

Difficult Conversations for Supervisors

Text-Only Version

Course Introduction

[Video shows John Employee casually talking with two co-workers in a cubical as Jane Supervisor walks by]

[Jane] See me in my office NOW!

[John] Okay, why? What's up?

[Jane] I can't believe you're asking me that. Do you know what the term 'deliverable due date' means?

[Narrator] Ouch. That didn't go so well. As an observer, it is easy to see that this is not an effective conversation. If the tables were turned, how effective would you be in communicating a difficult message to an employee?

Having difficult conversations with employees is hard. The employee could potentially have an emotional reaction that you will have to handle. There is also the risk that if the conversation is held, the situation will not improve. Consequently, supervisors avoid having these types of conversations. Yet, if you do not pursue these conversations, you risk the behavior or performance problem having a negative impact on your organization.

Poor performers can affect an organization's overall productivity and may lead to low morale. They can cause resentment by other employees as they deal with the impact on their own workload. Not dealing with these difficult conversations can create the perception that poor performance is condoned.

Welcome to the Difficult Conversations for Supervisors course.

This course is divided into two modules, including Techniques and Best Practices, and Practice Conversations. When you have completed the Techniques and Best Practices module, you will be able to:

- Recognize the preparation steps needed for a difficult conversation,
- Identify specific considerations for setting up a difficult conversation, and
- Recognize crucial techniques for carrying out difficult conversations.

You will also learn about the different phases of difficult conversations and the objectives of each. In the Practice Conversations module, you will plan and successfully conduct difficult conversations. The Techniques and Best Practices module is composed of four topics, including this introduction. In the second topic, you will learn how to prepare for and set up the conversation. Next, you will learn about techniques to successfully conduct a difficult conversation, and the phases these conversations generally follow. The final topic presents a summary of what you have learned. Upon completion of this module, you will be able to practice what you learned in three difficult conversation scenarios.

Conversation Preparation and Setup

Steps for Difficult Conversations

Proactive supervisors initiate informal difficult conversations when there are performance and conduct issues. There are three steps to set the stage for a positive outcome during the conversation. First,

gather the relevant information. Step two is to make carefully-considered arrangements to meet for the conversation. Finally, before you actually have the difficult conversation, be sure to practice. Note that if the discussion is investigative or constitutes a formal discussion, the supervisor needs to refer to the applicable collective bargaining agreement and contact employee and labor relations for advice and guidance.

1. Gather Information

The first step in preparing for a difficult conversation is to gather relevant information. You will need examples of performance and/or conduct issues. You should also review the expectations that have been conveyed to the employee. One source of agreed-upon expectations is the job description itself. Is the work the employee is being asked to do, what she or he was hired to do? What performance goals were established at the annual or quarterly review meetings? How is the employee's time management? Is the employee struggling to meet the goals? Has anything changed since the performance goals were established? Were there prior performance meetings? Were those meetings related to poor work performance? Have there been conduct issues in the past? You can also consult employee and labor relations personnel for additional information.

2. Make Meeting Arrangement

Once you have gathered the information on the employee's performance or conduct, you need to make arrangements to meet and discuss the issues and the way forward. Begin by scheduling a room for the conversation. It should not take place in an open area of the office. Difficult conversations should take place behind a closed door. Make sure you reserve the room long enough to have the conversation. How long do you think the conversation will take? 15 minutes? 30 minutes? That depends on the issue being addressed. Next, you will need to notify the employee, either by phone or in-person. Whether by phone or face-to-face, you and the employee must establish a mutually agreeable time for the meeting. After the time is set, send the employee a meeting invite email with the meeting information. This allows the supervisor to track the response to the meeting invitation and serves as a record of documentation. The meeting will be on the employee's calendar and the supervisor will be able to tell whether the employee read the invite or not. In order to be prepared for an emotional outburst, you should have a box of tissues on hand. In the event that you feel threatened in any way or at any point during the conversation, make sure you have the appropriate HR contact information. If this situation does occur, stop the conversation immediately and contact human resources.

3. Practice

Don't let your conversation go off point or devolve! Practice the key points that you want to address in the conversation. Consider the various responses you may receive, and plan your follow-on comments to keep the conversation on point. Additionally, you should develop a strategy of how to deal with emotional outbursts.

Activity 1

Now apply what you have learned. Read the scenario and then answer the question.

Sam Supervisor is preparing for a difficult conversation with Edward Employee. As part of the preparation, Sam gathers examples of the issue to be addressed, finds out what expectations have been set, and consults with the employee and labor relations personnel. He arranges the conversation at a

time that works for the employee and allots plenty of time for the conversation. He also reserves a conference room for the discussion.

What did Sam Supervisor forget to do?

- Practice key points.
- Nothing. He is all set.
- Notify his manager of the conversation.

Answer: Sam forgot to practice key points of the conversation.

Conducting Difficult Conversations

Conversation Techniques

There are some key techniques you need to keep in mind when conducting a difficult conversation. The tone of the conversation needs to be calm and constructive. The focus must be on the issues, not the person. Finally, ensure the conversation stays on track. Remember, you are the one leading the conversation.

Conversation Phases

There are five phases in conducting a difficult conversation. You can remember them by thinking of the mnemonic, OCEAN.

The first phase of a difficult conversation is the Opening. In this phase, the supervisor should set the stage for an open discourse with the employee, and introduce the reason for the meeting. The supervisor should employ a calm and constructive tone.

The next phase is Creating a foundation for problem solving. The purpose of the Creating phase is for the supervisor to address expectations as they apply to performance and conduct. In this phase, the supervisor's questions help to define the gap between the organization's expectations and the employee's expectations. Once you understand the gap between the two sets of expectations, you can describe that gap.

The next phase, Engaging the employee in understanding the problem, is the pivotal phase of a difficult conversation. In the Engaging phase, you will establish expectations of performance and conduct standards. During the conversation, you must apply the technique of active listening to ensure the employee is engaged and cooperating.

[Video plays with Jane Supervisor talking with John Employee in an office]

[Jane] John, this is ridiculous! You're falling asleep at work and you're not getting your deliverables out on time.

[John] What are you talking about? I get my work done. Did someone say something about me? I nod off once and now you are accusing me of sleeping at the office. Whose saying that I am not getting my work done?

