PDF 2 - Difficult Conversations.



NEGOTIATING & DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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Focus: Giving feedback, handling complaints, resolving conflict and communicating professionally under pressure.

A. Warm-Up

When Things Get Awkward

Discuss:

1. Is it better to be completely honest or tactfully diplomatic?
2. How do you react when someone criticises your work?
3. Have you ever avoided a difficult conversation? Why?
4. Should managers deal with conflict immediately or give people time to calm down?
5. Can a disagreement actually improve a working relationship?

C. Scenario 1

The Unreliable Colleague

You work in a small project team. One colleague regularly misses deadlines, arrives late for meetings and leaves other people to complete unfinished tasks.

You have decided to speak to them privately.

Student A: You are frustrated because the situation is affecting your workload. You want things to change.

Student B: You are the colleague. You have been dealing with personal pressures, but you haven't explained this to anyone. You feel that your contribution is being overlooked.

Discuss the problem and agree on a way forward.

B. Useful Language

Handling Difficult Conversations

Starting the conversation

- There's something I'd like to discuss with you.
- I think we need to address an issue.
- I'd appreciate the opportunity to explain my concerns.
- Can we talk about what happened?

Giving constructive feedback

- One area that could be improved is...
- I've noticed a recurring issue with...
- Your work is generally strong, although...
- Perhaps we could look at ways to improve...

Responding to criticism

- I appreciate you bringing that to my attention.
- Could you give me a specific example?
- I hadn't realised that was a concern.
- I understand your perspective, although I see things slightly differently.

De-escalating conflict

- Let's take a step back and look at the situation.
- I don't think blaming each other will help.
- Perhaps we've misunderstood one another.
- I'd rather focus on finding a solution.

Escalating a complaint professionally

- I'm afraid this issue remains unresolved.
- We have already raised this concern several times.
- I'd like this matter referred to someone more senior.
- Could you confirm what action will be taken?

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D. Scenario 2 – The Unhappy Customer

A customer has purchased an expensive piece of equipment. It stopped working after two weeks. They have contacted customer support three times and received no satisfactory response.

Student A: You are the customer. You want a replacement or a full refund. You are frustrated and considering posting a negative review.

Student B: You are the customer service manager. You want to resolve the complaint without making promises you cannot keep.

Challenge: Try to resolve the situation without becoming defensive or aggressive.

E. Scenario 3 – The Uncomfortable Feedback

A manager has told an employee that their communication style is causing problems in the department.

The employee believes they are simply being direct and efficient.

Student A: You are the manager. You need to explain why the employee's behaviour is affecting the team.

Student B: You are the employee. You feel unfairly criticised and want specific examples.

Discussion: How can feedback be honest without becoming personal?

F. Scenario 4 – When a Problem Goes Too Far

Two departments have been blaming each other for a major project failure. The deadline was missed, the client is unhappy and senior management wants an explanation.

Student A: You represent the sales department. You believe the operations team failed to deliver what was promised.

Student B: You represent operations. You believe sales made unrealistic promises without consulting your department.

Task: Hold a meeting to establish what went wrong and agree on practical steps to prevent a repeat.

G. Final Reflection – Difficult Doesn't Mean Impossible

Discuss:

1. Which scenario was the most challenging?
2. When should a person stop trying to resolve a problem informally?
3. How can you disagree without damaging a professional relationship?
4. Is there a difference between being assertive and being aggressive?
5. What makes an apology sound genuine?

Personal challenge: Describe a difficult conversation you might need to have in real life. Explain how you would prepare for it.

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