

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Strategy: COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

Effective Community Agreements will promote:

- Meaningful dialogue
- Trust building
- Participatory decision-making
- Equitable engagement
- Shared accountability



How are we agreeing to be together ?

Commonly used Community Agreements:

- ◆ Make “I” Statements
- ◆ Make space, take space
- ◆ Intent vs. Impact
- ◆ Practice Active Listening
- ◆ We are all learners
- ◆ Honor confidentiality
- ◆ Accommodate access needs
- ◆ Take care of yourself
- ◆ *Others?*

Reflect: Where could you use Community Agreements in your work setting?

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Strategy: ORID Model for Preparing for Difficult Conversations

Use this model to structure and navigate discussions with confidence and clarity.

Rational Aim: *Name the intent or practical goal of the conversation*

Experiential Aim: *Name the intended inner impact or overall experience*

OPENING: *Set a warm, welcoming tone for the conversation by sharing any context; Offer a tangible hook, story, or shared experience to help participants connect to the topic*



Objective (Facts and Observations)

- What is the issue? What are the observable facts?
 - How does this impact the team, students, or organization?
-



Reflective (Feelings and Perspectives)

- How do I feel about this?
 - How might the other person be feeling?
 - What assumptions might be influencing our perspectives?
-



Interpretative (Meaning and Understanding)

- Why is this conversation important?
 - What underlying factors might be contributing to this issue?
 - How does this impact the bigger picture?
-



Decisional (Next Steps and Action)

- What steps can we take to move forward?
 - What agreements or changes can we implement?
 - How will we follow-up and track progress?
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CLOSING: *An acknowledgement of the discussion, clarifying next steps, and offering a thank you or appreciation to the participants*

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Scenario Activity:

Scenario 1: Addressing Missed Deadlines and Accountability (Red)

Scenario: A client (student, volunteer, or external partner) has repeatedly missed deadlines for submitting required documents or completing a necessary step in their program. As the **coordinator**, you need to have a conversation to understand the reasons behind the delays, offer support, and ensure they stay on track without negatively impacting the program's timeline.

Key Focus Points:

- How to address the issue without sounding accusatory or dismissive of their challenges.
 - Balancing empathy with the need for the client to meet deadlines for the success of the program.
 - Offering support while maintaining team expectations.
-

Scenario 2: Providing Constructive Feedback on Team Dynamics (Orange)

Scenario: A long-standing team member's behavior has begun to create tension on the team. They tend to dominate discussions, which is halting collaboration and frustrating colleagues. As a **team leader**, you need to approach this person to address their behavior and find ways to improve dynamics without alienating them.

Key Focus Points:

- Using "I" statements to avoid sounding judgmental.
 - Framing feedback in a way that encourages self-reflection.
 - Encouraging openness and understanding of the impact on others.
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Scenario 3: Navigating Resource Allocation Conflicts (Blue)

Scenario: There's a disagreement between team members about how to allocate resources (funding, time, or personnel) for two equally important projects. You, as the **director**, need to facilitate a conversation where all sides feel heard, and a fair solution can be reached while keeping the organization's broader goals in mind.

Key Focus Points:

- Facilitating a balanced conversation where both sides feel their priorities are respected.
- Aligning decisions with the organization's mission and strategic objectives.
- Finding a solution that takes into account both short-term and long-term goals.

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Scenario 4: Managing Client Expectations When Resources Are Limited (Silver)

Scenario: A client (perhaps a volunteer or student) is expecting certain resources or support (e.g., job placement assistance, specialized training) that is not available due to budget or time constraints. You, as the **program coordinator**, need to manage their expectations while offering alternative solutions that will still help them make progress.

Key Focus Points:

- Being transparent and honest about resource limitations without damaging the relationship.
 - Offering alternatives, such as referring them to other programs or providing online resources to still support their goals.
 - Encouraging a collaborative approach to finding solutions and maintaining motivation despite the challenges.
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Scenario 5: Addressing Client Complaints or Dissatisfaction with Program Services (White)

Scenario: A client (volunteer, student, or external partner) expresses dissatisfaction with a specific service or aspect of the program (e.g., the quality of training, mentorship, or communication). They feel their expectations are not being met, and you need to address the complaint while maintaining a positive relationship and making improvements where possible.

Key Focus Points:

- Active listening to fully understand the client's perspective and validate their feelings.
- Framing the conversation as an opportunity for feedback and improvement.
- Offering concrete steps for addressing the issue or explaining why certain limitations exist, and how you will work to improve the service.

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Scenario Practice Exercise

Which Scenario Did You Choose?

- ☐ Missed Deadlines and Accountability (Red)
- ☐ Constructive Feedback on Team Dynamics (Orange)
- ☐ Resource Allocation Conflicts (Blue)
- ☐ Managing Client Expectations When Resources Are Limited (Silver)
- ☐ Addressing Client Complaints or Dissatisfaction with Program Services (White)

Questions to Ask Yourself

What are my key concerns in this situation?

What challenges might arise in this conversation?

How can I frame my approach to maintain confidence and connection?

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What question can I ask to better understand the other person's perspective?

What is my ideal outcome for this conversation?

Practical Strategies for Your Conversation

- ✓ **Confidence Through Preparation:** Plan key points before the conversation
- ✓ **Empathy Builds Connection:** Acknowledge emotions, both yours and theirs
- ✓ **Active Listening is Key:** Use open-ended questions and paraphrasing to show understanding.
- ✓ **Clarity Creates Trust:** Be direct, yet respectful.
- ✓ **Action Leads to Growth:** Guide the conversation toward solutions, not just problems.

