Chapter 4
Difficult Conversations:
How to Confront the Elephant in the Room

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is challenging, and factors such as cultural lens, emotions, power dynamics, and social capital influence how, why, and if you will respond. In an environment where getting along is expected, people can feel internal or external pressure to acquiesce so as not to rock the boat. Avoiding conflict and difficult conversations to get along can manifest into stress, anxiety, and other emotions that can make being productive and happy in the workplace difficult. There may be no way to make conflict feel good, but there are things that can be done to make conflict less painful. This chapter will analyze why conflict and difficult conversations can be challenging, offer advice on how to make the conversation more bearable and productive, as well as when it is ok to avoid it all together.

INTRODUCTION

In her personal and professional life, this author is often called upon to provide a sounding board, listen without judgment, and help facilitate or de-escalate situations with others. Through years of training and experience, she has learned that dealing with conflict and having difficult conversations is hard. Cultural lenses, emotions, power dynamics, and social capital are just a few factors influencing how, why, and if someone will respond to conflict at home or in the workplace. Many of us fear it, and few of us are trained in how to do it in a productive and respectful manner.

In a culture or environment where getting along is expected, people can feel internal or external pressure to acquiesce so as not to rock the boat. Academia is an animal that prides itself on welcoming new ideas and open discussion but can push back or push out people who do not fit the mold or are seen to be doing some boat rocking. Avoiding conflict and difficult conversations to get along can manifest into stress, anxiety, and other emotions that can make being productive and happy in the workplace difficult. There may be no way to make conflict feel good, but there are things that can be done to help you psych yourself up to have those conversations and prepare you to have them in a way that you will not

regret and all parties will leave feeling heard and respected. This chapter will analyze why conflict and difficult conversations can be challenging, offer advice on how to make the conversation more bearable and productive, as well as when it is ok to avoid it all together. While the examples in this chapter are specific to academia, the information can be used in conflict in other aspects of life.

Author's Background

The author's experience with conflict resolution comes from a variety of activities. In academia, she navigates conflict in her roles as the chair of a university's common reading program and as university ombudsperson. Outside of academia, she is a licensed foster parent and mentor in Big Brothers/Big Sisters. While very different environments, the author uses the same skillset (listening, reframing, de-escalation, etc.) to navigate conflict-filled situations.

As the chair of the university's common reading program, the author leads a selection committee of 35-65 people on two campuses. This work requires planning, meeting management, and a clear explanation of expectations, goals, and outcomes. She facilitates discussion amongst a group of students, staff, and faculty with strong feelings and opinions of what should be selected as the one book every incoming first-year student is asked to read. While selecting a book may seem insignificant at first glance, it is work that involves a lot of time and money, as well as the reputation of the university. Some schools in the country have had negative press, threats of loss of alumni donations, or had their program retired because of the book they selected.

The chair is responsible for fielding calls from upset or angry parents who feel that a particular book might tempt their child to alternative viewpoints that do not align with their values as well as disgruntled faculty who believe the selection will bring down the university's reputation as a place of higher learning. In both situations, skills such as listening to understand the story behind the emotion is vital. The upset or angry parent may be worried or afraid for their child's safety as they are moving away from home for the first time. They might need reassurance that the campus is a safe place and that they raised their child to make good decisions, regardless of the information found in the book. A disgruntled faculty member may feel excluded by the choice of book. They may need to be invited to participate in the process and be given an opportunity to have their voice heard.

At the author's university, ombuds serve a three-year term and serve as a confidential ear for those who need a sounding board, facilitate conversation between multiple parties, and provide information about the grievance process. In this role, the author has had one-on-one meetings with individuals facing dismissal or struggling with workplace politics who just needed a confidential person to vent to. Other times, she facilitates conversation between department heads and staff over issues connected to promotion and yearly evaluations.

Outside of academia, the author is a licensed foster parent and mentor in Big Brothers/Big Sisters. In these roles, she works with traumatized children, upset parents, overworked social workers or CASA workers, and the court system. This puts her in a position to be a sounding board, target of anger and sometimes violence, advocate, and teacher for people during a terrible time in their lives.

This background is important because it shows that the author's knowledge is not just theoretical -- it comes from practice and observation. While not everything in this chapter will work with everyone and every situation, it should provide the groundwork to help the reader as they navigate their own personal and professional difficult situations.

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