[Jane] Well, you did send the report, but it was late, wasn't it? [John] No, it wasn't late. The COTR said that he didn't need it by a specific date.

[Jane] Well he did need the technical analysis to go with the report to Acquisitions?

[John] Yeah, and he got it, so I don't know what the problem is.

[Narrator] In this video, the supervisor did not adequately prepare for the conversation. She did not present dates and times to back up the sleeping issue. Lack of preparation meant the supervisor could not stay on point. The purpose of the meeting was to address the employee's conduct that was impacting performance. The supervisor's approach will likely hit a dead-end, as expectations were not established and the supervisor did not employ active listening techniques.

The next phase is Agreeing. During this phase, the supervisor and employee discuss and agree on the problem to be addressed. Once there is alignment, the two parties must collaborate on possible solutions.

The last phase is Next Steps. In this phase, the supervisor will work with the employee to develop a specific plan to address the performance and/or conduct issues. Since the solution requires commitment from both parties, the plan developed will outline each party's responsibilities and time obligations.

By following the OCEAN methodology, you can be confident that difficult conversations will be set on a path towards success for both the organization and the employee.

Activity 2

Sally Supervisor just finished a difficult conversation with Wendy Worker. Sally did all of her preparation and setup. She arranged the conversation by inviting Wendy in person. When they met, Sally explained the reason for meeting, addressed her expectations and described the gap. After the conversation, Sally confirmed the issue to be solved and involved Wendy in identifying the solutions. They then developed a plan together with specific time commitments.

What conversations phase did Sally forget?

- Opening
- Creating
- Engaging
- Agreeing
- Next Steps

Answer: By not asking for Wendy's perspective in establishing expectations and gaps, Sally skipped the Engaging phase. Sally also did not apply active listening.

Activity 3

Identify the appropriate OCEAN phase (Opening, Creating, Engaging, Agreeing, Next Steps) for each phase requirement:

- Confirm Issue = ?
- Describe gap = ?
- Develop plan = ?
- Employ active listening = ?
- Identify the reason for meeting = ?

Answer:

- Confirm Issue = Agreeing

- Describe gap = Creating
- Develop plan = Next Steps
- Employ active listening = Engaging
- Identify the reason for meeting = Opening

Summary and Conclusion

In this Techniques and Best Practices module, you have learned that prior to conducting a difficult conversation, you must: gather relevant information, make arrangements for the conversation to take place, and practice key points. You also learned that when conducting the conversation, your tone should be calm and constructive, you should stay focused on the issues, and you should remain on track with your agenda. Finally, you learned the phases for conducting a conversation and the associated objectives for each. You'll find an [OCEAN planning job aid](#) in the Resources section. Read the OCEAN mnemonic below to review these phases.

Opening:

- Set the stage for open discourse
- Identify the reason for meeting

Creating:

- Address expectations
- Describe gap

Engaging:

- Establish expectations
- Employ active listening

Agreeing:

- Confirm issue
- Collaborate on a solution

Next Steps:

- Develop plan
- Define commitments

You have completed the Techniques and Best Practices module of the Difficult Conversations for Supervisors course. Next, you will practice what you have learned in three conversations. Read Practice Conversation 1 for the first scenario and apply what you have learned. In order to receive your Certificate of Completion, you must participate in each of the three practice conversations that follow. Select the menu to revisit any topics in this module or access the practice conversations at a future point in time.

Practice Conversation 1

In this first difficult conversation, you will apply your understanding of the OCEAN phases in a conversation with George. George is a male in his mid to late forties with a history of strong performance throughout his many years of service with the federal government. He is very competitive and a stickler for precision when it comes to others. Although George makes things happen, he is also very domineering and may come off as abrasive at times. As the new supervisor, you have noticed that George's performance has been slipping. There have been a number of errors on the reports that you have received from George, and you would like to address this problem. You gathered information supporting the decline in work performance. You have a copy of his job description and annual and quarterly review in your folder. The conversation will center on performance, with a renewed focus on accurate and effective reporting.

Opening

Expert Advice: Remember, during the Opening phase, you will set the stage for open discourse and identify a reason for meeting.

Your Options:

- Let's talk today about how we've been working together so far.
(Keep up the good work.)
- I want to discuss your recent problems with me.
(Don't let your emotions get the better of you.)
- When you have time, let's talk about a couple of things.
(Try being more direct.)

You: Let's talk today about how we've been working together so far.

George: What is it? What is your agenda so I can prepare?

Your Options:

- My agenda is to review how our working relationship is going. How does 2:00 sound?
- I'd like some time with you today to go over our working relationship. How does 2:00 sound?
- I don't need a reason to see you. I just want to see how our working relationship is going. How does 2:00 sound?

You: (Any of the responses)

George: Fine. I'll see you at 2:00.

End of Opening phase.

Creating

It is 2:00 and time to continue your discussion.

Expert Advice: The point of the Creating phase is to address expectations and describe the gap.

Your Options:

- Although you're been rated highly in the past, I noticed some recent issues I'd like to explore with you.
(Good job keeping the focus of the conversation on performance.)

- While your past performance has been commendable, your recent performance has not been. (You need to create an opportunity for open dialog. Adopting a harsh approach will be met with stonewalling.)
- There appears to be a disconnect between your past performance and your current performance. (When addressing performance issues, be sure to show concern for the employee.)

You: Although, you've been rated highly in the past, I noticed some recent issues I'd like to explore with you.

George: Since I'm the top employee, I have more projects to work on.

Your Options:

- I know that you're proud of your past performance and I want to see what we can do to keep it strong. (Keep up the good work.)
- I'm happy to hear that you value performance, but I don't think you have any more projects than your peers. (When speaking with George, you need to be consistent with your tone. You started off constructive, but shifted to dismissive.)
- Do you think that your work overload is contributing to your problems? (Continue to engage George. You need to determine what the gap in job expectations is.)

[Path 1](#)

You: I know that you're proud of your past performance and I want to see what we can do to keep it strong.

George: Ok. Is there something specific you want to talk about?

End of Creating phase.

[Path 2](#)

You: Do you think that your work overload is contributing to your problems?

George: What are you talking about?

Your Options:

- As I said before, my job is to point out performance problems and you have some.
- Some recent issues have suggested that you have some developmental areas that we need to talk about.
- You know what I am talking about.

