- **Resolve** to be calm, straightforward, and clear about what you expect from employees

- **Pause** the conversation if necessary -again reschedule if the conversation takes a turn for the worse.

- If you need further assistance, please contact Jen Mirabile to discuss other resources on and off campus.

With a remote conversation it can be easy to feel like you have to get right down to business. I have found it helpful to try to have some of the pleasantries you would typically have in the beginning of a face-to-face conversation.

Yes, we agree. It is always worth it to work on the relationship and build connection.

Yes, my biggest struggles have been with maintaining regular communications with employees who's pre-COVID responsibilities did not include digital engagement.

Yes, it is important to stay connected. Schedule weekly check-ins by phone even if it is just to give updates, ask how they are doing, and hear from them.

Zoom has a phone-in option and this can be helpful way to gather a group of employees in a way that maintains regular communications with a group or team of employees who have different technical capabilities.