

Managing Difficult Conversations

Most of the conversations we **don't** have (or avoid) are difficult conversations. Below are elements to consider when holding department meetings about hard topics. You can also reference the [Good Meetings Checklist](#) for extra tips on structuring meetings.

Before the meeting

- ☐ **Don't avoid** difficult topics. It's better to hold the conversation now than let it worsen over time.
- ☐ Design the meeting to focus on **collaboration** and partnership. The issue affects everyone.
- ☐ Set an **effective goal** for the meeting.
- ☐ **Structure** the meeting agenda to **prioritize** the situation or difficult topic at hand.
- ☐ Send an **agenda** ahead of time.
- ☐ **Coordinate** with additional outside participants if you need them (e.g. deans). This can include inviting a participant at a time certain, or a time approximate to the meeting.
- ☐ Use **anticipated significant concerns** to form the backbone of the meeting agenda.
- ☐ **Gather information** ahead of time in support of improving group decision making.
- ☐ Invite **ALL stakeholders** who are affected by this difficult conversation.

At the beginning of the meeting

- ☐ Set **ground rules** or **establish a mindful social process** that identifies biased behavior as undesirable.
 - If you have no ground rules, please spend at least 15 minutes establishing a set of rules that govern meeting comportment that everyone can agree to. Ground rules are useful indefinitely and reward good behavior.
 - Remind people who deviate from ground rules of the ground rules.
- ☐ **Have an agenda.**
 - **Share** all materials relevant to the topic/situation.
 - Provide (or delegate as appropriate) the **"big picture"** for the situation.
- ☐ **Lead with empathy** and **curiosity** to establish and reinforce trust.
- ☐ Be honest about what you do and don't know and **resist the urge** to blame.

During the meeting

- ☐ Be **specific** about the topic; communicate the **expected duration** of the situation.
- ☐ Be mindful of **time**. You may need more than one meeting.
- ☐ Focus on the **facts** but structure for **human behavior**. Meetings are about people.
- ☐ **Encourage thoughtfulness:**
 - Ensure **turns** are being taken equitably.
 - Prioritize voices that have not yet been heard.
 - **Do not assume** that everyone – or any one person – agrees with you.
 - Focus on **common interests** among participants, not positions.
 - Everyone needs to feel they are **seen and heard**.
- ☐ Allow the group **time** to process new information, address problems, and make decisions. You may need more than one meeting.
 - Ask participants to **prioritize** their interests and positions, particularly if disagreement is expected.
 - **Redirect** questions to facilitate the group engagement. You do not need to answer (or ask) every question.
- ☐ Encourage **feedback**. Welcome **structured disagreement**.
 - **Actively listen** to the text, and subtext, of the discussion.
 - Be mindful of **group biases**, such as “us versus them” and groupthink.
 - Openly discuss **power** in the room, particularly if it has an unhealthy presence.

At the end of the meeting

- ☐ Remind participants that the current difficulty will be handled as an **iterative process**.
- ☐ Be transparent about who has the final **decision-making authority** – and who can move things along.
- ☐ **Generate options** for the mutual benefit of participants. Use the QFT for your next meeting.
- ☐ Encourage **collective decision-making** and problem-solving.

After the meeting

- ☐ Create a **summary** of key discussion points and action items.
- ☐ **Share** this summary with those who attended the meeting --and those who did not.
- ☐ **Resist the urge to backchannel** if a meeting moves forward with the agenda items in good faith. Remember that disagreement with your position is not in bad faith.
- ☐ Build upon the **shared values** agreed upon in the meeting to work toward change.
- ☐ Work to **remove barriers** and friction to implement change.
- ☐ Build **trust** by honoring commitments.
- ☐ Recognize individual and team efforts: **celebrate successes!**
- ☐ Don't be afraid to run another meeting. People will get used to the process.

Try this more than once. Rinse and repeat.

Having difficult conversations about retention

Has your department ever had a conversation about academic quality? Quality of curriculum, instructor, or student quality? If not, the following may be structured as a several-parts meeting.

We recommend using a **questions protocol** to build a shared understanding of retention issues within the group, even when disagreements remain. Start with the broadest possible question and work down to specific questions. There is no predetermined outcome—just a space to ask unfolding questions.

Meetings always have questions. Are you asking the right ones? Use the [Question Formulation Technique \(QFT\)](#) to brainstorm better questions and reach more efficient solutions.

For example:

1. What does student success look like in your program/department/college? How do you know a student has been successful?
2. What does academic success look like in your program/department/college?
3. To what extent are **all** students academically successful?
4. What are obstacles for **all** students?
5. What are the possibilities for the support of **all** students?
6. What additional populations of students could we reach?
7. Is there any particular course in the program where students bump into the wall?
For example, *“That course is tough.”*
8. How could we help that course?