You: Some recent issues have suggested that you have some developmental areas that we need to talk about.

George: Ok. Is there something specific you want to talk about?

End of Creating phase.

Engaging

Expert Advice: You have just completed the Creating phase. Next, you will be entering the Engaging phase. Remember, the point of the Engaging phase is to establish expectations and apply active listening.

Your Options:

- I've noted errors in the last three reports. I'm concerned and feel we need to address this. (Good- now that you raised awareness of the issue, you can talk openly.)
- These report errors are unnecessary, and time spent reviewing your work would have prevented them. (You may want to think about shifting your tone from judgmental to constructive.)
- You might be overworked, which could be why you made mistakes in your last few reports. (Keep focused on the issues at hand. By providing an excuse for George, you won't be able to uncover the root cause of his mistakes.)

You: I've noted errors in the last three reports. I'm concerned and feel we need to address this.

George: Since nobody works as hard as I do, and I do everything, errors are going to happen.

Your Options:

- It sounds like you're feeling overworked. I think that deserves a separate conversation. (You validated and expressed concern for George's feelings.)
- Do you feel that the errors in your reports are not a big deal? (Good job employing active listening.)
- You seem overwhelmed by your responsibilities. Why don't we set up a time to discuss this? (Excellent job. You expressed concern for George's issues.)

Path 1

You: It sounds like you're feeling overworked. I think that deserves a separate conversation.

OR

You: You seem overwhelmed by your responsibilities. Why don't we set up a time to discuss this?

George: Just let me know when you want to talk about that.

Your Options:

- I want to review recent errors and highlight to you that any errors are a problem. (Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)
- We will address your sense of being overloaded later. Right now, we need to address your reporting errors. (Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)
- I'd like to go over some errors I've noted and emphasize that all errors are significant. (Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)

You: (Any of the responses)

George: My errors aren't going to have much of an impact.

Your Options:

- We need to discuss our difference of opinion about the importance of error-free reporting regarding the impact of errors.
(Keep up the good work.)
- It's more than that George. It's a lot of rework on my part.
(Not the best choice. When speaking with George, look for opportunities where you can engage him and use active listening.)
- We need to address our different views on the impact of errors and why accurate reports are important.
(Keep up the good work.)

You: We need to discuss our difference of opinion about the importance of error-free reporting regarding the impact of errors.

OR

You: We need to address our different views on the impact of errors and why accurate reports are important.

George: Error-free. That's a good one.

End of Engaging phase.

Path 2

You: Do you feel that the errors in your reports are not a big deal?

George: Yes, I do. There are more important things to focus on.

Your Options:

- Like what?
(Good job engaging George.)
- Do you understand the consequences of having errors on reports?
(You're doing great. By educating George on the impact of his performance issue, you can establish expectations with him.)
- What are these important things?
(Good job engaging George.)

Path 2a

You: Like what?

OR

You: What are these important things?

George: Well, uh, Mark doesn't do his share.

Your Options:

- How does that affect you?
(Keep at it. You need to continue to engage George.)
- George, I need you to focus on these errors. We can deal with Mark later?
(Excellent job. You expressed concern for George's issues.)
- George, the focus of this conversation is your reporting errors. Let's set up another time to discuss Mark.
(Excellent job. You expressed concern for George's issues.)

Path 2a1

You: How does that affect you?

George: He's annoying me.

Your Options:

- And this is causing you to have errors on your reports?
(Good job staying the course. Continue to use active listening.)
- Given your level, you should be able to fix this.
- Tell me why you think these errors aren't important.
(Keep engaging George.)

You: And this is causing you to have errors on your reports?

George: Well, no.

OR

You: Tell me why you think these errors aren't important.

George: It's just a couple of minor errors.

Your Options:

- Do you understand the consequences of having errors on reports?
(You're doing great. By educating George on the impact of his performance issue, you can establish expectations with him.)
- Do you know what happens if reports are inaccurate?
(Your active listening puts the conversation back on track but be careful as George tries to minimize the performance problem.)
- If it's just a couple of minor errors, you should be able to fix this, given your capabilities. / If Mark is not causing you to have errors, you need to figure why you're having them.

You: Do you understand the consequences of having errors on reports?

OR

You: Do you know what happens if reports are inaccurate?

George: I guess you have to fix them.

Your Options:

- The consequence of all the rework is that we can't be reimbursed until the information is correct.
- It's not that simple. Having report errors delays the reimbursement process, since rework is required.
- We can't be reimbursed if there are report errors.

You: (Any of the responses)

George: Oh, I didn't realize that.

End of Engaging phase.

Path 2a2

You: George, I need you to focus on these errors. We can deal with Mark later?

OR

You: George, the focus of this conversation is your reporting errors. Let's set up another time to discuss Mark.

George: Just let me know when you want to talk about that.

Your Options:

- I want to review recent errors and highlight to you that any errors are a problem.
(Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)
- We will address your sense of being overloaded later. Right now, we need to address your reporting errors.
(Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)
- I'd like to go over some errors I've noted and emphasize that all errors are significant.
(Good job- you didn't let George minimize the issue.)

You: (Any of the responses)

George: My errors aren't going to have much of an impact.

Your Options:

- We need to discuss our difference of opinion about the importance of error-free reporting regarding the impact of errors.
(Keep up the good work.)
- It's more than that George. It's a lot of rework on my part.
(Not the best choice. When speaking with George, look for opportunities where you can engage him and use active listening.)
- We need to address our different views on the impact of errors and why accurate reports are important.
(Keep up the good work.)

You: We need to discuss our difference of opinion about the importance of error-free reporting regarding the impact of errors.

OR

You: We need to address our different views on the impact of errors and why accurate reports are important.

George: Error-free. That's a good one.

End of Engaging phase.

Path 2b

You: Do you understand the consequences of having errors on reports?

George: I guess you have to fix them.

Your Options:

- The consequence of all the rework is that we can't be reimbursed until the information is correct.

- It's not that simple. Having report errors delays the reimbursement process, since rework is required.
- We can't be reimbursed if there are report errors.

You: (Any of the responses)

George: Oh, I didn't realize that.

End of Engaging phase.

Agreeing

Expert Advice: You have just finished Engaging and now are entering Agreeing. The purpose of Agreeing is to confirm the issue and collaborate on the solution.

Your Options:

- Tell me how you think you can set up a method to ensure error-free reports.
(You've confirmed and agreed on the issue. You now need to collaborate on a solution.)
- I'm interested in hearing your ideas on how to create accurate reports.
(You've confirmed and agreed on the issue. You now need to collaborate on a solution.)
- Do you have any suggestions on how to create error-free reports?
(You've confirmed and agreed on the issue. You now need to collaborate on a solution.)

You: (Any of the responses)

George: I guess I could have someone review the reports before I turn them in.

Your Options:

- Great idea! Let's agree that you'll work with your peers to help eliminate errors in your reports.
- Fantastic suggestion. You'll work with your peers to help eliminate reporting errors. Do you agree?
- I like your solution. Are we both in agreement that you will work with your peers to help eliminate report errors?

You: (Any of the responses)

George: Yes. I agree.

End of Agreeing phase.

Next Steps

Expert Advice: You have just finished Agreeing. The last phase is Next Steps. In this phase, you will develop a plan and define commitments.

Your Options:

- Let's touch base early next week. I want to make sure you are receiving the support you need.
- This sounds workable, George. Why don't we plan to meet Tuesday next week to see how it's going?
- I think we have a workable solution and I hope you do too.

You: Let's touch base early next week. I want to make sure you are receiving the support you need.

OR

You: This sounds workable, George. Why don't we plan to meet Tuesday next week to see how it's going?

Feedback

By adopting a direct approach for the majority of the conversation with George, it is very likely that George will address his reporting errors. During the conversation, there were times that you didn't always choose the direct approach. Consequently, this will affect George's level of commitment. Moving forward, remember to follow the conversation techniques, maintain a firm and assertive tone, seek to understand the situation from George's perspective and use active listening.

Practice Conversation 2

In this second difficult conversation, you will apply your understanding of the OCEAN phases in a conversation with Sally. Sally is a female in her late thirties. She recently passed her probationary period, and is new to the Federal government. During her probationary period, Sally often exhibited strong emotions. As Sally's supervisor, you have noticed that her attendance and punctuality are becoming issues for the team. There have been several team meetings to which she arrived late and some she even missed completely. Sally has not been present and on time for a complete work week since her probationary period ended. This conversation will center on a conduct issue, with a renewed focus on punctuality.

Opening

Expert Advice: Remember, during the Opening phase, you will set the stage for open discourse and identify a reason for meeting.

Your Options:

- Let's talk today to discuss how your transition as a full-time employee is going.
(Keep up the good work.)
- I want to discuss your late arrivals and missed meetings.
(Be very careful in choosing your words with Sally so that she doesn't dissolve into tears.)
- When you have time, let's plan on meeting.
(Try being more direct with your conversation with Sally.)

You: Let's talk today to discuss how your transition as a full-time employee is going.

Sally: Ok. Is there something specific you'd want to talk to me about?

Your Options:

- I've noticed an attendance and punctuality trend that I'd like to address. Does 2:00 work for you?
- I'd like to discuss our attendance policies with you. Does 2:00 work for you?
- I see a pattern emerging with your late arrival time and it's impacting team meetings. Can we meet at 2 today to discuss this problem?

You: I've noticed an attendance and punctuality trend that I'd like to address. Does 2:00 work for you?
OR

You: I see a pattern emerging with your late arrival time and it's impacting team meetings. Can we meet at 2 today to discuss this problem?

Sally: Um, okay.

End of Opening phase.

Creating

Expert Advice: You have just finished the Opening stage and now are entering the Creating phase. Remember the point of Creating is to address expectations and describe the gap.

It's 2:00.

Your Options:

- The expectation is that all employees come to work on time and, if they're running late, they call the team lead. Do you have any questions?
(Good job. You were firm at the right times, and ended the conversation by giving Sally the opportunity to ask questions.)
- The agency policy is to start work at 8:00 and if you're running late, you call your team lead. Do you understand?
(Good job being firm and establishing expectations.)
- My understanding is that coming to work on time is a challenge for you. Is that correct?
(Good job. Acknowledging your employee's perspective has created a space for open communication.)

Path 1

You: The expectation is that all employees come to work on time and, if they're running late, they call the team lead. Do you have any questions?

Sally: What do you mean by on time? When should I call?

Your Options:

- On-time means being here at 8:00 each day. If you know you're going to be late, call your lead. Is that clear?
- I'm surprised that you're asking me that. Be here at 8:00 and call if you're going to be late. Ok?
- To clarify, on-time means be here at 8:00 and call if you're going to be late. Got it?

You: On-time means being here at 8:00 each day. If you know you're going to be late, call your lead. Is that clear?

OR

You: To clarify, on-time means be here at 8:00 and call if you're going to be late. Got it?

Sally: Yes, it's clear.

End of Creating phase.

Path 2

You: The agency policy is to start work at 8:00 and if you're running late, you call your team lead. Do you understand?

OR

You: My understanding is that coming to work on time is a challenge for you. Is that correct?

Sally: Yes.

Your Options:

- My understanding is that you are frequently late and also miss team meetings. Do you understand that this is a problem?
- Your record for being to work on time is pretty dismal. You're putting your job in jeopardy.
- The agency policy is to start work at 8:00 and, if you're running late, to call your team lead. You aren't following policy.

You: My understanding is that you are frequently late and also miss team meetings. Do you understand that this is a problem?

Sally: Yes, I do.

End of Creating phase.

Engaging

Expert Advice: You have just completed the Creating phase. Next, you will be entering the Engaging phase. Remember, the point of the Engaging phase is to establish expectations and apply active listening.

Path 1 (continued from Creating)

Your Options:

- Moving forward, I'd expect to see you here at 8:00 and you'll call if you're running late. Do you understand?
(Watch your tone. You need to set the stage for open communications and provide opportunities for active listening.)
- I'd like you to be at work by 8:00.
(You're on the right path! Now that you have stated your expectations, engage Sally using an active listening technique.)
- Do what you have to do to be at work on time.
(Putting an emotional employee on the defensive is not the recipe for a successful conversation. Try engaging Sally using an active listening technique.)

You: I'd like you to be at work by 8:00.

Sally: Okay.

Your Options:

- Do you have any problems with this time requirement?
- Do you have any questions?
- Our attendance policy facilitates our ability to collaborate internally. Do you see the connection?
(You've provided Sally the reason for the time requirements. Remember to employ active listening.)

You: Our attendance policy facilitates our ability to collaborate internally. Do you see the connection?

Sally: Yes, I see what you mean.

Your Options:

- Why do you think being on time is important?
(By asking Sally for her understanding of the issue, you've continued to open the lines of communication and helped to solidify the expectations.)
- Great! I'm glad we talked about this. See you tomorrow at 8:00.
- Is there something causing you lateness?
(Although you've established specific expectations, it's a little early in the conversation to ask what's been causing Sally's tardiness. There hasn't been enough active listening on your part.)

You: Why do you think being on time is important?

Sally: It impacts what needs to be communicated and it prevents us from working effectively.

Your Options:

- That's right. So, what do you think is causing your lateness?
(Your open dialogue so far has enabled you to ask Sally about the root cause of her tardiness. Great job.)
- Ok. So, what are you going to do about it?
- How are you going to address this?

You: That's right. So, what do you think is causing your lateness?

Sally: It's really hard for me to manage my time in the morning.

Your Options:

- Not everybody is a morning person, yet others manage to be here on time. A little time management is all you need.
- Why don't we brainstorm some ideas? Does that work for you?
- I get it. You're not a morning person, but I can't change the start time for you. You just need to manage your time better.

You: Why don't we brainstorm some ideas? Does that work for you?

Sally: I'd like that.

End of Engaging phase.

Path 2 (continued from Creating)

Your Options:

- If possible, do you think you can get to work by 8:00? I'd appreciate it.
(Although you have successfully avoided an emotional outburst, you need to make a connection between her actions and what the desired behavior is. Be direct.)
- I don't care what you have to do, be here at 8am each day.
(Putting an emotional employee on the defensive is not the recipe for a successful conversation. Try engaging the employee by using active listening.)

- I would really like it, if you could be at work by 8:00?
(You need to make a connection between Sally's actions and what the desired behavior is. Be direct.)

You: If possible, do you think you can get to work by 8:00? I'd appreciate it.

OR

You: I would really like it, if you could be at work by 8:00?

Sally: Ok.

Your Options:

- Great, glad we talked about this. I'll see you tomorrow on time.
- The reason for our policy is that it enables the team to find out who needs additional resources as well as adjust priorities if needed. Does that make sense?
(Great job educating Sally on the issue at hand. Now, you need to shift your focus to active listening.)
- Great. Do you have any questions?

You: The reason for our policy is that it enables the team to find out who needs additional resources as well as adjust priorities if needed. Does that make sense?

Sally: Yes, I see what you mean.

Your Options:

- To reiterate, I expect you to be here at 8:00 and you'll call if you're running late.
(Now that you've confirmed your specific expectations, you need to use active listening to uncover the root causes of Sally's tardiness.)
- Great. I think we're done here.
- Ok, great. Don't forget to call me, if you're running behind.

You: To reiterate, I expect you to be here at 8:00 and you'll call if you're running late.

Sally: Yes.

Your Options:

- How do you think your lateness impacts the team?
(Good work! By using active listening, you're helping Sally take ownership of her problems.)
- Great. Glad we talked about this. See you on time tomorrow.
- So, you're going to be here on time?

You: How do you think your lateness impacts the team?

Sally: It impacts what needs to be communicated and it prevents us from working effectively.

Your Options:

- That's right. So, has something changed in your life since you became a full-time employee?
(Your open dialogue so far has enabled you to ask Sally about the root cause of her tardiness. Great job.)
- Ok, so, what are you going to do about it?

- You got it. Have you experienced any changes recently after being a full-time employee? (Your open dialogue so far has enabled you to ask Sally about the root cause of her tardiness. Great job.)

You: That's right. So, has something changed in your life since you became a full-time employee?

OR

You: You got it. Have you experienced any changes recently after being a full-time employee?

Sally: It's been hard managing my school work and dealing with traffic since now I have to come to work 2 hours earlier.

Your Options:

- I didn't realize that you're going to school. Why don't we spend time talking about flexible work options?
- You are quite busy. Let's take some time discussing flexible work options you can use on non-team meetings days.
- You're got a lot on your plate. Let's spend some time going over flexible work options that you can use on non-team meetings day.

You: (Any of the responses)

Sally: I'd like that.

End of Engaging phase.

Agreeing

Expert Advice: You have just finished Engaging and now are entering Agreeing. The purpose of Agreeing is to confirm the issue and collaborate on the solution.

Path 1 (continued from Engaging)

Your Options:

- Tell me your ideas on how you can ensure that you won't be late. (Good work confirming the issue. Your goal should now be to collaborate on a solution.)
- What are your suggestions on making sure you won't be late? (Good work confirming the specific issue. Your goal should now be to collaborate on a solution.)
- How do you plan to address your tardiness? (Although you confirmed the specific issue, you should watch your tone with Sally. Your goal should now be to collaborate on a solution.)

You: Tell me your ideas on how you can ensure that you won't be late.

OR

You: What are your suggestions on making sure you won't be late?

Sally: My idea is to put out everything I need the night before and set my alarm earlier.

Your Options:

- That's a good start. How about defining how early to set your alarms?
- Great idea. How early do you plan on setting your alarm?
- How much earlier do you think?

You: (Any of the responses)

Sally: I think 15 minutes earlier would work.

Path 2 (continued from Engaging)

Your Options:

- Some of the flexible work options we have include alternative work arrangements, telework, and telecommuting.
(By providing Sally with this additional information, your collaboration efforts are likely to be a success.)
- Your fellow employees use a variety of flexible work options such as alternative work arrangements, telework, and telecommuting.
(By providing Sally with this additional information, your collaborative efforts will likely be a success.)
- Alternative work arrangements, telework, and telecommuting are examples of flexible work options.
(By providing Sally with this additional information, your collaborative efforts will likely be a success.)

You: (Any of the responses.)

Sally: I know what telework and telecommuting are. What do you mean by alternative work arrangements?

Your Options:

- An alternative work arrangement is when employees can choose their arrival time based upon a conversation with their supervisor.
(Although, you explained the concept, it might have been better to provide an example.)
- Starting work at 7:00 or coming to work after 9:30 is an example of an alternative work arrangement.
(Keep up the good work.)
- An example of an alternative work arrangement is coming to work after 9:30 or starting work at 7:00.
(Keep up the good work.)

You: (Any of the responses.)

Sally: Would it be possible for me to come to work at 9:30 on the days we don't have team meetings?

Your Options:

- Yes, that would be possible. How will you address the requirement to be at work at 8am on team meeting days?
(Kudos to you for not being distracted from discussing the punctuality requirements.)
- That certainly will work. How do you plan on being at work at 8 on team meetings days?
(Kudos to you by not letting the time requirement discussion slide.)
- I can agree to that. What's your plan for getting work at 8 on team meeting days?
(Kudos to you by not letting the time requirement discussion slide.)

You: (Any of the responses.)

Sally: I will prepare everything I need the night before.

Your Options:

- What are you going to do about traffic?
- What's your plan for dealing with the increased traffic?
- How will you deal with traffic?

You: (Any of the responses.)

Sally: I'm going to leave my house 30 minutes earlier and try different ways until I find one that works best.

End of Agreeing phase.

Next Steps

Expert Advice: You have just finished Agreeing. The last phase is Next Steps. In this phase, you will develop a plan and define commitments.

Your Options:

- Let's touch base next week to determine if our solution is going well.
- How does next Tuesday sound for a check-in?
- What day next week works for you to see how our plan is going?

You: (Any of the responses)

Feedback

By adopting a calm, direct and non-confrontational approach for the majority of the conversation with Sally, it is very likely that Sally will address her tardiness. During the conversation, there were times that you didn't always choose the non-confrontational approach. Consequently, this will affect Sally's level of commitment. Moving forward, just remember to follow the conversation techniques, maintain a firm and assertive tone, seek to understand the situation from Sally's perspective, use active listening and always be cognizant of Sally's emotional state. Your ability to successfully manage Sally's emotions will be a key factor in having a productive difficult conversation.

Practice Conversation 3

In this third difficult conversation, you will apply your understanding of the OCEAN phases in a conversation with Thomas. Thomas is a male in his early thirties who has several years of Federal government experience. He was recently promoted to a role in which he interacts across agencies as well as with an internal team. Thomas is known for being judgmental, condescending, and dismissive if he believes that other people are incompetent. As the new supervisor, you have received feedback from the internal team and from other agencies that Thomas' attitude and behavior are impacting productivity. He frequently interrupts people, takes personal phone calls in meetings, and is not completing the work assigned to him. He has communicated the wrong messages across agencies and, consequently, you have had to deal with the aftermath. This conversation will center on the performance and conduct issues.

Opening

Expert Advice: Remember, during the Opening phase, you will set the stage for open discourse and identify a reason for meeting.

Your Options:

- Let's talk today about your new role. Developing team members by providing timely feedback is a priority for me.
(Good job! Make sure you employ a calm, direct and constructive tone consistently with Thomas.)
- I want to discuss all of the complaints and troubling reports I'm receiving from various team members.
(Good job! You've been direct in stating the reason for the meeting.)
- Thomas, can we plan a time to talk in the next few days?
(You won't be able to address Thomas's conduct and performance by being passive. Be more direct.)

Path 1

You: Let's talk today about your new role. Developing team members by providing timely feedback is a priority for me.

Thomas: What do you have in mind? I'm eager to take on more responsibility.

Your Options:

- I'd like to discuss a pattern I see emerging with your interpersonal skills as a leader. Does 2:00 today work for you?
- I'd like to chat with you about some feedback I'm receiving on your communication style. Can you meet at 2:00?
- More responsibility is not what I had in mind. Meet me in my office at 2:00 and I'll fill you in.

You: I'd like to discuss a pattern I see emerging with your interpersonal skills as a leader. Does 2:00 today work for you?

OR

You: I'd like to chat with you about some feedback I'm receiving on your communication style. Can you meet at 2:00?

Thomas: Yeah, sure. I know that after we talk, you'll see that I'm right and the others are wrong.

End of Opening phase.

Path 2

You: I want to discuss all of the complaints and troubling reports I'm receiving from various team members.

Thomas: People complain because I hold them accountable.

Your Options:

- We need to address these complaints. I would like to see you at 2:00 today.
- These complaints are creating more work for me. I want to see you at 2:00 in my office.
- These complaints concern me and I would like to see you today at 2:00 to discuss them.

You: We need to address these complaints. I would like to see you at 2:00 today.

OR

You: These complaints concern me and I would like to see you today at 2:00 to discuss them.

Thomas: People complain because they don't like being held accountable. After we talk, you'll see that I'm right.

End of Opening phase.

Creating

Expert Advice: You have just finished the Opening stage and now are entering the Creating phase. Remember the point of Creating is to address expectations and describe the gap.

It's 2:00.

Path 1 (Continued from Opening)

Your Options:

- Thomas, your current performance and personal conduct are not meeting the requirements of your new role.
(You've addressed the expectations with Thomas, but he will likely try to derail the conversation. Be sure you continue to follow through.)
- Thomas, the quality of your work is not meeting expectations.
(You only addressed one of Thomas' issues. Thomas also has a conduct issue. In order for the conversation to be effective, you should be explicit and address both the conduct and performance issues.)
- You're falling short in your new role and I'm concerned.
(You're doing the right thing in making Thomas aware that he's falling short of his performance goals, but you've neglected to address the specific expectations of the role. You need to be explicit with him.)

You: Thomas, your current performance and personal conduct are not meeting the requirements of your new role.

Thomas: Well, it's not my fault. It's because I'm working with people that don't know what they're doing.

Your Options:

- Your unprofessional behavior has hurt your ability to work with others. You've also fallen short in completing assignments.
- Interrupting people, taking personal phone calls in meetings, and failing to complete your assignments can't be attributed to other people.
- It seems that you have more problems with the groups you interact with than any of your peers.

You: Your unprofessional behavior has hurt your ability to work with others. You've also fallen short in completing assignments.

Thomas: My numbers show that I get results. I don't see a problem in how I motivate people to get the job done.

End of Creating phase.

