**Having Difficult Conversations**

**Introduction**

Nearly all of us avoid having difficult conversations. The avoidance may stem from the fear of creating unwanted conflict, or a concern that you will upset a teammate and/or make things worse by approaching someone in the wrong way.

For some managers, the ‘need to be liked’ causes them to shy away from providing important and necessary constructive performance feedback.

The need for a difficult conversation may arise from a number of issues:

* You find you are having conflict with a co-worker
* You have a subordinate that continues to have performance problems
* You need to give the boss feedback about their behavior

**Getting Started**

A real key to success in any difficult conversation is to begin with controlled emotions and stay centered. Staying centered means that you keep your emotions in check and rely instead on the facts and logic. You need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy. In doing so, you are much more likely to stay focused on your key talking points.

Here are a few conversation openers:

* I have something I’d like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
* I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
* I need your help with something. Can we talk about it this afternoon?
* I’d like to see if we might reach a better understanding about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

**Steps to Follow**

Follow these four (4) steps to ensure that your difficult conversation stays on track:

* **Get their Perspective**
* Begin with an open mind.
* Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity.
* Try to learn as much as possible about their point of view.
* Let them talk until they’re finished.
* Whatever you hear, don’t take it personally.
* Listen as much as you can in this phase of the conversation.
* Don’t interrupt, you’ll get your turn.
* **Acknowledge their Viewpoint**
* Acknowledgment simply means showing someone that you’ve heard and understood their point.
* Try to understand them so well you can make their argument for them.
* Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. Saying, ‘this sounds really important to you,’ doesn’t mean you are going to go along with their opinion.
* **State your Viewpoint**

When you sense that they’ve expressed all their energy on the topic, it’s your turn.

* What can you see from your perspective that they’ve missed?
* Clarify your position without minimizing theirs.
* **Collaborate to Problem-solve**

Now begin building solutions.

* Ask the individual what they think would work. Whatever they say, find something that you like and build on it.
* If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other’s point of view usually creates safety, and they’ll be more willing to engage.

**Conclusion**

If you’ve been successful in controlling your emotions, seeking to understand before being understood, sharing your perspective non-judgmentally and working with not against them to problem-solve, you will likely be much close to an amicable solution.

To really be at your best, remember the following tips:

* Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments (preserving the open communication)
* Don’t take verbal attacks personally. Help your ‘opponent’ come back to center.
* Practice the conversation with a friend before holding the real one.
* Mentally practice the conversation.
* See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease.
* Envision the outcome you’re hoping for.