



GRADUATE EDUCATION:

FAIM Guide for Engaging in Crucial Conversations

Faculty Advancing Inclusive Mentoring (FAIM)

Cornell University Graduate School

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Douglas, S., Patton, B., Heen, S., & Fisher, R. (2023). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most* (3rd ed.). Harvard.

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Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to help mentors and mentees prepare for and engage in difficult conversations to promote mutual understanding and effective problem-solving. This resource can help foster thoughtful preparation to prime for a constructive and productive dialogue.

Instructions

Part 1: Prepare for the Conversation

Reflect on the issue you want to address and clarify the problem or purpose. Consider how you and others have contributed to the situation and think about the emotions that may come up during the conversation. Be honest with yourself about any assumptions you may be making.

Part 2: Schedule and Plan the Conversation

Initiate communication to schedule a time to have the conversation with the other person. Frame the purpose of the conversation as an opportunity to collaboratively address the challenge or issue at hand. Allow ample time between initial communication and the meeting to ensure the other person can reflect on potential outcomes from the conversation.

Part 3: Have the Conversation

Approach the conversation with openness and curiosity, aiming for mutual understanding rather than agreement. Share your perspective while inviting the other person to share theirs. Acknowledge emotions and work toward a solution together, focusing on facts and shared goals.

Part 4: Take Action and Plan to Revisit

Summarize the conversation and agree on next steps. Ensure mutual understanding by documenting the plan and setting timelines for follow-up. If the issue remains unresolved, explore alternative solutions or seek further support.

Part 5: Frequently Asked Questions

The end of this guide covers frequently asked questions and provides additional resources to prepare for and engage in difficult conversations.



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Part 1: Prepare for the Conversation

To prime for a productive conversation, it's important to reflect on your experiences, identify the issue you would like to address, and consider your goals. The prompts below can guide you ensure a productive and thoughtful discussion.

General guidelines.

- Aim for mutual understanding, not mutual agreement or “winning.”
- Some situations are better left unaddressed, specifically if the problem is internal—related to your perceptions and feelings—and does not impact behavior, engagement, or productivity.
- Provide yourself with time to prepare for critical conversations.
- Everyone has limitations, imperfections, and unique ways of being.
- Not every conversation will effectively lead to desired outcomes conflict resolution.

Define the problem / purpose.

- What happened / is happening to prompt your wanting to have a conversation?
- Why do you care? What do you hope to gain?
 - Is this about a problem that impacts progress or performance or is it about your feelings and perceptions?
 - The response to this question will help determine whether the conversation is appropriate and necessary or not.

Reflect on contributions to the situation.

- How has the other individual contributed to the situation at hand? (list 3-5 ways)
- How have you contributed to the situation at hand? (list 3-5 ways)
- Who else is involved or impacted by the situation? How have they contributed to the situation at hand?

Identify assumptions.

- What story are you telling yourself about the other person?
- What story may they be telling themselves about you?

Anticipate difficult feelings (“hot buttons”).

- What emotions may come up for you or the other person that may derail the conversation? What do you do when that happens?



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- We recommend engaging with Stanford University's [SPARQtools "Identify Your Hot Buttons" step](#) from the ["Are You Ready to Talk?" toolkit](#) to explore and identify your hot buttons.

Part 2: Schedule and Plan the Conversation

Schedule the conversation.

Example of language you may use to schedule the conversation.

"I know this is a complex situation, and I want to make sure we reach mutual understanding. That means I want us to have ample time to share and understand one another's experiences and collaborate to develop an action plan that will allow us to work together more effectively."

Plan the conversation.

- Adopt a third-party perspective: step back from the situation and attempt to view it as an outsider or neutral observer. Through this lens, list the facts.
- What happened?
- Reflect on your story or perspective.
- Why is this conversation important to you as a research/academic mentor or mentee?
- Plan to invite them to share their stories.
- What assumptions are you making, and what are some questions of curiosity can you pose for more information?
- Consider your desired outcomes and next steps.
- What are you hoping to achieve, and what compromises are you willing to consider?
- If your ideal outcome isn't possible, what are some alternative resolutions?



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Part 3: Have the Conversation

Things to remember.

- Set ego aside.
- Be transparent about the purpose of the conversation and your motivation.
- Explicitly state you are thought partners and both have agency.
- State your stance and what may persuade you; ask them for the same.
- Seek to share your story, listen to theirs, and understand one another.
- Replace certainty with curiosity. Be open and willing to changing your mind.
 - Adopt the “*and* stance.” Your experiences are valid *and* so are the other person’s.
 - Engage in good faith and assume best intentions.
- Remember, agreement requires collaboration.

Steps for the conversation.

Start from the third story to find common ground and identify divergences.

- Bring up the facts that you reflected on during your preparation to the conversation.
- What can you both agree to have happened or to be happening?

Invite them to participate and share their story.

- Be genuine and take ownership of your assumptions if they are creating a barrier to collaboration. Some language you may use is below.
 - “I was surprised by your comment”
 - “I thought your action was out of character”
 - “The story I’m choosing to tell myself is that you do not respect my perspective. I know that’s unfair to you. Can you help me put this in perspective to help me understand what you are thinking or feeling?”
- Express a desire to understand them, have them understand you, and to move forward. Some language you may use is below.
 - “Can you help me understand ...”
 - “How have your past experiences shaped how you are understanding and experiencing ...”
 - “Let’s work on how we might...”
 - “Can you help me understand your intention?”
- Try to understand their internal narrative—what they might be telling themselves about themselves. Some language you may use is below.
 - “I’ve been in similar situations where I started to feel like others saw me as not [intelligent, good enough, etc.], and eventually, I started to believe it myself. I



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don't want that for you, and I want to make sure you know this isn't personal.
How are you feeling?"

