

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

You have a problem with your program, your adviser, or your advisee. Maybe you feel that another student is being favored at your expense. Perhaps you need to tell an advisee that progress to date is unacceptable. What do you do? Should you schedule a face-to-face conversation? If so, how do you prepare? How do you conduct this potentially awkward discussion?

Initial Considerations

Do you want to do something about it? If the situation is temporary, a wise alternative may be to cope with the problem rather than confront it. If the problem is serious and difficult to resolve, perhaps a dialogue with the person will help to improve matters.



Resources

Student Conflict Resolution Center

www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

Office for Conflict Resolution

www.ocr.umn.edu
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall
Contact: Tamar Gronvall

Boynton Mental Health

www.boynton.umn.edu
612.624.1444, 410 Church St SE
Contact: Matt Hanson

*A resource of the Dignity Project
Workgroup, 2019.*

If you want to do something about it, consider whether a direct conversation is the best approach. Consult with someone who understands the academic culture. The Student Conflict Resolution Center (academic issues), Office for Conflict Resolution (employment issues), Student Counseling Services (confidential counseling), or a trusted mentor are all good resources. Consider:

- How does a direct conversation contribute to the achievement of your short-term and long-term goals? If your goal is to vent, do not have the conversation.
- If you value the relationship, will a direct conversation enhance the relationship or risk damaging it? If you feel unsafe or threatened in the relationship, do not have the conversation in person.
- What are the alternatives to a face-to-face conversation? Are there intermediaries who can help?

Setting up the Meeting

If you decide a direct conversation is best, do not do it by email or phone. Meeting in person will provide you the opportunity to judge the reaction of the other person and adjust your approach, if needed.

- Make an appointment and plan for adequate time. The location should be private, such as a professor's office where you will not be interrupted.
- Practice the conversation with a trusted mentor or friend. Anticipate the range of reactions and practice your response.

The Conversation

- Use diplomatic, not inflammatory, language to present the issue in the meeting.

- Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Do not assume the worst about their intentions. Try to understand the needs and stressors that the other person is experiencing.
- Frame the conversation so that you are acknowledging the needs of the other person and helping to make clear your own needs
- Avoid judgmental language. For example, instead of saying: "You could have told me two months ago, but you didn't," try something like: "This assignment comes at a time in the semester when I have no real options to change my schedule."
- Understand and acknowledge your role in the conflict. Maybe you missed a deadline, failed to communicate about obstacles, or have been inaccessible or non-responsive at times.
- Be an attentive listener.
- Try to have an open and positive attitude.
- Come prepared to share some ideas for resolutions and to listen to others. Be open-minded about possible solutions. If the other person asks: "What do you want me to do about it?" respond by generating several acceptable outcomes rather than limiting yourself to only one.
- Be brief, organized, and to the point.

Ending the Conversation

- Have an exit strategy in case the conversation goes badly. If the conversation begins to escalate unpleasantly, bring it to an end. For example: "Rather than talking more now, let's adjourn and talk more later after we've had a chance to reflect on this."
- Have realistic expectations. It may be a great achievement for the conversation to go "not badly." Don't expect it to provide the ideal resolution or to resolve all of the relationship issues.
- Identify next steps before concluding the conversation. When you will hear back regarding the response? What will you do to further problem solving? Acknowledge that you may feel awkward in the days ahead but you want to get over the awkwardness and have a good working relationship.