

# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



February 6, 2019

**Christine Licata**

Vice Provost  
Rochester Institute of Technology

# STYLE UNDER STRESS SELF ASSESSMENT

The following questions explore how you typically respond when you're in the middle of a crucial conversation.

---

- T F 1. At times I avoid situations that might bring me into contact with people I'm having problems with.
- T F 2. I have put off returning phone calls or e-mails because I simply didn't want to deal with the person who sent them.
- T F 3. Sometimes when people bring up a touchy or awkward issue, I try to change the subject.
- T F 4. When it comes to dealing with awkward or stressful subjects, sometimes I hold back rather than give my full and candid opinion.
- T F 5. Rather than tell people exactly what I think, sometimes I rely on jokes, sarcasm, or snide remarks to let them know I'm frustrated.
- T F 6. When I've got something tough to bring up, sometimes I offer weak or insincere compliments to soften the blow.
- T F 7. In order to get my point across, I sometimes exaggerate my side of the argument.
- T F 8. If I seem to be losing control of a conversation, I might cut people off or change the subject in order to bring it back to where I think it should be.
- T F 9. When others make points that seem stupid to me, I sometimes let them know it without holding back at all.
- T F 10. When I'm stunned by a comment, sometimes I say things that others might take as forceful or attacking—comments such as "Give me a break!" or "That's ridiculous!"
- T F 11. Sometimes when things get heated, I move from arguing against others' points to saying things that might hurt them personally.
- T F 12. If I get into a heated discussion, I've been known to be tough on the other person. In fact, the person might feel a bit insulted or hurt.

---

*Adapted from: Kerry Patterson, et al. Crucial Conversations, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (McGraw-Hill USA, 2012), 63-68*

# SELF ASSESSMENT SCORING GUIDE

Please fill out the score sheet below. Next to the question number is either a (T) or an (F). For example, under “Masking,” question 5, you’ll find a (T). This means that if you answered it true, check the box. Your Style Under Stress score will give you a measure of how frequently you fall into these less-than-perfect strategies. A high score (one or two boxes checked per domain) means you use this technique fairly often. It also means you’re human. Most people toggle between holding back and becoming too forceful.

SILENCE	VIOLENCE
<b>Masking</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 5 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 6 (T)	<b>Controlling</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 7 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 8 (T)
<b>Avoiding</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 3 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 4 (T)	<b>Labeling</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 9 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 10 (T)
<b>Withdrawing</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 1 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 2 (T)	<b>Attacking</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 11 (T) <input type="checkbox"/> 12 (T)

Adapted from: Kerry Patterson, et al. *Crucial Conversations, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (McGraw-Hill USA, 2012), 63-68

# 20 THINGS TO NEVER SAY

## During a Difficult Conversation

1. “How about them Cowboys last night?...”
2. “You feel alright?...”
3. “This is going to be difficult...”
4. “I’m sorry to have to raise this with you...”
5. “This is so embarrassing...”
6. “How’s the family?”
7. “Now you’ve made me really mad...”
8. “@!#\$%&!!+&”
9. “Please don’t cry...I can’t stand tears...”
10. “They want me to talk to you about...”
11. “You’re always...”
12. “You just have a bad attitude...”
13. “So-and-so is much better at this than you...why can’t you be more like him/her?”
14. “I’m going to cut you some slack because you’re close to retirement...”
15. “Maybe we should continue this another time...”
16. “How am I doing so far?...”
17. “You just have to do better...  
I’m not very pleased with you...”
18. “Pity me – now I’ve got to talk to Joe Blow about something really horrible he did...”
19. “I’m your only defender here – other people didn’t want to hire you in the first place...”
20. “I’ve only got 10 minutes so let’s get this over with...”

# TIP SHEET

## POSITIVE STRATEGIES TO INVOKE

- Tackle the issue directly and promptly
- Enter into the conversation with an open mind
- Respect the other person's perspective and feelings
- Keep emotional control
- Address a specific issue and explain your position clearly
- Ensure the other person understands what you're saying
- Stay on topic and only make it about this person
- Take the time to get it right
- Give the other person an opportunity to be heard
- Keep the conversation on track and stay in control of the message
- Before parting ways, establish an action plan moving forward
- Follow up with the person to ensure action plan is followed

## NEGATIVE STRATEGIES TO AVOID

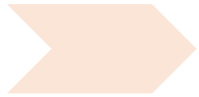
- Avoid having a tough conversation and let the problem continue
- Assume the worst about the direction of the conversation
- Act defensively
- Get emotional or heated
- Use generalizations
- Use absolutes (always, never)
- Make comparisons to other people
- Rush through the conversation to get it over with
- Dominate the conversation
- Allow the other person to dominate the conversation and take charge
- When the meeting is over, consider the matter ended
- Avoid the issue after the meeting is over

# SUGGESTED RESOURCES

## Communication Skills for Department Heads, Chairs and Directors



Bolman, Lee G., and Joan V. Gallos. "Leading Difficult People." *The Department Chair* 26.4 (2016): 1-3. Mar. 2016. Web. 25 Jan. 2017.  
<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/dch.30071/full>>.



Crookston, R. Kent, Ph.D. "Seven Steps for Dealing with Problem Faculty (The Top Concern of America's Academic Chairs)." *Academic Leader* (2010): 7-8. Web. 25 Jan. 2017. <<http://www.magnapubs.com/newsletter/academic-leader>>.



Fairhurst, Gail T. *The Power of Framing: Creating the Language of Leadership*. 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass, 2010. Print.



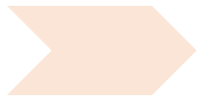
Higgerson, Mary Lou. *Communication Strategies for Managing Conflict: A Guide for Academic Leaders*. Jossey-Bass, 2016. Print.



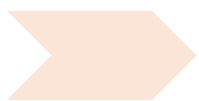
Licata, C. M. and Lees, N. Douglas. "The Chair as Evaluation "Charlatan."" *The Department Chair*, Vol. 17, No. 2, (16-18), Fall 2006



Ogle, R. L., PhD. "Moving from 'Yes, but' to 'Yes!': Using Motivational Interviewing to Engage Faculty and Facilitate Change." *Academic Leader*, (June 2014), Vol. 30, No. 6.



Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, Second Edition. McGraw-Hill, 2012. Print.



Ringer, Judy. "We Have to Talk: A Step-By-Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations." Mediate.com. Web. 25 Jan. 2017.  
<<http://www.mediate.com/articles/ringerj1.cfm>>