

## CHALLENGING CONVERSTION PLANNING WORKSHEET

When facing a challenging conversation, it can be helpful to use this worksheet to plan how you will engage in that communication so that your intended goal or objective can be met, and the performance or issue addressed.

1. Goal - What is your goal or objective for this conversation? What specifically do you want to see happen as a result of this communication?
2. The Other Person – What do you know about the other person? DiSC profile? What do they care about, value, prioritize? What do *they* need to hear to want to change their behavior? What could happen if they don't change?
3. Your Perspective - What is the specific *behavior* you are currently seeing? What data or metrics do you have to support your concern?
4. Desired Course of Action - What does the desired behavior look like?
5. Consequence or Next Step - What will you do if you can't get their willingness to change the behavior.
6. Time and Place - What's the best time and place to have this conversation? How will you get them to the place you decided on?
7. Starting the Discussion - How will you start this communication? What words will you use to support their dignity and convey your respect? Draft your opening words.

## Challenging Conversations Pathway

Pathway	Conversation
<b>Opening</b>	
Affirmation	
Leader presents the facts and shares his or her observations.	
<b>Conversation</b>	
Give the other person an opportunity to share his or her reality by soliciting a response. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the response.	
Leader shares specific behavioral goal and the “why behind the what” with the other person and solicits a response. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the response.	
Determine if there are any obstacles that may prevent the other person from obtaining the goal. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the response.	
If the other person raises concerns, the leader can coach that individual to a solution that allows the goal to be met.  Meeting the goal may require action by the other person or the leader. This is often determined through the dialogue or coaching.	
<b>Closing and Commitment</b>	
Leader wants to gain the other person’s buy-in to the solution (if applicable) and secure a commitment.	
Leader clarifies the consequences if the other person will not commit.	

**Challenging Conversations Pathway**  
**Example: Customer Complaints Previously Discussed**

Pathway	Conversation
<b>Opening</b>	
Affirmation	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>I know that you work very hard to work efficiently and keep up with the high work flow of the job.</i>
Supervisor presents the facts and shares their observations.	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>The reality is that customer complaints have increased since we last talked; there were three more complaints, and it affects our credibility.</i>
<b>Conversation</b>	
Give the employee an opportunity to share his or her reality by soliciting a response. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the employee's response.	<u>Employee:</u> <i>Really? I think everyone likes me; I'm just trying to get the job done. They're just sensitive.</i> <u>Supervisor:</u> <i>I see how you might think people take things too personally and that you don't mean to offend anyone.</i>
Supervisor shares behavioral goal and the "why behind the what" with the employee. Supervisor solicits response. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the employee's response.	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>I'd like to go over each complaint together and help you find a way to communicate without upsetting others. It could be less about WHAT you say, and more about HOW you say it. I want to support you in your development.</i> <u>Employee:</u> <i>Okay, I don't want to upset anyone else.</i>
Determine if there are any obstacles that may prevent the employee from obtaining the goal. Remember to <i>actively listen</i> to the employee's response.	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>Is there anything that might prevent you from being able to do that?</i> <u>Employee:</u> <i>It's not like I can change my voice or my personality.</i>
If employee raises concerns, the supervisor coaches the employee, asking questions that allow the employee identify possible solutions. Meeting the goal may require action by the employee (i.e. arranging alternative child care) or the supervisor (i.e. allowing the employee to use flex time)	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>I understand that; what might you do to make it happen?</i> <u>Supervisor:</u> <i>What else?</i> <u>Supervisor:</u> <i>Would like any ideas from me? Perhaps we can work on the tone of your voice, eliminate any slang or sarcasm?</i>
<b>Closing and Commitment</b>	
Supervisor must gain the employee's buy-in to the solution (if applicable) and secure a commitment.	<u>Supervisor:</u> <i>Moving forward you are going to think about how to provide information in a way that does not upset our customers, correct?</i> <u>Employee:</u> <i>I am going to try.</i>
Supervisor needs to clarify the consequences if employee will not commit.	

