

Managing Conflict for Supervisor Success – Section 2

A Pound of Cure: Conversational Techniques for Handling Conflict



Photo: Two Businesswomen in a Meeting by [Storyblocks License](#)

Conflict may seem like a difficulty but can actually be an opportunity. As you learned in the first session, “An Ounce of Prevention,” conflicts are necessary for innovation and change to occur. Despite your best preventive efforts as a supervisor, disagreements may arise that lead to conflict or disharmony between you and a direct report or between team members. This section offers three tips that will help conversations prompted by conflict to be productive:

- **Tip 1:** Prepare Yourself for the Conversation
- **Tip 2:** Practice with a Conversational Model
- **Tip 3:** Follow up your Conversation with Ongoing Actions

Tip 1: Prepare Yourself for the Conversation

Henry Ford may have once said, “Whether you think you can, or think you can’t, you’re right.” What you tell yourself before you begin the conversation can have an impact on the outcome. What is that little voice in your head telling you about the conversation? Have you stressed yourself out just by thinking about the conversation? What are your needs and fears? What have you done or not done to contribute to the conflict—and what can you do about it now?

Below are three options for guidance on productive conversations. Select at least one of the following resources to help prepare yourself for upcoming conversations:

Option 1: Watch [10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation](#) (11 min 45 sec)

Celeste Headlee is a radio host with expertise in having conversations. Her unique and down to earth perspective on how to talk, and more importantly, how to listen, creates a sound platform for any workplace conversation. Headlee’s key message is that conversations fail because “we’re not listening to each other.” Her 10 ideas come from the perspective of eliciting the best out of interviewees on her talk show. All of these ideas apply to the workplace and developing the skill of setting aside one’s self in favor of really hearing what the other person has to say.

Watch Headlee’s TED Talk to hear the nuance and the humor behind these ideas.

1. Don’t multitask
2. Don’t pontificate
3. Use open-ended questions
4. Go with the flow
5. If you don’t know, say that you don’t know
6. Don’t equate your experience with theirs
7. Try not to repeat yourself
8. Stay out of the weeds
9. Listen
10. Be brief

Take Action

As you listen, jot down *at least one* of the 10 tips that you would like to work on to prepare for your next workplace conversation, whether or not it’s on a difficult topic.

Option 2: Read [Preparing for Difficult Conversations](#)

This brief blog post from Ridge Training recognizes the dread of impending conversations that are about “confronting performance problems, giving tough feedback, being candid about smoldering conflicts, or delivering bad news.” Giving your attention to three powerful actions can go a long way to make a difficult conversation productive:

1. Manage your self-talk
2. Speak objectively about behavior and consequences
3. Listen more than you talk

Take Action

As you read, think about an upcoming difficult conversation you need to have.

- What are you telling yourself? How can you turn your negative self-talk into constructive self talk?
- How can you frame behaviors and consequences in an objective manner?
- Write down your ideas so that you will be able to review them just before the next conversation.

Option 3: Watch [Kim Scott on How to Give Candid Feedback](#) (15 min 57 sec)

In her book *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott has many suggestions for shaping the culture in the workplace where people can give constructive feedback and speak openly. “Radical candor” has two dimensions: 1) challenge directly; and 2) care personally. The second dimension of enables feedback that is being brutally honest yet spoken out of compassion so that the message is not lost to a floodgate of emotion. In this interview, Scott shares some of the stories found in her book that exemplify the strength of this bold approach to addressing conflict.

Take Action

As you watch, consider how you solicit and listen to feedback from those who report to you.

- How timely are you with feedback, both complimentary and critical?
- How do you demonstrate that you care personally for those who report to you?
- Write down your ideas about how to phrase honest and direct feedback to address specific problems in your workplace.

Taking the time to get in a receptive and collaborative frame of mind can go a long way to make a difficult conversation productive and impactful. Proceed to Tip 2 to learn about two different step-by-step models.

Tip 2: Practice with a Conversational Model

Conducting a productive conversation to work through conflict is like any skill—practice helps to prepare you for the real thing. The following two models offer a structure for you to prepare and practice step-by-step. Choose one to learn about and then practice.

