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## **LET'S TALK:**

# **TURNING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS INTO MEANINGFUL ONES**

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***Change Catalyst***

***(... and a Non-Soul-Crushing Kind of Attorney)***

### **COURSE MATERIALS AND EXERCISES**

Please note that even though I am an attorney, no attorney-client relationship exists by virtue of this program, and the information presented in this class and in these materials is not intended to be legal advice. Individual situations vary and appropriate resolutions are fact specific, and I recommend that you consult with Human Resources or your organization's legal counsel before you apply this information to specific risk management decisions



# NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

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**SILENCE ISN'T KINDNESS. IT IS ABANDONMENT DISGUISED AS KEEPING THE PEACE.**

**AVOIDING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS MEANS  
TRADING SHORT TERM DISCOMFORT FOR LONG TERM DYSFUNCTION**

- Lead with **empathy**.
- Prepare** for the conversation and stay flexible (Don't script it).
- Stay calm**, not combative or combustible. Own your emotions and keep them in check.
- Own and apologize for your** role in the situation (accountability matters).
- Be **more responsive** to employee needs and **less reactive** to the heat of the moment.
- Name the **impact of behaviors**, not just the issues.
- Really listen** and ask open-ended questions to gain a better understanding.

**RESPOND TO WHAT PEOPLE SAY**

**NOT TO THE STORIES YOU MAKE UP IN YOUR HEAD BASED ON WHAT YOU HEARD.**

- Lead with **more curiosity** and **less criticism** to ensure you are solving the right problem.
- Give your **full attention** and ask for the employee's perspective.
- Validate the employee's perspective** and feelings, even if you disagree with it.
- Be clear and direct with a dose of compassion (**nerf darts**) without sugar coating feedback.
- Focus on and **develop solutions** or a path forward **together**.
- End the meeting with **clear next steps** and follow up documentation.

**DON'T EXPECT YOUR FEEDBACK TO MATTER TO SOMEONE  
WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE THEY MATTER TO YOU.**

# NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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## *Be Secure in Who You Are & Your Role*

- Prepare for the conversation:
  - ✓ Clarify your objectives (**Purpose Statement**) – what do you want to accomplish in the conversation (with customers, co-workers, leaders, etc.)?
  - ✓ Anticipate how information might be received along with your reactions to it.
- Don't take the comments personally. This is about them, not you.
- Believe in your knowledge, skill, expertise and ability to help others. Believe in YOU!
- Avoid becoming defensive (see above) or putting the other party on the defensive.
- Maintain appropriate personal and professional boundaries.** Remain mindful of your tone and content of written, oral and in-person communications.
- Stay actively engaged! Maintain a positive attitude. **Avoid getting sucked in to negative feelings.**
- Treat people with respect and dignity always and no matter what.**

## *Listen Actively to what others are saying*

- Listen more than you talk**, and don't interrupt to give your opinion until you are clear about the other person's perspective.
- Be interested and watch for cues from the speaker; maintain appropriate eye contact. **Be patient and allow the speaker to tell their story at their own pace. Ask "And what else..."**
- Avoid comparisons because your experience may be totally different; focus on the person's circumstances and how they feel about it.
- Don't try to help immediately or offer solutions. The point of empathy is understanding and hearing the person out, not necessarily solving the problem.
- Let people know they have been heard, listened to, understood and that you appreciate the importance of the conversation, even if you haven't resolved the problem yet.
- Be authentic, considerate and straightforward. **Respect people enough to be honest about what to expect.** Do not build up false hopes or make promises you can't keep. Sometimes the best you can do is listen.

# DELIVERING OBJECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK

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## *Leadership Discussion Questions:*

1. Share a story about when you either hesitated to give feedback or you sugar-coated feedback to avoid hurting someone's feelings. Did you see the change in behavior or performance that you needed to see? How could you adjust that feedback now to achieve a different result?
2. Share a story about when you did not address performance issues when they happened but instead waited a long time and then addressed issues as a group of concerns. How did the employee receive that feedback? If the employee was upset or got defensive, how did you react or respond?
3. Share a story about when you gave what you thought was honest and authentic feedback and the conversation did not go well. Looking back on that conversation, what would you do differently now if you had to do that conversation over.