# THE 8 MOST EFFECTIVE DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES

When an individual becomes extremely irate, they begin using their core brain or "alligator brain." This part of the brain includes the limbic system, brain stem structures and the amygdala that drive anger and aggression.

Many de-escalation techniques that have proven effective over time are effective because they re-engage the frontal lobe of the brain that regulates impulse control, rational thought and awareness of consequences. The following are the Big Eight techniques that individuals should include in their de-escalation skills.

## 1. Listen

Listening allows an irate person to "flood," which is a means of purging angry energy. As long as the individual's behavior is not posing a safety or security risk, allowing them to vent may help them return to a state of equilibrium.

Seemingly simple, listening is a difficult skill for many to master. This can be especially true in a position where a large portion of our success is dependent upon providing directives to others.

## 2. Acknowledge

Relaying that you understand what a person is meaning or feeling helps by validating their emotions. Acknowledgement occurs when you legitimately understand the person's anger. You could then respond with, "Wow, I can see how something like that could cause some anger." Or you might say, "If that happened to me, I might be angry too."

This confirms the legitimacy of the emotion, but not the behavior. You want the angry person to realize that being angry isn't the problem; the problem is the way they're choosing to act out those angry feelings.

## 3. Agree

When attempting to diffuse someone's anger, it's helpful to find some truth in what's being said and agree with it. Often when people are angry about something, there is at least some truth in what they're saying. When attempting to diffuse someone's anger, it's important to verify that truth and agree with it. When you agree with the truth in the angry person's tirade, you take away the resistance and consequently eliminate the fuel for the fire. Like acknowledgement, agreement also validates their emotions.

It's important not to confuse "agreeing" with validating inappropriate behavior. Think of it as simply giving the individual the right to be angry. An example may include, "I agree, Tom, having all of these issues crop up could be a challenge/hassle." The supervisor can then follow up with the solution or an alternative way of finding one.

#### **4. Apologize**

Never apologize for an imaginary wrong, but a sincere apology for anything in the situation that was unjust can build credibility in your attempt to de-escalate. This is a simple acknowledgement that something occurred which could reasonably cause anger. For example, "I'm sorry you can't find that report you need – how aggravating."

If you can't find anything to apologize for you may say, "I'm so sorry you're having such an awful day" or "I'm sorry the situation has you so frustrated."

Apologizing lets the individual know that you're empathetic to what they're going through and they may cease to direct their anger toward the person attempting to help.

#### **5. Clarification**

There may be a natural instinct to assume you know what a person means. Highly agitated individuals may not articulate themselves in a way that was intended or they may generally have difficulty expressing themselves. In these instances, the only sure way is to directly seek clarification.

For example, a person might say, "You need to get someone to help me before I snap."

Instead of just making an assumption of what the individual means, a supervisor could restate, "Are you saying you're going to do something to someone here?"

The individual may say, "Yes." Or perhaps, "No, I just don't want to get mad and say something that could get me in trouble or make this worse."

In either case, the supervisor has shown interest in the individual and has kept the lines of communication open for additional dialogue. He's also given the individual the chance to clarify his message which can also be done by paraphrasing the individual's statement, "So what you're saying is that if we don't figure out how to solve your problem you're going to harm someone."

It's possible that once the individual hears his own words reflected back, he or she may want to re-think their delivery.

#### **6. Choices and Consequences**

Supervision involves enforcing conditions, and consequences for breaking those conditions. This makes it easy to fall into a challenging posture with challenging employees or individuals. Presenting choices involves defining conditions and consequences without threatening and makes individuals aware that they have a choice in how they handle their behavior.

Presenting choices and consequences may sound something like: "If you keep talking over me we're not going to get this resolved today. If's that's the case, there are options: would you like

to go back to your desk now and we can finish this conversation later, or would you prefer to take the rest of the day off." Which would you prefer?

