

CULTURE & COMMUNITY

Difficult work conversations: get ready

By Sam Ali, Fidelity Central Senior Associate Editor 1/24/2018

Workplace conflict happens. It's an inevitable fact of work life. But how should you prepare for difficult conversations? How do you find the right words in the moment? And, how can you manage difficult conversations so they go as smoothly as possible?



Alex Yaroslavsky, an experienced mediator and trainer recently lead a three-hour pilot workshop for associates in Jersey City, NJ called "Mediation Skills for Challenging Conversations," to help associates develop techniques to overcome conflict.

The workshop, hosted by Brenda Schachter, Vice President, Talent and Learning Solutions and the Women's Leadership Group (WLG), was designed to support the [Fidelity Leadership Principle, Telling it Like it Is and Enabling Candid Debate](#).

Yaroslavsky, Principal at the Yaro Group LLC, said that trying to avoid conflict is like trying to avoid bad weather.

"Conflict is a fact of life – there is no way to avoid it," he said. "But if you're prepared, you can adjust for it."



Brenda Schachter

He said handling difficult conversations requires skill and empathy, but ultimately, it requires the courage to go ahead and do it. The more you get into the habit of facing these issues squarely, the more adept you will become at it.

If you're unsure of how to best approach a difficult conversation, here are some tips from the workshop to guide you:

Be clear about the issue.

To prepare for the conversation, you need to articulate the issue: Ask yourself the following questions: What do you want to accomplish with the conversation? What is the desired outcome? What are the non-negotiables? Remember that a lack of focus can derail the conversation and sabotage your intentions.

Choose the right time and place.

Calling people into your office or workspace may not be the best strategy. Being on your own turf shifts the balance of power too much on your side. Instead, consider holding the meeting in a neutral place. The proposed location is supposed to make the other party feel more relaxed, comfortable, and free from public scrutiny.

Know how to begin...and close.

Some people put off having difficult conversations because they don't know how to start. Being upfront is the authentic and respectful approach. "I would like to talk with you about what happened at the meeting this morning. Let's grab a cup of coffee tomorrow morning to chat." Conversely, starting the conversation by saying, "I didn't like what you did and want to discuss it" is not the best approach because it will likely put the person

on the defensive. You also don't want to ambush people by surprising them about the nature of the "chat."

Listen more than you talk.

Make sure your tone of voice signals discussion and exploration, not inquisition and punishment. In the early stages of a difficult conversation, it's important to listen more than you talk. Ask open-ended questions and gather as much information as you can about what they see happening, how they are feeling, and how they view themselves in this situation. Then to further foster clarity, summarize what they're telling you — and ask them to do the same when it's your turn to talk.

Be comfortable with silence.

There will be moments in the conversation where a silence occurs. Don't rush to fill it with words. The periodic silence allows all parties to hear what was said and lets the message sink in.

Want to learn more? Fidelity has plans to run additional workshops at various sites throughout 2018. If you're interested in participating, please [contact Brenda Schachter](#).