

Difficult Conversations--Before the Conversation

Hailey Krueger, EAO Counselor

In a recent management consultation, a supervisor stated they knew a conversation needed to take place with an employee to clarify work expectations on a project, and they were surprised at how difficult it felt to bring up. As we spoke, it was clear the supervisor was focused on wording things “the right way” to prevent any possibility that the conversation could be misunderstood or turn into an argument. The supervisor kept putting the conversation off, leading to more stress. They began thinking about it while not working, and at times it even came to mind when they woke up at night.

I think a lot of us can relate to this. I sure can. Our brains and bodies tend to prefer predictability and safety, especially when a lot of change and stress may be taking place around us. This supervisor had a lot of change taking place in their life, personally and professionally. This seemingly simple conversation was one more unknown situation they had to navigate.

When working with individuals about to engage in a potentially stressful conversation, I like to first take the focus away from the conversation and how to structure it, and instead start by addressing the conversations we have with ourselves. Consider the following thoughts and tips we discussed to prepare the supervisor for the conversation:

Before the Conversation

Ask yourself, “How is my stress showing up?”

Bring awareness to how your body is responding to stress. Do not judge it, just be aware of it. Many people unknowingly operate in their fight, flight, or freeze response. Slowing down and becoming aware of how your stress is showing up can be very helpful.

Fight: I dive into the conversation; I want to be right; I tend to regret what I’ve said

Flight: I avoid the conversation; I want to leave; I tend to regret what I didn’t say

Freeze: I may not be able to move, speak, and/or think; I don’t know what I want; My words come to me after the conversation

Tip: Engage in a breathing exercise before the conversation. Remind your body you are safe, and if this conversation does not go according to plan, you have resources to help you navigate it after.

The person you are speaking with has their own stress response. Remind yourself that their stress may show up, you may pick up on it, and that is okay. Continue intentional breathing even during the conversation.

Consider Your Intention

What is your intention with having a conversation?

Whether we realize it or not, our unspoken intentions can shape the tone and feel of a conversation. Identify and adjust the intent of your conversation before it takes place to help guide the conversation in a positive direction.

- Is your intention to prove you are right? Or perhaps to get in and out as fast as you can?
- Or is the intention to build connection and safety, understand a perspective, to provide or collect information, or remove distance you might be feeling from that person?

Focus on a positive, authentic intention and purpose to your conversation, and consider writing it down. If you impact someone differently than you intended, pause, breathe, apologize, and refocus on your intention and make sure everyone feels safe to continue.

Recognize and Own Your Thoughts and Stories

Thinking: Do you replay old conversations in your head? Prepare yourself for the worst-case scenario? Is your brain trying to fill in missing information?

Feeling: Do you feel a tightness in your throat or chest? Feel anger and resentment? Superior or inferior to the other person?

These are common reactions to stress, and they can influence how we connect to others. Our thoughts and feelings provide us with information, and it can be helpful to be aware of them. If you have told yourself a negative story going into this conversation, consider telling yourself, “it is possible this story is not true, and this conversation will be just fine.” Reconnect with a more positive intention.



Difficult Conversations--Before the Conversation, continued

Consider the Other Person

The person you will be speaking with may not have had the time to consider their intentions or prepare themselves for the conversation. Prepare by reminding yourself that each person is entitled to their thoughts and feelings, and this is not something you should manage or control. Consider the time, location, and if privacy is needed. Our own stress can sometimes make it difficult to see the needs of others.

This supervisor was able to find balance and bring greater self-awareness to their part in the situation. They reduced their need to manage and control the things they did not know, and they made it through the conversation. If you would like talk through a workplace situation where a conversation may need to take place, consider reaching out to EAO or LifeMatters to walk through the process. Navigating stress and relationships in the workplace are skills we all continue to learn and master. It can be helpful to discuss this with a confidential employee assistance professional.



Did You Know, EAO Offers Suicide Prevention Training?

Recognize, Respond, Refer—A Suicide Prevention Training for the Workplace

Recognize, Respond, Refer (RRR), is a suicide prevention training offered by UW-Madison's EAO. In this training employees learn to recognize warning signs of suicide and significant distress, learn ways to respond through words and actions, and explore ways to refer someone to receive the help they need. The training acknowledges the current COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to present stress and suicide and discusses strategies for the employee's own support and self-care when interacting with others who may be struggling. RRR also can help supervisors learn suicide prevention within the supervisory and management context. Contact the EAO to request this training, and to request a consult on other ways to support workplace mental health.



LifeMatters Monthly Resources and Promotions

https://www.empathia.com/promos/current_wpo_complete.php

Resources, promotions, newsletters and more! Go to mylifematters.com and sign in with Bucky2. This month's promotional content includes:

Flyers: Growing a Healthy Relationship, Be Smart About Alcohol Use, Alcohol and Other Drugs at Work (for Managers)

Posters: Out of Control, Stronger Together, Balancing Act

LifeMatters offers supportive sessions at no cost for employees to share their challenges, ask questions and focus on strategies to enhance coping and build resilience. Please share this information with employees as you deem appropriate.

Caregiving When Life is Upended

March 3rd at 12 p.m. CST

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/5673593661905056270>

If you are you taking care of an older member of your family or someone with special needs, you know this COVID-19 pandemic has made your job much more challenging. This session will help you find creative solutions for both taking better care of yourself and those you love.

There's No Guide for Teaching in a Pandemic!

March 10th at 4 p.m. CST

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/8593223644161930766>

Would you ever have imagined your job as an educator would look like it looks today? COVID-19 has presented educators with a plethora of challenges! This session will help you recognize those challenges and discover practical strategies for more effective coping.