

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

Difficult times can involve uncertainty and unexpected or significant change, which can increase stress, reduce trust, and strain relationships. The following general practices may help you craft more effective communication and proactively manage conflict during difficult times. Please contact the Ombuds Office for confidential coaching on how to use these tips and other customized strategies for particular situations you may be facing.

Potentially Counterproductive Responses to Difficult Times

- Refuse to acknowledge the difficulty
 - Catastrophize the situation
- Escalate emotional reactions
 - Be defensive
- Refuse to listen to different perspectives
 - Villainize those who disagree

Consider whether these responses serve your goals. Risks include eroding trust, escalating conflict, and triggering defensive reactions.

Below are common reactions to difficult times and how people may hope to be perceived compared to how others may perceive them:

Behaviors and Thoughts about Difficult Times	How You May Hope to Be Seen	How You May Be Seen
Avoid talking about the difficulty with anyone	Caring of others’ feelings, prudent	Dishonest, indifferent to others’ feelings
Avoid engaging with those who disagree	Respectful of differing opinions	Polarizing, immature, rigid, unhelpful
Engage in argumentative or combative discussions	Passionate, committed to ideals	Aggressive, fracturing the group, arrogant
Reassure others the situation is neutral or good	Hopeful, supportive	Untrustworthy, insincere, manipulative
Assume the worst will happen	Effective planner, realistic	In-over-your-head, chaotic

Potentially more constructive responses: (1) Bridge communication differences, (2) demonstrate compassion, and (3) face the moment.

1 - Bridge Communication Differences

- Consider the possible impact of your communication beforehand. Consider running your communication by a neutral third party, such as the Ombuds Office or a trusted colleague.
- Accept that people process information differently and may have different needs when talking about difficult or sensitive topics.
- Consider whether verbal or written communication, or some combination, may help others engage productively.
- When your communication doesn’t land well, simply acknowledge it and then try other language. This may be more effective than defending your original good intentions or offering extensive explanations.
 - For example: Instead of “I wasn’t trying to insult anyone, I think you misheard me” try “I’m sorry my language upset you. I did not mean to offend, but I acknowledge that my words had that effect. Could we try again to talk about this?”

2 - Demonstrate Compassion

- Recognize the stress others may be experiencing. This is true for the entire campus community: leaders, staff members, and students.
 - For example: Verbally acknowledge when others react strongly or ask how they are doing or what they need right now.
- Recognize the bigger picture. Difficult topics may have wide ripple effects for many people, so be mindful of that as you communicate.
- In a spirit of curiosity, attempt to better understand others. Clarify your intentions when asking questions to lower defensiveness. (For example: “It would help me better understand your perspective if I knew the impact this has had on your sense of belonging here.”)
- Consider offering resources to bolster the group’s capacity to effectively navigate change and productively engage difficult topics, such as Student Health and Counseling Services, the Academic and Staff Assistance Program, Human Resources, and the Ombuds Office.

3 - Face the Moment

- Communicate with courage! Talking about hard things can be hard, but communicating with clarity and compassion can help everyone.
- Be clear about what you *know* vs *don't know* and what you *expect* vs *hope*. Expressing hopes as expectations can be especially risky.
- Avoid assuming the intentions of others, particularly if initial reactions are defensive or emotional.
- Consider inviting people with opposing viewpoints or perspectives into collaborative problem-solving.
- Consider explicitly separating perspective-sharing and problem-solving.



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Tips for Supervisors / Leaders / Faculty

Preparing for Difficult Conversations

Prepare yourself for the discussion

- Prepare yourself emotionally for challenging reactions to difficult topics. Gather any information you want to share. Prepare time-out strategies in case the conversation becomes heated or unmanageable. Have information for supportive resources readily available.

Prepare others for the discussion

- For example: "I'd like to know who wants to discuss these issues as a group and talk about how we do so productively and respectfully."

Focus on the present and future, rather than the past

- For example: "I would like to talk about how we can move forward together through these difficult times ahead."

Speak to the goals, values, and priorities of others

- For example (one-on-one): "You mentioned before that _____ values are especially important to you, and I want to discuss options for how those values could be better reflected moving forward." Consider creative, outside-the-box ideas to support what's most important for them. Acknowledge when ideas or plans you previously discussed with them are no longer feasible or helpful.

Closing Out Difficult Conversations

- Summarize your main points. Use clear, concise language. Be compassionate and extend grace as people process information.
- If any decisions are being communicated, clarify what exactly has been decided and any next steps or action items, including who is responsible for what and by when. If you promise subsequent updates or other follow-up, be clear about what and when.
- Schedule follow-up meetings for additional questions and action planning. Anticipate additional questions and concerns over time.

Additional Pointers

- Anticipate a range of reactions from the group. Respond non-defensively and avoid taking initial reactions personally.
- Avoid promising what you cannot deliver or reliably predict. It may feel compassionate to "soften the blow," but this can erode trust. In particular, be careful not to invite problem-solving in situations where decisions have already been finalized.
- It may take time or additional conversation for difficult news to fully sink in. Avoid moving to next steps prematurely, before members of the unit fully understand the situation and are prepared to engage in collaborative problem-solving.
- Consider risks of delayed information sharing. For example, if you withhold information, staff members may hear rumors or obtain false or incomplete information from other sources. You may also erode trust if staff feel you are hiding difficult information from them.
- Be kind to yourself and each other. Change and uncertainty are difficult for many of us, regardless of role!

Tips for Staff Members / Students

- Recognize that even leaders may have limited information or limited authority over large changes or difficult events.
- Take notes and ask clarifying questions when hearing difficult news. Avoid immediately responding until you fully understand the situation and have time to consider your goals and needs. Try to focus instead on listening to what is being shared.
- Acknowledge any emotional reactions you may feel in the moment.
 - If you feel able to manage those reactions in the moment, try to continue gathering information. You may need this information to eventually create a plan for yourself to achieve your priorities.
 - If you feel overwhelmed in the moment, consider asking when a follow-up meeting could be scheduled for additional questions or clarification. It may be risky to continue engaging if you feel overwhelmed or unable to remain calm.
- Consider how these events may affect your future opportunities. Prioritize your needs and consider new ways of meeting them. Consider things like feeling secure, feeling seen and valued, having a balanced workload, and relationships with colleagues.
- Consider whether your priorities have changed and consider alternative options for meeting them. For example, you might seek out opportunities to gain new experiences or acquire new skills after a structural reorganization.
- Be kind to yourself and each other. Change and uncertainty are difficult for many of us, regardless of role!