## **7. Sequence Questions**

Sequence questions get the emotional individual to engage other parts of the brain needed to think and formulate answers. Asking an individual to play back the sequence of events or asking an unexpected question may prove useful as well.

These open-ended questions often get the individual actively involved in his own problem-solving and can prove empowering if done correctly.

## **8. Suggestibility**

When individuals are highly agitated they may be less likely to respond to commands and orders. They may, however, "fall into suggestions," meaning they may act out on suggestions without even knowing they're doing what they're told. These suggestions may be verbal or non-verbal. One verbal means of suggestibility may be to present a "Question Statement."

Similar to a rhetorical question that is asked to make a point rather than to elicit an answer, a "Question Statement" suggests that the person do the action that is presented as a question. This can also take emphasis off of what you're actually asking the offender to do.

Saying, "Would you step over here please," will likely work better than "Get over here, now!" If an emotional employee enters your office and you say "Sit down!" you may get more challenging behavior than if you simply pulled up a chair and gestured as if to say "have a seat."

## **Conclusion**

With the complexities of managing a diverse employee team, it's important that supervisors become master communicators. This skill set must include de-escalation. By understanding the physiological characteristics of anger, supervisors are better equipped to participate in the "rewiring" essential to restoring reasoning.

*Adapted from an on-line article 'Safety, Security, and Everything in Between' by Rusty Ringler, May, 2017*

Recognizing some signs of conflict escalation:

- A person clenching his or her fists or tightening and untightening their jaw.
- A sudden change in body language or tone used during a conversation.
- The person starts pacing or fidgeting.
- A change in type of eye contact.
- The “Rooster Stance” – chest protruding out more and arms more away from the body.
- Disruptive behaviors – Such as yelling, bullying, actively defying or refusing to comply with rules.

Some steps:

- First, calm yourself before interacting with the person.
  - If you’re upset, it’s only going to escalate the situation. Calm down and then begin to look at the situation and how you can intervene safely.
  - Take a deep breath.
  - Use a low, dull tone of voice and don’t get defensive even if the insults are directed at you.
- Becoming aware of your situation is also critically important. This can include:
  - Other people in the room,
  - Objects; such as chairs, tables, items on a table,
  - and the space around you, like exits or openings, and if you are blocking the person so that they are made to feel trapped.
- Try to look as non-threatening as possible.
  - Appear calm and self-assured even if you don’t feel it.
  - Maintain limited eye contact and be at the same eye level. Encourage the customer to be seated, but if he/she needs to stand, stand up also.
  - Maintain a neutral facial expression.
  - Place your hands in front of your body in an open and relaxed position.
  - Don’t shrug your shoulders.
  - Don’t point your fingers at the person.
  - Avoid excessive gesturing, pacing, fidgeting, or weight shifting.
  - Maintain a public space distance, which is 12 feet or more.
- Make a personal connection. Something as simple as asking, “What’s your name?” can diffuse a situation quickly.
  - People respond positively to their own name and can make the dialogue more personal.
- Listening to the persons concerns. - Acknowledge the other person’s feelings without passing judgment on them.
  - Empathy needs to be shown during conflict situations. Even if you do not agree with the person’s position, expressing an understanding why that person feels a particular way will help resolve the conflict.

- Clarifying, paraphrasing and open-ended questions all help to ensure that the person is aware you have understood their frustrations completely.
- Ask to take notes.
- Ask for their ideas or solutions.
- Help them talk out angry feelings rather than act on them.
  
- Shift the conversation to the future, create hope, and you make yourself less threatening.
  - Using “what” and “we” helps include the person in those future plans.
  
- Get them to say yes.
  - It is very hard for someone to stay angry towards you if they are agreeing with you.

No person, group, or set of conditions can guarantee that a conflict will proceed constructively.

If de-escalation is not working, stop!

If the situation feels unsafe, leave and call for help.