Path 2 (Continued from Opening)

Your Options:

- Thomas, your current performance and personal conduct are not meeting the requirements of your new role.
(You've addressed the expectations with Thomas, but he will likely try to derail the conversation. Be sure you continue to follow through.)
- You're falling short in your new role and I'm concerned.
(You're doing the right thing in making Thomas aware that he's falling short of his performance goals, but you've neglected to address the specific expectations of the role. You need to be explicit with him.)
- You seem unfazed by these complaints. Why do you think there's a gap between you and your team mates?
(Remember, the point of the Creating phase is to address expectations and describe the gap that exists. It's too early in the conversation to attempt active listening.)

You: Thomas, your current performance and personal conduct are not meeting the requirements of your new role.

Thomas: Well, it's not my fault. It's because I'm working with people that don't know what they're doing.

Your Options:

- Your unprofessional behavior has hurt your ability to work with others. You've also fallen short in completing assignments.
- Interrupting people, taking personal phone calls in meetings, and failing to complete your assignments can't be attributed to other people.
- It seems that you have more problems with the groups you interact with than any of your peers.

You: Your unprofessional behavior has hurt your ability to work with others. You've also fallen short in completing assignments.

Thomas: My numbers show that I get results. I don't see a problem in how I motivate people to get the job done.

End of Creating phase.

Engaging

Expert Advice: You have just completed the Creating phase. Next, you will be entering the Engaging phase. Remember, the point of the Engaging phase is to establish expectations and apply active listening.

Your Options:

- In your role, you are expected to interact professionally and complete your assigned work. You aren't meeting this expectation.
(You have successfully established the specific expectations. Now, focus on applying active listening in order to uncover the root cause of Thomas's issues.)
- I'd like you to address your communications and performance issues.
(You need to be more explicit with Thomas regarding his performance and conduct issues. He's likely to react to your messaging, and take action on what he thinks is most important. For

optimum results, you should cover the specific issues that exist and make sure Thomas acknowledges that he's accountable for his actions.)

- From what I've heard, you stifle collaboration. Your performance is not currently meeting the expectations of your new position.
(You need to be more explicit with Thomas regarding his performance and conduct issues. He's likely to react to your messaging, and take action on what he thinks is most important. For optimum results, you should cover the specific issues that exist and make sure Thomas acknowledges that he's accountable for his actions.)

You: In your role, you are expected to interact professionally and complete your assigned work. You aren't meeting this expectation.

Thomas: The expectation is that I make my numbers, and I do.

Your Options:

- Making numbers is only one piece of the puzzle. The bigger piece is successful interpersonal communications and the timely completion of assigned tasks.
(The more explicit you can be with Thomas, the more likely it is that he'll address your concerns.)
- There's a gap here. While making numbers is important, the bigger focus is working well with others and completing assigned work.
(Great work not letting Thomas control the conversation. Stay focused on the task at hand.)
- While you do make your numbers, you interact poorly with your peers and don't complete your assignments.
(Watch your tone - you can be direct and constructive at the same time. Being harsh with Thomas, will only put him on the defensive.)

You: Making numbers is only one piece of the puzzle. The bigger piece is successful interpersonal communications and the timely completion of assigned tasks.

OR

You: There's a gap here. While making numbers is important, the bigger focus is working well with others and completing assigned work.

Thomas: Who's saying I'm not getting my work done and not working well with others?

Your Options:

- My comments are based on the feedback I've personally received, and what I've observed. You interrupt people, roll your eyes, and submit incomplete work.
(Good job not letting Thomas derail the conversation. Stay focused and direct. Be careful that you don't adopt a harsh approach.)
- I know that I've upset you, but these issues need to be addressed. It seems you associate leadership with force. Is that correct?
(Continue your slow and steady approach with Thomas. By doing so, you'll be able to understand what's driving his behavior.)
- It doesn't matter who is making these comments. You need to address your interpersonal skills and complete your assigned work.

Path 1

You: My comments are based on the feedback I've personally received, and what I've observed. You interrupt people, roll your eyes, and submit incomplete work.

Thomas: What are you getting at? Isn't it enough that I make my numbers?

Your Options:

- Yes, you do make your numbers, but it comes at a cost. You communicate forcefully, which alienates people.
(Good job redirecting the conversation and expressing your concerns over Thomas's behavior. Continue to stay on track.)
- Your current approach creates more work for me. You need to figure out how to work with others and complete your assignments on time.
- While your current approach may get the job done, you're alienating people which is negatively impacting employee morale. You need to make some changes.

You: Yes, you do make your numbers, but it comes at a cost. You communicate forcefully, which alienates people.

Thomas: Force gets the job done. People are a little too sensitive.

Your Options:

- Have you tried other ways to influence people?
- Force is one way to influence, yet it has a negative impact. Have you ever experienced this?
(Nice job shifting Thomas' perspectives on leadership.)
- Being soft doesn't mean being a pushover. It's focusing on collaboration and helping to develop others.

You: Force is one way to influence, yet it has a negative impact. Have you ever experienced this?

Thomas: The only negative thing I've experienced is getting complaints. However, that's part of the job.

Your Options:

- It doesn't have to be that way. You can reduce the number of complaints by listening and modifying your approach.
- I think you should take these complaints more seriously. If you get multiple complaints about the same thing, it's probably an issue that needs focus.
- If there is something you could do to decrease these complaints, would you be willing to try?

You: If there is something you could do to decrease these complaints, would you be willing to try?

Thomas: I'd give it a try.

End of Engaging phase.

Path 2

You: I know that I've upset you, but these issues need to be addressed. It seems you associate leadership with force. Is that correct?

Thomas: Yes. All the successful leaders I know are quite forceful. In fact, my last supervisor was.

Your Options:

- How was your last supervisor viewed by his peers and subordinates?
(Great work! Continue to use active listening and try to keep the conversation focused on the issues at hand.)
- Do you know of any successful supervisors who don't use force?
- Have you tried other ways to influence people?

You: How was your last supervisor viewed by his peers and subordinates?

Thomas: Now that you ask, most people didn't like working for him and eventually transferred to other departments. I just realized that.

Your Options:

- Why don't we spend some time discussing how we can work to improve your interpersonal skills?
- We've covered a lot of ground here. The next step is to address how we're going to work together on resolving these issues.
- Reflecting on the past helps you see things differently. Now that we've talked, I'd like you to address these issues.

You: Why don't we spend some time discussing how we can work to improve your interpersonal skills?

OR

You: We've covered a lot of ground here. The next step is to address how we're going to work together on resolving these issues.

Thomas: I'm interested in hearing your ideas.

