

PRACTICAL POINTERS FOR APPROACHING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS NALP 2016

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Preparation

- Clearly identify the issue(s) to be discussed.
- Think through what outcome you are seeking.
- Select a meeting place that will afford privacy.
- Select a meeting time when the other person might be most receptive. For example, you would want to avoid a time when they are rushed trying to meet a deadline or when you know they have something important to attend to later in that day. If you know it is going to be a very difficult issue, consider scheduling it at a time when the other person likely will not have significant demands or obligations following the meeting.
- Invite the other person in a pleasant, non-threatening manner.
- Immediately before the meeting, check in with how you are feeling; especially become aware of feelings of anger, resentment and irritation. Take a few minutes to breathe and calm yourself to neutralize strong emotions.

Opening the Meeting

- Be sure that you are both seated in a space and at a distance that is comfortable.
- Be aware of your body language and non-verbal cues. A calm and relaxed demeanor will signal an openness and willingness to engage in a constructive dialogue.
- Let the other person know up front that, although this may be a difficult conversation, it is intended to help resolve issues that may be holding the other person back from contributing meaningfully to the team's work and/or their personal success. Make it clear that you want to see them succeed.
- Clearly identify the specific issue(s) that you wish to discuss. Provide some context so the other person understands the significance of the issue—how it affects the team or the work product.
- Mentally take note of the other person's non-verbal cues so that you can better appreciate where they are coming from.

The Discussion

- Invite the other person to elaborate on their view of the situation/issue.
- Listen mindfully with a sense of curiosity: there may be aspects of the issues that you had not previously considered. While they are speaking, don't allow your mind to race ahead to the next thing you are going to say. Continue to monitor body non-verbal cues—both theirs and yours.
- Demonstrate your interest in what they have to say. For example, acknowledge points with which you agree; ask questions if their comments require clarification or expansion.

- Don't assume something they may not be intending to communicate. You can frame your follow-up in open ended ways: "Can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by..." or "I'm not sure I understand fully your point about..."
- Once you have heard them out, reflect before responding. Intervals of silence are okay!
- Keep your emotions in check. Often at this point in the discussion the other person likely has begun to push some hot buttons. By acknowledging to yourself how you are feeling in the moment you will be better able to resist the urge to react instinctively and, instead, will be better positioned to respond in a calm and level headed manner.
- When you respond, acknowledge that you understood what the other person has said. An effective way to do this is to reiterate your understanding of the other person's position: "So if I understand you correctly, your main concern is..."
- Be mindful of your tone; avoid accusatory, judgmental or condescending comments. Consider phrases like "I've noticed that..." or "I'm concerned because..."
- Identify any areas where you disagree with the other person's viewpoint and explain why.
- If appropriate in context, ask how the other person would propose to resolve the situation or address the issue.

Closing the Meeting

- Summarize the key points of the discussion in a way that acknowledges the other person's point of view.
- Propose an action plan for moving forward that includes specific steps/tasks and a timeline for accomplishing them.
- Ask the other person to summarize their understanding of the plan and whether they have questions or concerns about how it will be implemented.
- Thank the other person for the time and willingness to talk through the issues.
- If the conversation was emotionally charged, suggest that the other person take a break (or go home for the day if appropriate and feasible).

Post-meeting follow-up

- Keep track of whether the plan agreed upon is being implemented as scheduled.
- Reach out to the other person at regular intervals to see how they are doing and if any issues have arisen.
- Acknowledge improvements they have made and talk through any areas where further development is needed.