Conversation Starters:

- "I'd love to check-in about something that could help us work more effectively together. Do you have a moment?"
- "I want to better understand your perspective on [your challenge]. Can we talk about it?"
- "How do you see this situation? What would help us move forward?"

Reflection After the Role-Play

After practicing your conversation, take a moment to reflect:

What worked well in my approach?

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What was challenging, and why?

Did I adjust my strategy during the conversation? If so, how?

What did I learn from this experience that I can apply to real conversations?

What's one action I'll take in future difficult conversations?

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Navigating Difficult Conversations

Difficult Conversation Planning Worksheet

Defining Your Upcoming Conversation

What difficult conversation do you need to have?

(Example: Providing feedback to a colleague, addressing a team issue, handling student concerns, navigating leadership challenges, etc.)

What makes this conversation important?

What challenges do you anticipate?

What emotions are involved (yours and theirs)?

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What's your ideal outcome for this conversation?

Planning Your Approach

- ✓ **Confidence Through Preparation:** Plan key points before the conversation

What are the key points you want to communicate?

- ✓ **Empathy Builds Connection:** Acknowledge emotions, both yours and theirs

How will you acknowledge the other person's feelings and perspective?

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- ✓ **Active Listening is Key:** Use open-ended questions and paraphrasing to show understanding.

What questions can you ask to encourage open dialogue?

- ✓ **Clarity Creates Trust:** Be direct, yet respectful.

How will you frame the conversation constructively?

- ✓ **Action Leads to Growth:** Guide the conversation toward solutions, not just problems.

What possible solutions or next steps can you offer?

Conversation Starters to Help You Begin:

- “I’d love to check-in about something that could help us work more effectively together. Do you have a moment?”
- “I want to better understand your perspective on [your challenge]. Can we talk about it?”
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What's one action I'll take to improve my confidence in future difficult conversations?

Presentation Resources

Leadership Resources

To deepen your understanding of self-awareness in leading and participating in difficult conversations, please explore the suggested reading below:

Books

- [Standing in the Fire](#) (Dressler, 2010)
- [Crucial Conversations](#) (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, 2012)
- [The Art of the Focused Conversation, 3rd ed.](#) (Stanfield, Nelson, 2024)

Online Content + Tools

- [Radical Candor Practice Workbook](#)
- [Strategy Triage Tool](#) (for times of rapid change)
- [Non-Violent Communication Tool](#)
- [When the Unexpected Happens](#) (Literacy Works, Blog)
- [The Ripple Effect: How Leadership Begins Within](#) (Psychology Today)
- [The Double-Edged Sword of Self-Awareness in Leadership](#) (Psychology Today)
- [How Self-Awareness Elevates Leadership Effectiveness](#) (Forbes)
- [Impact of Self-Awareness on Leadership Behavior](#) (Journal of Applied Leadership and Management)
- [What Self-Awareness Really Is](#) (Harvard Business Review)

Self-Awareness Assessments

To help you evaluate your current level of self-awareness and identify areas for growth, please take the Leadership Styles Assessment:

- [What's your Leadership Style?](#) (MindTools)

Additional Trainings to Support Your Work

To provide further learning opportunities for enhancing leadership skills, please consider attending:

- [Technology of Participation \(ToP\)](#) (Institute for Cultural Affairs)

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Self-Awareness Grounding Activity

A practical activity for increasing self-awareness through body awareness:

Somatic Activity – Grounding Practice

Instructions:

"Find a comfortable position in your seat. Let's begin by taking a **few deep breaths**. Inhale slowly through your nose, and exhale through your mouth, allowing your body to relax with each breath. Take another deep breath, and as you exhale, consciously release any tension you may be holding in your shoulders or neck.

Now, place both feet flat on the ground. Feel the connection between your feet and the floor, grounding you. Imagine you're rooted to the earth like a tree, with your feet as your base. Take a moment to feel this grounding sensation.

As you sit in this grounded position, bring awareness to **how your body feels**. Are you tense anywhere? Do you feel any tightness or discomfort? Check in with your **chest, your stomach, and your shoulders**. Notice any areas of tension.

Next, gently shift your attention to your breath again. Notice how it feels as you breathe in and out. Allow your breath to become slow and deep. If your mind begins to wander, gently bring your focus back to your breath, returning to that grounded feeling.

Now, think about the last difficult conversation you had or one that is upcoming. Allow yourself to **connect with how you felt** during that conversation—did your body tense up? Were you aware of feeling nervous or anxious? Simply observe these sensations without judgment. We're not trying to change anything, just to notice what's happening in the body.

Take one last deep breath. Inhale through your nose, hold for a moment, and exhale through your mouth. When you're ready, slowly bring your awareness back to the room."

Conclusion:

"Now that we've grounded ourselves, notice how you feel. Do you feel a bit more calm, centered, or aware of your body? This simple practice can be something you use whenever you're preparing for or in the middle of a difficult conversation. It helps you stay aware of your emotions, regulate your responses, and open up space for more effective communication.

Moving forward, as we explore strategies for navigating difficult conversations, remember that self-awareness and grounding techniques like this can enhance your ability to stay focused, composed, and empathetic—even when tensions are high. Let's continue to keep this mindful awareness in our conversations as we move through the strategies next."

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Presentation Feedback Survey

To gather feedback to improve future presentations and better meet the needs of participants, please take a few moments to share your feedback in this [SURVEY HERE!](#)

Thank You for Attending the Session!

For any further questions or to connect, feel free to reach out:

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Navigating Difficult Conversations
Workforce Wednesday 2025 | 14