Principles of Communication

Best Practices: Difficult Conversations in the Workplace

Cheryl A. Casey, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Communication
Champlain College
Who am I?

• 25 years of studying communication, media, and culture
• 20 years of teaching undergraduate courses in communication, media, and culture
• M.A. and Ph.D from New York University
• dog lover, bookworm, athlete, craft beer drinker, nature lover, coffee addict, wine appreciator, wife of VT State Park Ranger
Purpose of this workshop

• Clarify the role of difficult conversations in the workplace.
• Explain the essential criteria of competent workplace communication.
• Identify the needs of one’s audience and the appropriate mode of communication for engaging in difficult conversations.

• Implement techniques of active listening
• Evaluate and choose language that is clear, concise, and issue-centered.
• Recognize nonverbal cues that can help or hinder in difficult conversations.
• Evaluate one’s own conflict style and make adjustments to improve outcomes of conflict situations.
• Identify key aspects for communicating effectively when difficult situations arise
Starting Premises

Difficult conversations, including conflict, in the workplace are inevitable.

How difficult conversations are managed can indicate a thriving workplace.
Starting Premises

Communication =
co-creation of meaning

Words matter.

The meanings we create
and the language we use
affect our behaviors.
**Starting Premises**

Communication competence can be systematically developed

- Situational
- Relational
- Flexible and adaptable
- Understanding from a variety of perspectives
- Uses self-monitoring
The Communication Process

What’s involved?
The Communication Process

Source

Self

Receiver

CHANNELS

Message/Feedback

Receiver

Other

Source

Message/Feedback
The Communication Process

- SELF-MONITOR
  - Check emotions and perceptions
- BE ACCOUNTABLE
  - Acknowledge your own responsibility in the communication situation
The Communication Process

- KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
  - Check emotions and perceptions
  - Recognize their needs and perspectives
  - Validate their needs and perspectives
The Communication Process

- Face-to-Face
- Email
- Texting
- Social Media
The Communication Process

- Face-to-Face – *most appropriate*

- Email – *useful for follow-up and documentation*
Producing and Engaging With the Message

LISTENING, LANGUAGE, AND NONVERBAL TECHNIQUES
What is listening?

Listening:
- Cognitive
- Mindful and intentional
- Receptive and responsive

Hearing:
- Physiological
- No conscious effort
Effective Listening ➔ “HURIER Model”

Filters
- Role
- Attitudes
- Experiences
- Values
- Bias

Hearing
Understanding
Interpreting
Evaluating
Remembering
Responding
Ineffective Listening → Faulty Listening

- Pseudo-listening
- Egocentric listening
- Gap-filling
- Selective listening
- Defensive listening
- Attacking

Faulty listening can create difficult conversations!

Cats have 32 muscles in each ear, to help them ignore you.
Language Matters

Have a goal and be able to articulate that outcome in ways that connect to shared objectives

**DO use Declarative Statements**

- **GOOD**: “I’d like to…”
- **NOT SO GOOD**: “Do you mind if I…”

**DO be assertive without being demanding**

**DON’T have a hidden agenda**
Language Matters

Be clear and concise

DO use concrete language

- NO: “Significant cost savings”
- YES: “Savings of $100,000, nearly 10% of our budget”

DO be specific

- NO: “Joe’s work is unreliable”
- YES: “Joe’s work often fails to include research”

AVOID equivocation

- “Your suggestions were fine.” → “FINE” is RELATIVE and AMBIGUOUS.
Language Matters
Use language that focuses on the issue at hand, not the person

Use first-person pronoun
• “I perceive” instead of “You are”

Evaluate qualities of behaviors, not person
• “This behavior presented a problem” instead of “You behaved badly”

Check perceptions and ask questions
• Validate emotions, don’t tell someone how to feel
• Be willing to apologize if your behaviors were inappropriate
Nonverbal Says a Lot

- Pay attention to tone of voice
- Make eye contact
- Be open in how you hold yourself
- Manage your facial expressions
- Make strategic use of silence
Conflict Styles

Preferences for dealing with conflict
We all tend to default to certain styles of managing conflict according to the people and the situation.
5 Common Styles of Conflict Management

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Compromising
- Avoiding
- Accommodating
Styles of Conflict Management

Competing: High assertiveness, low cooperation
Collaborating: High assertiveness, low cooperation
Avoiding: Low assertiveness, low cooperation
Accommodating: Low assertiveness, high cooperation
Compromising: Middle ground
What is your conflict style?
QUESTIONS?
THANK YOU!