## *What makes it hard to give honest, balanced, and action-oriented feedback.*

1. What feels most uncomfortable to you about giving direct or authentic feedback?
2. What kinds of things do you do to try to "soften the blow" or to avoid hurting feelings?
  - a. Are you doing that preemptively because you are worried about how they will take the feedback or because you know they will be hurt? (***There is an important distinction here.***)
  - b. If it is because you *know* they will be hurt by the feedback, explore what is "hurtful" about it (e.g., it's a surprise, you weren't honest in the past, etc.)
3. What risk do you face if you are fully honest and authentic in coaching or in a review? What's the risk to the employee or your team if you withhold honest feedback?
4. What would make it easier for you to be more direct, specific, and authentic in our reviews?
5. What are you willing to commit to trying to do differently when you need to provide difficult feedback?

# IS MY FEEDBACK OBJECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL?

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**1. Is it based on observable behavior?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → What specific behavior did you see or hear?

**2. Can I describe the impact of the behavior?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → Consider how the behavior affected team, project, or goals.

**3. Is it timely and relevant?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → Provide it as soon as possible and explain any delay.

**4. Does it promote growth or performance improvement?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → Reframe it to include developmental or performance value.

**5. Would I say this feedback to a peer or leader I respect?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → Reassess tone and language for professionalism.

**6. Am I assuming intent or sticking to facts?**

- Facts → Good to go
- Assuming → Reframe to observable behaviors only.

**7. Have I invited a two-way dialogue?**

- Yes → Continue
- No → Plan to ask questions and listen with curiosity.

# NAVIGATING THE CONVERSATION

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## EFFECTIVE PHRASES FOR DIFFICULT PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS

**THESE PHRASES ARE DESIGNED TO FOSTER CLARITY, EMPATHY, AND PROGRESS.**

### *General Notes to Keep in Mind:*

- ✓ Don't assume the conversation will be difficult. Bringing negative energy and anxiety into the room can create discomfort and defensiveness.
- ✓ Employees are allowed to disagree, express disappointment or frustration. These emotions are natural during conversations about performance.
- ✓ Own your part in not providing timely or clear feedback.
- ✓ Check your assumptions and understanding before responding. Take the employee's point of view into consideration.
- ✓ Don't escalate. Don't match escalating energy. Stop the meeting and reschedule if necessary.

### *Opening the Conversation:*

- ✓ "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today."
- ✓ "I want to have an open and honest conversation with you."
- ✓ "My goal is to support your success and growth here."
- ✓ "The purpose of this meeting is..."
- ✓ "We are meeting because..."

### *Setting the Tone*

- ✓ "This isn't an easy conversation, but it's important."
- ✓ "Let's work together to understand what's going on and how we can move forward."
- ✓ "I respect your contributions and want to see you succeed."
- ✓ "I can see you are disappointed/upset. What is disappointing or upsetting for you — the topic, the timing, or something else?"
- ✓ "It sounds like this is a surprise. I apologize for not mentioning this sooner or for not being clear."

### *Addressing the Issue Clearly*

- ✓ "I've noticed a pattern I'd like to talk with you about."
- ✓ "Here are some specific examples of where performance hasn't met expectations."
- ✓ "This is the impact these issues are having on the team/project/client."
- ✓ "When X isn't done or done correctly, I see Y impact. What impact do you see on the team in that situation?"

### *Instead of Saying the Person Is Incorrect or Wrong, Say...*

- ✓ "How do you see things from your perspective?"
- ✓ "I see the issue differently."
- ✓ "I have a different perspective."
- ✓ "I have a different recollection."
- ✓ "I can see why you and I might have different perspectives here. Tell me more about yours."