Option 1: [We Have to Talk: A Step-by-Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations](#)

Judy Ringer, who leads workshops on conflict, communication, and creating a more positive work environment, believes “you have more power than you think” in difficult conversations. In this step-by-step checklist, she shares seven questions to ask yourself before the conversation, followed by four steps to a successful outcome, or stages through which your conversation ideally progresses:

- inquiry,
- acknowledgement,
- advocacy,
- and problem solving.

This model is useful for any two people--including two peers or supervisor and supervisee.

Take Action

Using this 4-step model, practice a difficult conversation either with a partner or quietly by yourself. Use the “How Do I Begin?” guide on page 5 to compose your opening lines.

Option 2: [Give Feedback with Situation-Behavior-Impact](#) (4 min 40 sec)

The Situation-Behavior-Impact Feedback model (or SBI Feedback model), created by the Center for Creative Leadership, helps you to provide clear, direct feedback to another person--often a supervisee rather than a peer. The strength of the model is in its simplicity and the clarity of how to structure feedback via three elements:

- Situation: clearly define the where and when of the situation
- Behavior: describe the challenging behavior as you observed it directly
- Impact: use “I” statements to describe how the other person’s action has affected you or others

This brief video on how to [Give Feedback with Situation-Behavior-Impact](#) will help you understand the details of applying the SBI process.

Take Action

After you’ve learned about the model, identify a situation in which you could provide constructive feedback to another person. Outline the situation, behavior, and impact you would like to share, and then practice having the conversation either with a partner or quietly by yourself.

Tip 3: Follow up your conversation with ongoing actions

It may seem like the actual conversation is the culmination of all your efforts to manage team relationships and prepare for a productive exchange. But if you don’t follow up and follow through after a critical conversation, you may find yourself right back where you started. For one, you may need multiple conversations with an individual to get to a point of mutual satisfaction. There are key actions you can take that will help everyone stay on an even keel.

- **Read [Your Coaching Is Only as Good as Your Follow-up Skills](#)**
Although this article is written from the perspective of coaching, the actions are applicable to follow up for any workplace relationship maintenance. Suggested steps include:
 - Take immediate actions, such as writing things down* while the conversation is fresh.
 - Follow up on agreements.
 - Observe signs of growth.
 - Check in directly.
 - Communicate impact.
 - Watch for changes in relationships.
 - Evaluate yourself.

Take Action

This is not a cookie-cutter process; as a supervisor, you already know that every employee is unique. After each conversation you have with a team member, create your own list of follow-up steps that are tailored to that person and to your relationship with them. Keep them all on file and refer to them periodically.

*Note: it's important to be clear and professional in your note-taking. Stick to accurate and factual statements about your conversation with an employee. Avoid expressing opinions, conjectures or emotions.

REFLECTIONS

Apply what you learned in this guide to an actual conversation. Reflect on what worked well and what did not go as expected. What would you repeat next time? What might you approach differently?

Conclusion

The process of follow through never ends. In fact, it cycles right back to that “ounce of prevention” of conflict by creating a healthy work environment where civility reigns and social connections are strong. It's no coincidence that last step in Your Follow Up Skills is to “evaluate yourself.” You lead by example and model the preferred behavior. Your emotional honesty with yourself opens up the possibilities for trust and reliance from your team. Ideally, the cycle is more of a spiral, with continual improvement toward a workplace where everyone has the skills to navigate difference and to address tensions in a timely and constructive way.

Additional Resources

Tip 1: Prepare Yourself for the Conversation

- Read Kim Scott's Book: [Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss without Losing Your Humanity](#)
- Read *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High* by Kerry Patterson et al. This classic is an excellent resource if you are interested in both preparing yourself for a conversation and techniques to use during the conversation itself.

Tip 2: Practice with a Conversational Model

- For more in-depth information, watch [Situation-Behavior-Impact Feedback Model](#) video (11 min 53 sec) to observe a conversation in action followed by a debrief.

Tip 3: Consider what action you will take when you follow up

- [You Just Had a Difficult Conversation at Work. Here's What to Do Next](#)
What happens when a heated conversation arises that you haven't planned for? This brief article has practical advice for anyone who may find themselves in an unanticipated situation where tempers flare and strong emotions surface.