

Leadership Skills Series #3: Communication & Conflict Management¹

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As part of the Leadership Skills Series, this publication provides Extension professionals with recommendations on how to utilize short leadership videos to address the topics of communication and conflict management. Outlined throughout the publication is a brief synopsis of each of the four different videos, a link to the videos, and recommended questions to help facilitate group discussion. After watching the videos and engaging in the discussion questions, Extension professions should have a better understanding of how to have better conversations, the impact of technology on communication, and how to handle conflict productively.

Communication

Effective communication is one of the most important skills in leadership and group success. Unfortunately, individuals often do not recognize the developmental need they have to address their personal and professional communication skills, which can cause major organizational issues. Addressing even basic rules of effective communication can have a significant impact on the way individuals communicate with others. The following two videos address effective communication practices in both face-to-face and technology driven settings.

Video 1: 10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation

Speaker: Celeste Headlee

Time: 11:44

Where to find this video: https://www.ted.com/talks/celeste_headlee_10_ways_to_have_a_better_conversation

Americans are more polarized in their opinions than at any other time in history. In her video *10 Ways to Have Better Communication*, Celeste Headlee suggests this is because we are not listening to each other. In Headlee's video, she shares 10 different ways we can encourage better conversation with each other, including (1) don't multitask; (2) don't pontificate; (3) use open-ended questions; (4) go with the flow; (5) if you don't know, say you don't know; (6) don't equate their experiences with your experiences; (7) try not to repeat yourself; (8) stay out of the weeds; (9) listen; and (10) be brief. The video provides actionable items that Extension professionals can both quickly learn and put into practice in order to increase communication effectiveness.

USING 10 WAYS TO HAVE A BETTER CONVERSATION

As a tool to increase effective communication, the facilitator should ask (prior to showing the video), "What are

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some ways to positively impact the way we communicate with others?” It is likely that those participating will answer with the traditional suggestions like “lean forward” or “paraphrase what the speaker says”. Like Headlee suggests, there is no reason to worry about how to pretend or show that you’re paying attention, if in fact you are paying attention. Show the video and ask participants to rate (with some form of rating scale, such as numbers 1-5 or happy/sad face) how well they do each of the 10 basic rules for better communication. After the participants have viewed the video, ask the following questions:

- What basic rules do you think you are already effectively practicing in your conversations?
- What one basic rule would do you think you could practice/develop that would have the greatest impact on your conversations?
- How would you want to have someone hold you accountable if you are not utilizing this rule?

End the exercise by asking those individuals who watched the video to pick one rule they will commit to improving over the next week (or until the next meeting). Let them know that they will be reporting on their progress at the next meeting. At the next meeting, ask the participants to provide a story of their progress/difficulties with the rule.

Video 2: A Conference Call in Real Life

Speaker: Tripp Crosby, Beth Pilgreen, Tyler Stanton, Jon Raffa, Paul Ryden, and David Robertson

Time: 4:04

Where to find this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYu_bGbZiiQ

Technology has a significant impact on the way individuals work and communicate with each other. In the past two decades, email, conference calls, video-conferencing, social media (like Facebook and LinkedIn), and communication applications (like Slack) have all been utilized to provide platforms for employees to communicate with each other. However, with these advances in technology have come new problems with organizational communication. *A Conference Call in Real Life* presents some of the challenges faced when communicating virtually, such as missing nonverbal cues, inefficiency due to distractions, and disengagement of team members. As individuals continue to navigate new technology to increase both our ability to communicate and work with each other, it is important to

continue to address the problems presented by these new forms of communication as a group.

USING A CONFERENCE CALL IN REAL LIFE

There certainly are benefits to utilizing technology to increase communication efforts across a group or organization. Open the conversation by asking participants for ways that technology is currently making a positive impact on communication in your organization. Next, ask the group if they have ever experienced any issues with technology as it related to communication. Once they have all had a chance to answer, show the *A Conference Call in Real Life* video. After the video use the following debriefing questions:

- Have you experienced the issues in the video?
- Do we have to just accept these issues (or the ones you described prior to the video) or is there something we can do to address them?
- As a group/organization, how do we ensure we are utilizing technology to get the best communication possible?