### *Inviting Dialogue*

- ✓ "Is there anything that might be affecting your performance?"
- ✓ "What support do you feel you need from me or the team?"
- ✓ "I hear that point and am making a note to cover that in another meeting. For now, let's focus on the purpose of this meeting which is..."
- ✓ "Tell me more about that."
- ✓ "What is standing in your way to do what I am asking you to do?"
- ✓ "What obstacles are preventing you from doing your work today?"
- ✓ "What I gather is that you are prioritizing X over Y. Tell me more about that."

### *When the Employee Blames Others or Points to Others*

- ✓ "I am more curious about what your role in the situation was here."
- ✓ "I am more curious about what you need."

- ✓ "I am more curious about you and how the situation impacts you."
- ✓ "I am more curious about what the real challenge is for you."

### *Focusing on Improvement*

- ✓ "Let's talk about what success looks like going forward."
- ✓ "What steps do you think you can take to address this?"
- ✓ "Here's what I need to see moving forward, and here's how I can help."
- ✓ "This is what I need from you. Let's talk through your plan to get that done."
- ✓ "Let's talk through your next steps. I want to make sure we are on the same page before you go."
- ✓ "Let's talk about where we go from here."
- ✓ "Can I count on you to...?"
- ✓ "Are you willing to consider how to implement the feedback I am giving you?"
- ✓ "Are you willing to try to implement the feedback I am giving you? If not, why not?"

### *Expressing Support and Accountability*

- ✓ "I'm here to support you, and accountability is essential."
- ✓ "We'll schedule a check-in to review progress."
- ✓ "This is a chance to reset and make meaningful change."
- ✓ "How can I support your success moving forward?"
- ✓ "I understand that you disagree with my decision/assessment/perspective. We don't have to agree. We do have to move forward. Let's talk about how we can do that."
- ✓ "I understand your concerns or objections AND you have a choice to make. Refusing to follow directions or perform assigned work is insubordination and will result in discipline. My preference would be to find a path forward where you are successful."
- ✓ "I understand you disagree, and the issue is not up for debate. The decision has been made. I need you to focus on doing what I've asked you to do. What support do you need to do that?"

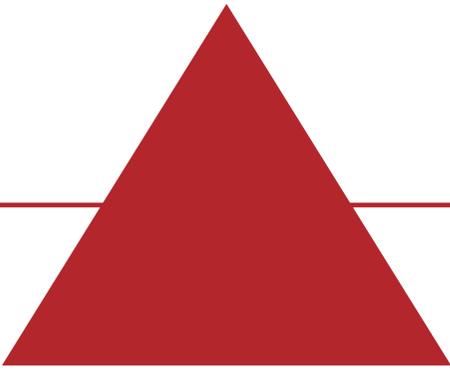
## *Using Strategic Pauses*

- ✓ "I am going to pause for a minute to think about what you said."
- ✓ "I am going to pause and check my understanding of what you are saying/seeing."
- ✓ "I am going to pause here because I want to be responsive to your concerns instead of reactive to the moment. Please give me a minute."
- ✓ "I think what you are saying is... am I right?"
- ✓ "It sounds like you are frustrated/disappointed/upset, is that correct?"
- ✓ "I appreciate you sharing your perspective. It's important to me that I understand where you are coming from, and I would like some time to think about it. Let's break for X minutes and then meet again later to discuss."
- ✓ "I would like some time to consider what you have said before responding."

