

Difficult Conversations for Academic Chairs

Good communication is the bridge between confusion and clarity

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As academic administrators, we sometimes have difficult conversations with students, parents, faculty, staff, and our supervisors. The following are suggestions for having successful difficult conversations with faculty and staff under your supervision.

Be willing to do your job. No one likes conflict but it does come with the job and it is important to confront bullying, unethical or unprofessional behavior.

Find a mentor. Try to find an experienced department chair or dean who can give you suggestions on how to deal with a variety of situations. You can also practice conversations with a friend or partner.

Be a mentor. If you realize that you are supervising colleagues and think of it as a mentoring rather than supervising you will have less difficult conversations to begin with.

Be prepared for the conversation. Get the facts and do not just use anecdotal information or observation. University policies and procedures can be helpful in the process.

Be positive. You are a supporter looking for a positive outcome. It's not about you. Particularly try to end the meeting on a positive note with a potential solution identified.

Listen more - talk less. Sometimes people just need to be heard and can talk themselves out of their anger or fear. Don't be afraid to admit you have made a mistake.

Don't make it personal. Try to keep your emotions controlled. Document conversations and/or have a third party attend in the most difficult conflicts.

Find the right setting. Choose a safe environment for all. Usually your office is the right place, sometimes coffee is less threatening.

Keep it confidential. Employees often come to you with very personal problems and need to be able to trust your confidentiality.

Show respect. Respect faculty and staff and expect the same from them. It doesn't mean you agree on everything but always try to keep the discourse respectful.