How to Have a Difficult Conversation

Ask *Open* Questions Throughout the Conversation

- Difficult conversations often require a negotiation to come to an agreeable outcome for both parties. Skilled negotiators ask twice as many questions as average negotiators.
- You can use questions throughout the conversation to:
  - Gather information about the other party’s position and interests
  - Manage the discussion and keep the other party engaged
  - Avoid direct disagreements and gain thinking time while the other party responds
  - Break up pro/con debates and enhance the possibility of creative solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Questions</th>
<th>Closed Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start with “Who, what, where, when, how, why...?”</td>
<td>Start with “Is, Are, Do, Can, Have...?”</td>
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<td>Elicit further explanation</td>
<td>Can be answered yes or no, or with a single phrase</td>
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<td>Allow for more information to be shared and for individuals to move beyond their position</td>
<td>Most frequently used</td>
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**Examples:**
- “How do you feel about the proposal?”
- “Why do you want this data?”
- “What items are important to you?”
- “When are you expecting to hear back from them?”
- “Will this lab space meet your needs?”
- “Have you been talking about this with your peers?”
- “Is this the only time you are available to meet?”
- “Can you start the case before 7a?”

Illuminate Meaning and Expand the Discussion

- Create a window into where they are coming from by asking what their definition is of a key term
  - E.g., “We need to discuss why you are always late to work.”
    - “What? I don’t think I’m always late; how do you define being late for work?”
    - “Cases start at 7a, so you need to be in the PACU by 6:30 a.m. at the latest.”
    - “Oh! I don’t remember hearing that during my onboarding. At my last job, 6:50 a.m. was acceptable, now I know the expected start time and will arrive then!”
- Expand the discussion by exploring the larger context. This will make the other party’s interests more visible and allow the two parties to build trust and foster understanding.
  - E.g., “We need to discuss why you are always late to work.”
    - “Yes, I’m sorry about that. My nanny is always late; I told her she can’t be!”
    - “It’s okay; that’s why we are here to have a discussion and find a solution. You are a great clinician, and we wanted to know if there were ways that we can support you.”
    - “I’ve talked to her over and over again about being on time, but I don’t feel comfortable interviewing and possibly switching nannies during the pandemic.”
    - “I understand the position you are in, and I have a few ideas. There’s a daycare at the hospital that you could check out, or you could temporarily switch to a later start resource shift until the pandemic calms down and you can find another sitter.”

References and Further Reading: