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How to Approach a Challenging Conversation

The core of ENGAGE is supervisors and team members having regular professional development conversations to help each other improve. And the centerpiece of these conversations is genuine, thoughtful feedback. Giving effective feedback is a skill. Feedback is about how we do something better, not your checklist or tasks.

Some of you already feel completely comfortable with the ENGAGE approach. Most of you are still practicing, building new muscles, and developing a new rhythm with your supervisors and teammates.

No matter what, though, you will likely experience a challenging conversation at some time.

Sometimes in delivering feedback, the person receiving feedback may shut down or not respond. In other situations, the person may become defensive or upset.

Instead of avoiding such conversations and letting challenges remain unresolved, we encourage you to view such conversations as opportunities.

When done right, challenging conversations can make the work environment better and improve individual and team performance.

Preparing for a Challenging Conversation

Preparation for every ENGAGE conversation is important. Take time to prepare to use the 4-step feedback model.

- 1) "I observed that... [describe specific situation and behavior]."
- 2) "The impact upon me was... [describe impact]."
- 3) Pause for understanding. If necessary, ask questions to ensure you understand each other.
- 4) "I suggest that next time... [offer recommendations to improve]."

- Remember to focus on only one or two clear, concise takeaways, and then back them up with specific examples.
- Take time to understand how the other person will react to the feedback.
- Get advice from peers. The odds are that someone you know has confronted a similar situation and learned from it.
- Come to listen and learn, not just talk. Success requires a real conversation. Also, prepared to be flexible in generating new options and finding "win/win" solutions.
- As you begin the conversation, relax, check your body language, and watch your tone of voice. If you are tense, the other person is likely to be tense as well.



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- Lastly, remain open to feedback yourself.

So let's check out a couple examples on how we can tackle these opportunities.

What if someone doesn't engage at first?

How can a supervisor handle this challenge? The team member had identified improving their communication skills as a professional development goal during previous ENGAGE conversations. The team member has been improving in speaking more clearly and confidently when giving presentations, but in the last meeting they did not.

Supervisor: Sharon, I want us to talk today about one of your goals for the year – your communication skills. You've done a great job with your communication skills. Two weeks ago, I noticed that you gave a clear and easy to understand presentation on the project to your team. But yesterday, I observed you looked down at the floor and mumbled. I found your update hard to follow. Other team members did too.

Employee: OK.

Supervisor: Did you feel a difference in how you presented yesterday?

Employee: (shrugs)

Supervisor: We agreed that building your communication skills was a top goal for this quarter. And the better your communications skills are, the better you team will be. I want to help you get better. Sharon, I really want to see you succeed.

Employee: OK

Supervisor: I suggest that we find some opportunities for you to work on your communications skills.

Employee: OK.

Supervisor: You did a great job with your update two weeks ago. What was the difference this week?

Employee: Well..... I know I had more time to prepare two weeks ago.

Supervisor: Why do you feel that way?

Employee: Well this one I didn't get a few minutes to review my notes before the meeting.

Supervisor: Well let's make sure that we give you enough time to prepare for your update. Will that help?



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Employee: Well this time I know right before the meeting you asked me to run some numbers so I was working on those numbers up until the time of this meeting.

Supervisor: Wow. I didn't realize that. I completely missed it. Thank you for letting me know. I will try not to put anything on your plate at the last minute – and if I do, remind me that you would like a few minutes to prepare for your presentation. I bet we can have either you do it later or have someone else do it if there is a short fuse. I want to make sure that we can focus on you giving a good update to the team. Can we try this?

Employee: OK. Let's try it.

What if someone becomes defensive?

Imagine the same basic situation, but the team member reacts very differently.

Supervisor: Kelly, I want us to talk today about how you're making progress on one of your goals– your communication skills. I've seen your communication skills improve. Two weeks ago, you gave an easy and clear understanding of your summary to your team members. But yesterday I noticed that you were looking at the floor and mumbling. I found your update was hard to follow and other team members did too.

Employee: Whatever.

Supervisor: Did you feel a difference in your presentation yesterday?

Employee: No, not really!

Supervisor: Kelly, I feel that there is an issue. I feel that we are not having a conversation right now.

Employee: No, it's fine. Go on.

Supervisor: Ok, I want to be sure we are on the same page. I respect your opinion, but yesterday I just couldn't hear what you had to say. And I know other team members did as well because they asked for clarification afterwards.

Employee: Whatever.

Supervisor: Kelly – I want you to be successful. You're a valuable team member. And you have had wonderful communication skills. Two weeks ago you were strong and gave a concise presentation. Last month, you were looking forward to building these skills.

Employee: Yeah, I know.

Supervisor: You did a very good job with the team update two weeks ago. What was the difference this week?



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Employee: Well two weeks ago I had plenty of time to prepare, but this week you gave me a project to do right up to the time of the meeting. So when you gave me that I didn't think you cared very much for my presentation.

Supervisor: I didn't realize that. I see how that could be frustrating. Thank you for letting me know. Next time I will try not to put something else on your plate at the last minute – and if I do, let me know and remind me that you would like a few minutes to prepare for your presentation. I'm sure that we can either have you do that later on or if it's a short fuse that we could have somebody else do it. I want to be sure that we give you enough time to prepare and focus for your presentation. Does that sound good?

Employee: It does. Let's try it.

Supervisor: Awesome.

All ENGAGE situations are different. There are no cookie-cutter answers. But this list of proven 10 tips for challenging conversations can help:

- Prepare in advance
- Maintain a positive tone and body language
- Reinforce expectations and importance of goals
- Stick to facts
- Express support
- Build on points of agreement
- Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a "yes" or "no"
- Work together to find solutions
- Express appreciation and understanding
- Be flexible