

Managing Conflict and Difficult Conversations Workshop Course Outline: Two-Day Duration

Day 1

Introduction and purposes

In this introductory section, we will outline the general purposes of the workshop, and check in with participants to summarize their key goals. We will briefly present the context and history of the material, its underlying analytical approach, and how this informs the course structure. We will also introduce Common Outlook Consulting and the facilitator(s).

Costs of raising / avoiding / cycle of indecision

We will brainstorm some of the costs of having challenging conversations in the face of conflict, and then the costs of avoiding them. Often the tension we experience about whether to have the conversation or not leaves us in a cycle of indecision, which leads us either to no action or to unskillful action. Using an interactive format, this segment outlines the *business impact* of either not handling these types of difficult discussions or handling them poorly.

Example of a Conflict-filled Difficult Conversation

In front of the room, the facilitators play out a difficult conversation one could expect to see in the workplace. A frequent context chosen for this example is a conversation between two colleagues from different departments, where one party is informing the other that a “deliverable” will not be completed on time. The role-play illustrates the problem of the “toxic inner voice”. The exercise makes explicit the premium challenge to effective communication: what makes it hard to be skillful in a conversation is what’s in our heads. The inner voice is one of the core concepts in the framework presented in the workshop, and sets this course apart from many other workshops that address issues of this nature. It does this by addressing not only what we should do interactively with the person we are speaking with, but also what we need to do internally, to negotiate with ourselves, so that we can be as skillful as possible interpersonally. The exercise is fun and energetic, and sets the tone and stage for all else that will happen in the workshop.

Personal Case – Effective and Ineffective Communication Skills

At this early stage participants will immediately begin to work on a real situation that they have personally experienced in the recent past. They will be asked to choose a conversation that did not go well, and then write several lines of dialogue from it on a form we will provide, as well as the corresponding thoughts and feelings (inner voice). We will introduce some core strategies for effective communication, and use these to analyze where they may have gone wrong, and identify some strategies for getting back on track. Participants will practice these skills with a partner, and this may be supplemented by “stop-action” role-play at the front of the room to demonstrate effective and ineffective communication. We will complete this module by having participants examine the patterns in their inner voice, and how those thoughts and feelings interfered with their ability to be effective in that particular conversation. The remainder of the workshop focuses on unpacking this dilemma in order to improve their ability to conduct these conversations.

Orchestrating a Difficult Conversation Authentically

As a way to demonstrate the power of handling a difficult conversation skillfully, using a real case provided by one of the participants, one of the facilitators will conduct a conversation at the front of the room with a participant (assuming this was not done in the previous module). The other facilitator will pause the dialogue at various points to highlight what is working and why. This exercise will also demonstrate how difficult it can be to communicate well when you strongly disagree with the other party. This sets the context for subsequent components of the workshop.

LUNCH

The “Three Conversations” Framework: shifts in thinking

We present the core framework developed by our colleagues at The Harvard Negotiation Project and presented in their book: *“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.”* (Stone, Patton, Heen). The hypothesis is that there are patterns to what makes a conversation difficult. Those patterns are described as three simultaneous conversations occurring in any challenging or conflict-filled situation:

The “What Happened” Conversation, which includes:

- A debate about who has the “right” view of a situation or the “right” solution for moving forward
- A debate about the intentions behind various actions. Typically we make worst case assumptions about people’s motives, despite the fact that more often than not, our assumptions are wrong.
- The tendency to focus on assigning blame when things go wrong, rather than on considering how each party contributed to the situation at hand;

The Feelings Conversation

- Moving from avoiding feelings or expressing them poorly to acknowledging others’ feelings and sharing ours without blaming the other person for them;

The Identity Conversation

- Moving from being knocked off balance by perceived threats to our identity to maintaining a balanced picture of our identity, and exploring identity implications for the other party.