As an added feature of the session, it might be fun to try a new communication platform for a week (like Slack or Facebook) and then talk about the positive and/or negative impact it had on the team in the next meeting.

Conflict Management

Taking a proactive approach to addressing conflict on both the individual and organizational level provides opportunities for leaders to engage others in purposeful and intentional change. This proactive process of addressing conflict also has a number of positive benefits, including increased collaboration, creativity, and the ability to build stronger relationships within a team. The two following videos look at this proactive process and provide tools to positively impact conflict resolution between different groups/people.

Video 1: Dare to Disagree

Speaker: Margaret Heffernan

Time: 12:56

Where to find this video: https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree#t-751806

Margaret Heffernan’s video explores the difficulties individuals have when dealing with conflict in organizations. Heffernan presents research, which suggests 85 percent of managers are afraid to speak up about something they believe is an issue because of the conflict it would provoke.

Heffernan goes on to present an alternative that dares leaders to speak up and take on difficult situations. She suggests that the action of disagreeing or presenting a conflicting idea is beneficial to the organization. By daring to create conflict, leaders are creating an environment where others are able to do their very best thinking.

USING DARE TO DISAGREE

If you are going to utilize *Dare to Disagree* in a training or meeting, set it up by asking your team to think of a conflict that has happened over the past year. Ask a few of the participants to share their conflicts and the outcome of those conflicts. (Note: it is important not to force anyone to share because of the sensitive nature of the topic.) At this point, show *Dare to Disagree*. After the video, ask the following questions to debrief:

- How does this group “think together?”
- How are we creating an environment where we can proactively address opportunities and concerns?
- How would the conflict you addressed at the beginning of this exercise have been handled differently if our environment was better at addressing conflict? Note: even if your environment is better than most at addressing conflict, there are still ways to improve. Take time to discover those ways you could positively impact how others work together and/or address conflict, even if it is just small improvements.
- What is one thing we can do differently moving forward to create an environment where we “think together” and/or intentionally use conflict?

Video 2: The Walk from “No” to “Yes”

Speaker: William Ury

Time: 18:45

Where to find this video: https://www.ted.com/talks/william_ury

William Ury, author of the bestselling book *Getting to Yes*, talks about how we deal with our differences and address conflict. Ury suggests there are three sides to every conflict: the two sides that are at odds, and the “third side.” This third side is all of us who play a constructive role as part of the community reminding the two sides what is at stake. Ury also argues that the third side allows individuals to step back and “go to the balcony” for perspective. If leaders are able to utilize the third side to create stories that address

values inherent in the conflict, there is greater likelihood that the conflict will move toward resolution.

USING THE WALK FROM “NO” TO “YES”

The video should be used to introduce a larger conversation about how conflict is and should be managed within a current work environment. Although Ury talks about international conflicts on the large scale, it is important to address how the process of understanding the “third side” and values have application in all workplaces. When utilizing *The Walk from “No” to “Yes,”* one option is to ask the following questions prior to showing the video:

- How is conflict addressed in this work environment?
- How should those who are not involved with the conflict help create a space to address the conflict in a positive way?

After asking and debriefing these questions, show the video in its entirety. After the video is complete, ask the following questions:

- How are we creating an environment that promotes the third side?
- What are the values that guide our story and help us address conflict when it surfaces? Remember it is better to address conflict now than when it is actually occurring.
- How can we hold each other responsible to create an environment that takes the time and energy needed to address conflict?

In Summary

This publication in the Leadership Skills Series focuses on utilizing short films within the topics of communication and conflict management. The recommended videos and discussion questions can be used to enhance working relationships and organizational effectiveness among Extension professionals. The videos in this publication propose that teams are successful when they employ purposeful conversation techniques, utilize technology effectively, and use conflict to their advantage.

References

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