

FACULTY TIPSHEET

Navigating Difficult Conversations

There are numerous “hot button” issues that can create difficult conversations. These might be issues regarding productivity, promotion, salary negotiations, grant deadlines, paper deadlines, grading discrepancies, plagiarism, race, politics, and other potentially polarizing issues. Or they might be more personal issues like mental illness, anger management, or rude behavior. How can faculty navigate these difficult conversations with colleagues and students?

First, in any difficult conversation it is important to engage in active listening and to show that you care. If you cannot be in the mental headspace where you are communicating caring, then consider rescheduling the conversation. Healthy work and learning environments are created when people are respectful and communicate that they care about each other. However, there are times when people are not respectful, kind, nor considerate and it is during these times that navigating difficult conversations can be tricky. Here are some tips for navigating difficult conversations.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES

1. If a colleague is being rude to you or you witness rude behavior consider saying, “It looks like you’re feeling pretty angry. Should we talk about this at a different time?”
2. If you are feeling angry and cannot speak in a respectful way consider saying, “I’m having a hard time right now and would like to have this conversation at a later time when I’m not feeling so emotional.”
3. Have a list of empathic statements that work for you: “Looks like you’re having a difficult day,” “Is something bothering you?” “I’m sorry to hear that you’ve had a difficult time,” “Is there anything I can do to help you?”
4. It’s okay to say, “We can agree to disagree.” Different opinions make the world an interesting place to live. While you can have different opinions about hot button issues, you can express these differences in a healthy, respectful way.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS

1. Consider adding a syllabus statement on respectful behavior and civil discourse.
2. Model respectful behavior and civil discussions in your classes.
3. If students are not talking in a respectful way, stop the conversation and review ground rules for respectful discussion.
4. Remind students that differences of opinion are healthy, and the goal of education is to hear and value multiple perspectives.

We live in a diverse, pluralistic world and our differences should be embraced and celebrated, not diminished. “The key to community is the acceptance, in fact the celebration of our individual and cultural differences. It is also the key to world peace.” – M. Scott Peck.

RESOURCES

- UNL TipSheet: Facilitating Safe and Civil Discourse go.unl.edu/safecivildiscourse
- UNL Communication Studies Guide: How to Have Difficult Conversations go.unl.edu/conversationguide