End of Engaging phase.

Agreeing

Expert Advice: You have just finished Engaging and now are entering Agreeing. The purpose of Agreeing is to confirm the issue and collaborate on the solution.

Path 1 (Continued from Engaging)

Your Options:

- There are leadership and interpersonal communication classes you could take. What are your thoughts?
(You've missed a step here. You need to confirm the issues you would like addressed with Thomas, before offering a solution. Also, the solution needs to be a collaborative one.)
- I think we're in agreement that you'll work on addressing your interpersonal skills and work completion. Do you agree?
(Good work confirming the specific issues to be addressed.)
- I like your enthusiasm. How does the idea of a mentor sound to you?
(You did an excellent job of listening. Continue to listen as you attempt to uncover the root cause of Thomas's behavior.)

Path 1a

You: I think we're in agreement that you'll work on addressing your interpersonal skills and work completion. Do you agree?

Thomas: I recognize that my communication style needs work. I'm surprised my work completion is an issue. What do you mean?

Your Options:

- You've submitted incomplete work several times recently. Is there anything that's preventing you from checking your work?
(It was important that you took the time to explain the significance of the incomplete work to Thomas. It shows him that you are committed to problem-solving, and genuinely interested in helping him address his issues.)
- On several occasions, you've submitted incomplete work. It's my understanding that you are more than capable of addressing this.
- You submit incomplete work and you need to fix this.

You: You've submitted incomplete work several times recently. Is there anything that's preventing you from checking your work?

Thomas: Between all these conference calls and meetings, I just don't have the time. Do you have any suggestions?

Your Options:

- Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?
(Great job on addressing Thomas's concern.)
- It should like you're having some time management issues. Why not consider taking a time management class?
- I find using a day planner works for me.

You: Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?

Thomas: That sounds like a good idea. I appreciate your help.

Your Options:

- We both agree that you'll take interpersonal communication classes and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.
- To recap, you'll take some communication classes and we'll get together and look at your schedule.
- That's what I'm here for.

You: We both agree that you'll take interpersonal communication classes and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.

OR

You: To recap, you'll take some communication classes and we'll get together and look at your schedule.

Thomas: Works for me.

End of Agreeing phase.

Path 1b

You: I like your enthusiasm. How does the idea of a mentor sound to you?

Thomas: I think that would be a good idea.

Your Options:

- We also need to address why you've submitted incomplete work. Is there something causing this?
(Good job addressing Thomas's second issue. You've set the stage for open dialogue and you're well on the way to uncovering the root cause of this issue.)
- On several occasions, you've submitted incomplete work. It's my understanding that you are more than capable of addressing this.
- You submit incomplete work and you need to fix this.

You: We also need to address why you've submitted incomplete work. Is there something causing this?

Thomas: I've got a lot on my plate between meetings and conference calls. I don't have any time.

Your Options:

- Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?
(Great job on addressing Thomas's concern.)
- It should like you're having some time management issues. Why not consider taking a time management class?
- I find using a day planner works for me.

You: Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?

Thomas: That sounds like a good idea. I appreciate your help.

Your Options:

- We both agree that I'll find you a list of potential mentors and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.
- To recap, a mentor will be assigned to you and we'll get together and look at your schedule.
- That's what I'm here for.

You: We both agree that I'll find you a list of potential mentors and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.

OR

You: To recap, a mentor will be assigned to you and we'll get together and look at your schedule.

Thomas: Works for me.

End of Agreeing phase.

[Path 2 \(Continued from Engaging\)](#)

Your Options:

- There are leadership and interpersonal communication classes you could take. What are your thoughts?
(You've missed a step here. You need to confirm the issues you would like addressed with Thomas, before offering a solution. Also, the solution needs to be a collaborative one.)
- I think you should take all the leadership classes and have someone review your work before it's turned in.
- I think we're in agreement that you'll work on addressing your interpersonal skills and work completion. Do you agree?
(Good work confirming the specific issues to be addressed.)

You: I think we're in agreement that you'll work on addressing your interpersonal skills and work completion. Do you agree?

Thomas: I recognize that my communication style needs work. I'm surprised my work completion is an issue. What do you mean?

Your Options:

- You've submitted incomplete work several times recently. Is there anything that's preventing you from checking your work?
(It was important that you took the time to explain the significance of the incomplete work to Thomas. It shows him that you are committed to problem-solving, and genuinely interested in helping him address his issues.)
- On several occasions, you've submitted incomplete work. It's my understanding that you are more than capable of addressing this.
- You submit incomplete work and you need to fix this.

You: You've submitted incomplete work several times recently. Is there anything that's preventing you from checking your work?

Thomas: Between all these conference calls and meetings, I just don't have the time. Do you have any suggestions?

Your Options:

- Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?
(Great job on addressing Thomas's concern.)
- It should like you're having some time management issues. Why not consider taking a time management class?
- I find using a day planner works for me.

You: Why don't we spend some time discussing how you prioritize?

Thomas: That sounds like a good idea. I appreciate your help.

Your Options:

- We both agree that you'll take interpersonal communication classes and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.
- To recap, you'll take some communication classes and we'll get together and look at your schedule.
- That's what I'm here for.

You: We both agree that you'll take interpersonal communication classes and we'll spend time prioritizing your schedule.

OR

You: To recap, you'll take some communication classes and we'll get together and look at your schedule.

Thomas: Works for me.

End of Agreeing phase.

Next Steps

Expert Advice: You have just finished Agreeing. The last phase is Next Steps. In this phase, you will develop a plan and define commitments.

Your Options:

- Let's touch base early next week. I'm looking forward to meeting with you to look at your schedule and classes. OR
Let's touch base early next week. I'm looking forward to meeting with you to look at your schedule and identify some potential mentors.
- Why don't we plan to meet Wednesday next week to see how it's going?
- I think we have developed a successful plan, and I hope you also see it that way.

You: (Any of the responses)

Feedback

You've successfully navigated through a difficult conversation with Thomas by maintaining focus on the issues and not allowing Thomas to derail you. Great work.

Course Conclusion and Certificate

Congratulations! You have completed the Techniques and Best Practices module and practiced what you learned in three conversations. The next time you need to have a difficult conversation with an employee, refer back to this methodology before you begin your discussion. You may now [print your Certificate of Completion](#).