

Leading Difficult Conversations Series #1: Introduction¹

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Introduction

This publication series examines strategies and tactics for leaders to utilize when tasked with having a difficult conversation. Leaders are often required to have necessary conversations that are not always easy. Difficult conversations are required in almost every context of our lives: personal relationships, work environments, and volunteer organizations, to name a few. While the conversation tools discussed in this series may be widely applied to a variety of individual contexts, this series examines these tactics through the lens of leaders working within professional or volunteer organizations. Typically, difficult conversations are dealt with in one of three ways: they are ignored; they are ineffectively addressed; or they are effectively addressed (Patterson et al., 2012). The overarching goals of this series are to provide leaders with specific tools to have difficult conversations, promote dialogue, and be more effective in their leadership practices. Specifically, the publications within this series focus on the process of preparing for difficult conversations, creating a safe environment for conversations, utilizing specific conversational tactics, and employing listening skills.

Many of the skills discussed throughout the series are from the book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High* by Patterson et al. (2012). The purpose of this book is to assist individuals to become better equipped to have productive dialogue. Dialogue is defined as “the free flow of meaning between two or more people” (Patterson et al., 2012, p. 23). A leader’s overarching guide in a difficult

conversation should be considering the question “how can I promote dialogue with this person?” Leaders willing to engage in dialogue pursue getting all relevant information about the issue on the table for discussion.

The goal of dialogue is not for the leader to agree with the information presented or to make a quick decision to achieve a resolution. Rather, the goal of dialogue is twofold. The first goal is for the leader to hear and understand all the information from the other person that is influencing their perspective of the issue being discussed. The second goal of dialogue is for the leader to effectively add meaning to the dialogue. Leaders must find ways to share their “personal pools of meaning—especially our high-stakes, sensitive, and controversial opinions, feelings, and ideas—and to get others to share their pools” (Patterson et al., 2012). The ultimate outcome for a difficult conversation is to develop shared meaning about the issue at hand. Sometimes shared meaning leads to a resolution that is amenable to everyone. Other times shared meaning does not lead to an outcome agreeable to everyone, but by achieving shared meaning, no party is confused about *why* the final decision was ultimately made.

Below is a brief description for each publication remaining in the series. Each of these topics is related to increasing dialogue within difficult conversations.

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Leading Difficult Conversations #2: Preparing for the Conversation

The second publication in this series focuses on the value of preparing for difficult conversations. To best prepare for difficult conversations, leaders must be able to clearly define the goal of the conversation and determine their motive for the conversation. When faced with conflict, a person's natural biological response is fight or flight. Unfortunately, neither of these natural responses is productive during a difficult conversation. This publication outlines considerations to effectively prepare ahead of time for a tough conversation. Secondly, leaders must examine their personal motivations for entering a difficult conversation. A leader's motivation for a conversation can be categorized into two types of motives: dialogue-promoting motives or dialogue-killing motives. When preparing for a conversation, leaders must make every effort to ensure their motive aligns with promoting dialogue.

Leading Difficult Conversations #3: Creating a Safe Environment for Conversations

In the third publication in this series, the components for creating a safe environment for a conversation are outlined. A safe environment refers to an environment, created by the leader, that promotes feelings of physical and emotional safety for everyone in the conversation. One way to promote feelings of physical safety is through considering the location where the conversation will take place. Emotional safety must be constantly evaluated during the conversation as the leader monitors both the content of *what* is being said and the conditions of *how* it is being said (Patterson et al., 2012). This third publication also provides ideas for how leaders can restore safety if it is lost during the conversation.

Leading Difficult Conversations #4: Communication Styles Under Stress

In the fourth publication of the series, communication styles under stress are reviewed. Patterson et al. (2012) indicate when individuals are stressed, they lean towards one type of reaction—silence or violence. Complete quiet is not the only way silence presents itself during difficult conversations. Masking one's true feelings about an issue, avoiding the issue, or withdrawing from the conversation are all indicators of a silent reaction to a difficult

conversation (Patterson et al., 2012). Moreover, violence is not always seen as attacking or anger. Attempting to control the conversation by cutting others off or labeling people into categories to reduce the importance of their perspective or experience is also a form of violence within a conversation (Patterson et al., 2012). This publication also contains a link to a survey to determine your personal communication style under stress.

Leading Difficult Conversations #5: Conversation Tactics and Listening Skills

In the fifth publication of the series, a basic understanding of conversation tactics are covered, providing leaders with the tools to reach their intended outcomes in difficult conversations. This publication reviews Patterson et al.'s (2012) STATE acronym to help leaders purposefully move through a difficult conversation. STATE refers to Sharing your facts, Telling your story, Asking for other's paths, Talking tentatively, and Encouraging testing. Additionally, the publication explores how being an effective listener ensures leaders hear the issues at hand and avoid the trap of overreacting based on incorrect assumptions.

Summary

This initial publication in the *Leading Difficult Conversations* series defined dialogue and provided an overview of the specific conversation skills to be discussed in subsequent publications within the series. Through adequate preparation, creating a safe environment, understanding their communication style under stress, employing specific conversations skills, and improving their listening skills, leaders can successfully navigate difficult conversations.

Reference

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2012). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when the stakes are high*. McGraw-Hill.