Working with the “What Happened” Conversation

Unlocking Polarized Points of View

Every party to a conversation has a story about what is happening. Often in difficult conversations, we get stuck arguing about those stories: who’s right. Two interactive excises are used to make this point. Using a tool called the Ladder of Inference first developed by Chris Argyris of Harvard Business School, we will demonstrate how, at subconscious levels, we quickly form opinions and lock into them as being “the right answer”. We will practice using this tool on real situations faced by participants to break the deadlock of disagreement and attempt to uncover where the disconnect occurred.

Intent vs. Impact

We will discuss the importance of making this distinction both intellectually as well as in the conversation, and have participants do an exercise to illustrate this.

Blame vs. Contribution

In this segment we will make the distinction between these two concepts, and the

significant cost of playing the blame game. Participants will once again work through a real-life exercise to illustrate this point and its impact. We will also highlight the power of acknowledging your contribution to a problem situation early when raising it with others.

Role-Play

In order to tie these concepts together and allow participants to practice, we will have them do a one-on-one role-play that surfaces the themes covered thus far today. We will walk them through a structured preparation tool that will enable them to conduct the conversation more usefully. In the debrief of the role-play, participants will note issues their counterpart handled well, as well as topics that they might handle differently. Participants give each other feedback in pairs, and a group discussion about the case follows, highlighting what behaviours worked well and what should be modified or changed, and the effect of preparation & analysis on the success of the conversation.

Wrap-up

Participants summarize their key insights from the day.

End of Day 1

Day 2

Check-in + Q&A

We will begin the day by looking back at Day 1 and asking participants to share their key insights with the group. This provides a sense for what is resonating with the group. We will also take questions and summarize the agenda for the day.

The role reversal exercise – seeing it from the other side

Participants work in pairs on their own scenarios. They will be encouraged to pick a situation that is important to them and that they have really wrestled with. It could be the same scenario they used yesterday, or a new one. Each participant will have the chance to experience their scenario from the “reversed” position, where they play the role of the person they have the issue with (called their “absent party”). Participants choose a difficult conversation, and then choose a partner to help them work on it, and brief their partner on the details. That person plays two roles: first the absent party (i.e. the person who the conversation is with) and then the participant whose example it is. This enables the participant to see both how it is to be in the absent party’s shoes and also how they are coming across in the conversation. Participants respond very well to this exercise. They find a great deal of value in being able to view the situation from the other person’s side.

Managing Strong Emotions

Even very skilled people struggle when confronted with strong feelings. Building upon the skills and the framework introduced earlier in the workshop, in this segment we will work through a number of exercises to help participants manage strong feelings better when they are trying to communicate about difficult topics. This module will offer a concrete framework for (1) Managing other people’s strong emotions; and (2) Managing your own strong emotions. This module may also include stop-action role-play at the front of the room to demonstrate the power of acknowledging strong emotions, rather than simply trying to ignore or suppress them.

Identity and its Role in Difficult Conversations

In every difficult conversation, what triggers strong emotions is the fact that people are hearing either an implicit or explicit attack on how they see themselves. This section introduces the concept of the identity conversation and what it means to be off balance with your identity. It explores the triggers for losing balance as well as the tools for regaining it. Participants work independently to reflect on their personal identity “hot buttons” as well as work in pairs to discuss how the identity conversation played out in their personal example.

“Nightmares”

This module is included depending on time and need. Participants form two groups: each group brainstorms a nightmare scenario and prepares one person to play the nightmare person. Groups then nominate someone to try to “deal” with the other group’s nightmare and role-play with coaching from Instructors and other participants. This portion of the workshop brings all the ideas together. Participants are invited to use the skills from across the Three Conversations.

How to Begin, and Deciding Whether or Not to Engage a Topic

Finally, we consider what factors to use in deciding which conversations to engage, and which do not merit engaging. We will also offer thoughts on how to begin a challenging conversation productively.

Wrap-up, evaluations & going forward

As a closing, we place the workshop in the context of a life long learning process. In this final module we will ask the participants to review all of the tools and concepts of the session and 1) identify specific places in their day to day lives where they can and will immediately implement some of the ideas; and 2) articulate places, for themselves, that they want to focus their personal professional development.

End of workshop