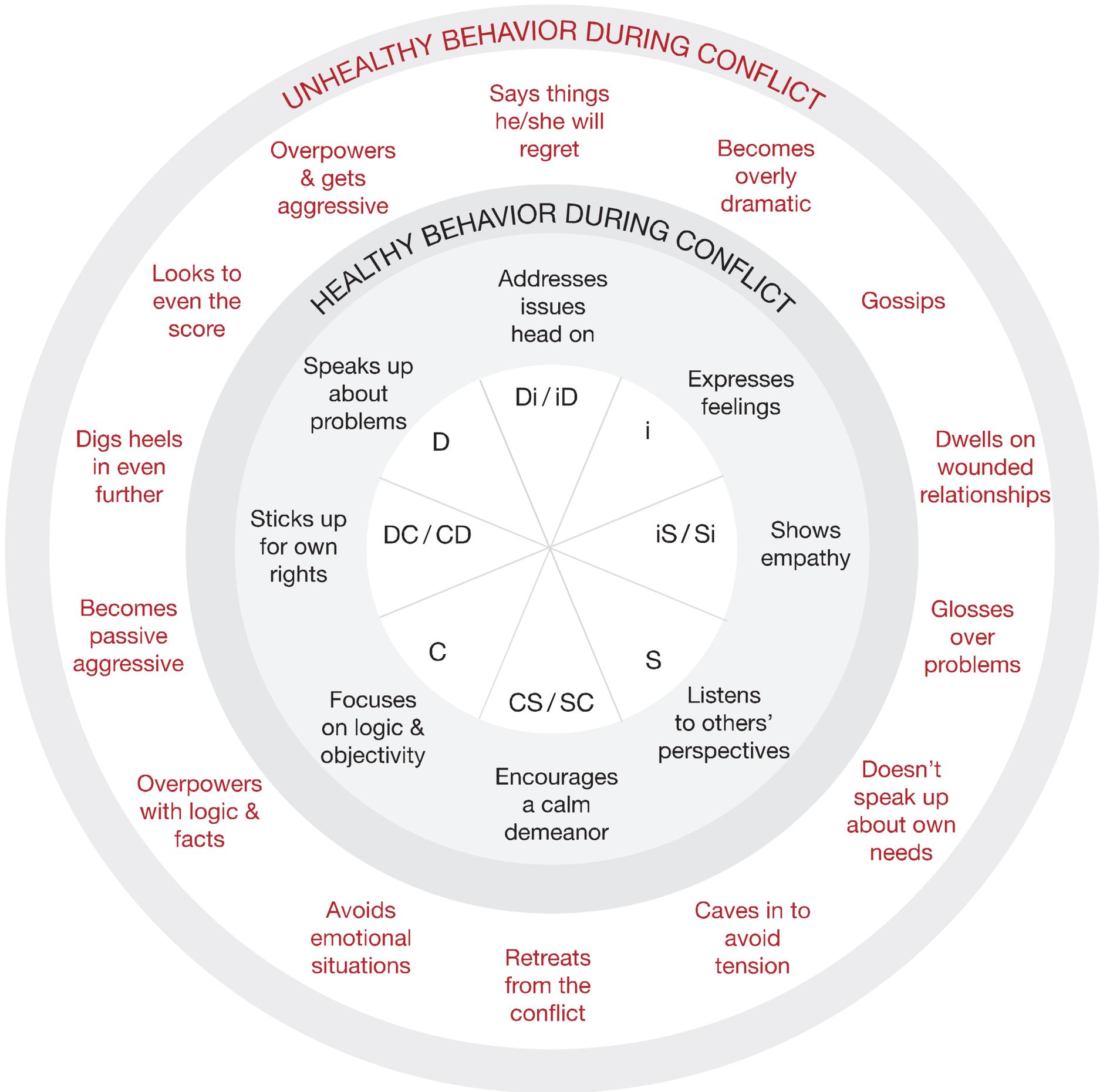
## *Closing the Conversation*

- ✓ "I appreciate your openness today."
- ✓ "Let's agree on the next steps and a timeline."
- ✓ "Thank you for your time and willingness to engage."

**USE THESE PHRASES AUTHENTICALLY, ADAPTING THEM TO YOUR STYLE AND THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF EACH CONVERSATION.**



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