- Ask clarifying questions to fully understand one another's perspectives. Some language you may use is below.
 - "I heard you say x, and I am missing something. Can you help me understand ..."

Now, participate and share your story.

- Begin by stating what is at the heart of the matter. Some language you may use is below.
Some language you may use is below.
 - "What is important to me is ..."
 - "What I am feeling is ..."
- Use the *and* stance to frame the complexity of your experience. A sample of language you may use is below.
 - "I believe you are incredibly bright and have the potential to significantly contribute to the field and the research team; *and* I've noticed that there you are struggling with [x] and have not engaged in ongoing learning opportunities that can help you succeed or asked for help."
- Share how this is impacting your internal narrative and create space for them to share also (if that has not already happened in their sharing their story). Some language you may use is below.
- "What am I telling myself this says about me or how others now perceive me?"

Note: Be cautious of using these words: "inappropriate", "should" or "professional" is subjective and can carry judgement. If they do need to be used, preface your statement with "My view is that..."

Problem-solve together to come up with possible solutions.

- Structure the conversation as co-constructive, collaborative initiative. The solution should work for both parties and both should be involved. Some language you may use is below.
- "Can we find a creative way to address both of our issues and concerns with both our issues? Are you willing to try to find a solution with me?"
- "What would you do if in my shoes?"
- "I appreciate your idea to ... I'm not fully convinced this is the way to go because I want ... and I have heard you say you want ... can you share more about why this solution may be the best way to address the situation?"
- Hold space to candidly and directly share your concerns and needs for resolution and listen to theirs.
- Look for external standards of fairness.



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- What are department or field standards that serve both faculty mentors and graduate student mentees?
- The solution should be co-constructed by all parties.
 - “Let’s work on how we might ...”
 - “I wonder if it is possible to ...”
 - Does this address both individual’s major concerns?
 - Does this address negative consequences on group and personal dynamics and behaviors, productivity, and / or engagement?
- Keep in mind that compromise can manifest in different ways.
 - For example, a plan that is not the ideal for both individuals, but instead, something that two individuals can work with for positive outcomes.
 - The solution may be to agree to disagree.

Identify a clear plan to move forward.

Collaboratively develop a plan to revisit the situation at hand and refine future steps.

- When will you next meet?
- How do you measure and/or determine success?



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Part 4: Take Action and Plan to Revisit

Ensure mutual understanding.

- The mentee should summarize the conversation via a written format.
- The mentor will then review the summary and make additions as appropriate.
- The mentee should have an opportunity to ask questions and integrate suggestions and changes.
- File the summary in a mutually accessible space.

Identify next steps to address solvable problems.

Note: If your compromise is to agree to disagree, this is not a necessary step.

- Use one of the possible suggestions the mentee and mentor co-constructed to guide next steps.
- Define progress.
- Define success.
- Identify and set a timeline to complete and check in on next steps.
- Set communication expectations.

Identify next steps if the issue cannot be resolved between all parties.

You may consider:

- helping them explore paths forward and refer them to others.
- encouraging engagement with a mentee's mentor network.
- removing from a project or a part of a project.
- recusing from *and* helping rebuild the mentee's special committee.
- working with the graduate school and mentee to master out of the program.
- sun-setting the relationship.



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Part 5: Frequently Asked Questions

Conflict is a natural part of any relationship, and how you handle it can either strengthen trust or cause friction. Below are some common sources of conflict in academic and professional settings, along with practical tips for resolving them effectively.

Common Areas of Conflict and Quick Tips to Resolve Conflict

Disagreement on best courses of action to address academic or professional challenges

- Review your collaboratively defined and communicated mentoring agreement plan.
- Ask the mentee to develop a timeline and research agenda to share.
- Encourage the mentee to consider what they need to progress toward their goals.
- Discuss the mentee's ideas; you may offer additional opportunities or clarify limitations with transparency.
- Modify the timeline, funding, and professional development plans together.
- Prioritize the mentee's goals and aspirations.

Unmet mentoring and/or working expectations

- Review the mutually defined and communicated agreement plan to identify unmet expectations.
- Meet with the mentee to raise concerns, approaching each conversation with good faith.
- Apply a growth mindset, shifting from “they don’t know” to “they don’t know YET, but they can learn.”
- Manage emotions and avoid defensiveness by using tactics from provided resources.

Conflict within a research group or team

Perception of preferential treatment:

- Meet with the mentee to understand their concerns.
- Check in with the mentee if concerns are raised by others.
- Be transparent about your individualized approach to mentorship and how opportunities arise at various stages.

Unequal work distribution:

- Meet individually and with the group to understand concerns and clarify roles.
- Refer to the research group/lab manual and provide opportunities for questions.
- Review team roles and responsibilities, including areas of overlap.

Competition for resources:

- Be transparent about the reasoning behind resource distribution.
- Reflect on who is receiving opportunities and why, considering internal biases.



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How can I explore, identify, and anticipate my hot buttons?

We recommend engaging with Stanford University's [SPARQtools "Identify Your Hot Buttons" step](#) from the ["Are You Ready to Talk?" toolkit](#) to explore and identify your hot buttons.

What are some other resources that can help me prepare for and engage in a crucial conversation?

Framework

- [Listen, Affirm, Respond, Ask/Answer \(LARA\) communication](#)

Cornell Campus Resources

- Cornell Intergroup Dialogue Project
- Cornell Office of the University Ombuds
- Provost's Office of Faculty Development and Diversity