Leadership Challenges: Having the Difficult Conversation

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Goals for this session
- Begin with why???
- List strategies for initiating difficult conversations
- Frame these types of conversations in terms of current research in conflict resolution
- Address communication strategies to focus on rational communication while minimizing the “emotion” of the communication process
- Introduction to tools that can help address these issues

What are the difficult conversations? Some examples
- Performance: Academic, clinical, work related
- Perspective: Differing points of view on the issue at hand
- “Bad news”: Downsizing of a position, not being accepted into a graduate program

What are the difficult conversations? Some CAPCSD examples
- A unified accreditation body
- Challenging how “hours” are counted or clinical experience is delivered (e.g., telehealth or tele-teaching)
- Speech/language pathology assistants
- CCC’s required for supervision

Why are conversations perceived as difficult?
- Discomfort with “confrontation”
  - Desire to keep the status quo
  - Desire to avoid “bad feelings”
  - Fear of reaction of others
  - The belief that “leaving it alone” will result in a better outcome
- Lack of information
- Lack of skill on the part of the communicator

WAIT...SHOULDN’T THIS BE EASY FOR US...
- The difficult conversations are based on communication...
- And we are in the field of communication
- Ergo...these conversations should be easy for us? 😊
- Is the joke that “we specialize in disordered communication” really true?
Evidence-based approaches for addressing these issues

- The science of difficult conversations...
- The tools that will be presented today are based in this science and from this evidence base
  - Conflict resolution
  - Negotiation
  - Facilitating change

Change is difficult

- Challenges us: May require that we learn new skills
- Challenges others: May request that a behavioral change occurs
  - Perceived as criticism that's not constructive
- Status quo: perceived as easier to keep status quo than the efforts needed to change

Reasons for the conversations being challenging

- Imbalance of power; perception of unilateral decision making ability
- Set patterns of communication/set perception of individual positions (history)
- Potential high stake results
- Many, many others
  - Don’t talk, don’t want to talk, talk and make things worse

Our ability to change...

- Often we expect the person on “the other side” of the conversation to do the changing
- Damning comment from my friend, a University professor (not in CSD)...
  “why do any of ‘those people’ want to change…they fight for status quo, particularly Dept. chairs”

Conversation with a graduate student

- Clinical advisor: Your clinical supervisors noted that you have had many issues with professionalism this semester…arriving on time, falling asleep during the day while at your placement, letting the SLPs there know this isn’t your preferred population
- Student: Yes, but my supervisor didn’t understand and when I told her that I was tired because I go out of town often on the weekends to visit my boyfriend, she was fine with it.
- Clinical advisor: Well, this isn’t the first time these issues have come up.
- Student: Yes, I think that the clinical supervisors in this program pick on me. I think they have problems with my personality and the fact that I don’t do clinic just like they do.

Some potential conversations

**All based on true situations, but the names and details have been changed to protect the innocent 😊**
Lab director: I wanted to talk to you about your performance in the lab.

RA: I've been spending a lot of time in the lab—I think I'm about done with that group of subjects.

Lab director: We won't be able to use most of that data. One of the other RAs told me that you changed the protocol for the localization task about 6 weeks ago.

RA: Well, they were complaining that it hurt to keep their head in that position, so I thought I would help make them more comfortable.

Lab director: When I heard that, I was really angry but didn't know how to talk to you about this. I'm going to have to let you go...you intentionally screwed up our experiment.

Grad studies chair: You know that you are supposed to be communicating with graduate students regarding things that are happening in our Department.

Grad secretary: I have been communicating...whenever students have a question, I answer them.

Grad studies chair: That's not what I meant by communication. You really don't seem to understand how to do your job.

Grad secretary: I'm not a mind reader and these students are very demanding.

Chair: The University has introduced a new performance appraisal measure that we need to be using.

Clinic director: Yes, I plan on attending a meeting about this tool and I'm looking forward to trying something new.

Chair: Good, I hope that means that you'll be more discriminating in your performance appraisals of the staff...seems like we have grade inflation. I'm tired of not getting more out of the clinical staff and they never support what the faculty want them do to.

Clinic director: You really don't support the clinic at all.

Chair: Oh, I knew you would react like this, you always do.

Avoiding the difficult conversations:
- Passive-aggressive communication style
- Head in the sand is easier
- “Not my job”
- I won’t be liked/popular
- Someone may threaten legal action (hear this often in a University environment)

Myths about the difficult conversations that may make them even more difficult:
- “Business is business and friendship is friendship”
- These conversations happen in isolation
  - Bring our history with that person to the table
- The facts are the facts
- Keep emotions out of it
- Just appeal to the person’s “rational” side

All of these situations demonstrate issues that need to be addressed and clearly the beginning of these conversations do not seem to be a foundation for successful resolution to these situations.
**The benefits of having the difficult conversations**

- Can resolve issues prohibiting the person, relationship, or Department from moving forward.
- Can help people be more productive in their job, clinical placement, etc.
- As a leader/mentor, there is an imperative to demonstrate/model effective conflict resolution/negotiation skills.

**building/collaborative problem solving**

- Most powerful decision making process—agreement with the final decision.
- Equalizes power.
- Gets to a solution that can be supported.
- Based on compromise and common ground.

**Lest we think it's all love, peace, and kum-ba-ya**

- Engaging in and resolving the difficult conversations, in the long run, contributes to the bottom line in terms of time savings, money savings, stress savings.
- The ideas raised here have to reflect change and not just be antics with semantics.

**We want the issue to magically disappear**

- The realistic assessment:
  - Time and energy are spent on “the issue.”
  - Spending time on it is actually making it worse (e.g. engaging colleagues, spouses, friends, etc.—issue “grows” and venting doesn’t relieve the situation).
  - Better to direct energy in useful and efficient directions.
  - Advice and coaching.

**A framework for the difficult conversations: two tools**

- Based on research from the Harvard Negotiation Project that was also the basis for Getting to Yes.
- The “Harvard method” addresses an easy way to facilitate two-way communication.

- Based on the “happiness hypothesis.”

- Emotions are the Elephant.
- Rational thought is the Rider.
- The rider is perched atop the elephant and appears to be the leader.
- Rider’s control is limited, as the rider is small compared to the elephant.
- If emotion and rational thought are in conflict emotion “wins” every time.

**“Self help” mania or EBP of difficult conversations?**

- Tools that have been proven to support difficult conversations.
- Not the “hopey-changey” type? Analyze how your approach currently works and see if/where it can be done more effectively.
- Assuming you are here for a reason…tools for the tool box.
The “Harvard” method
An overview of the tools and skills in “Difficult Conversations”

The dilemma: Avoid or confront?
- Should I raise the issue or keep it to myself?
  - If we avoid: feel taken advantage of, feelings fester, wonder why we didn’t stick up for ourselves, rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things
  - If we confront: Things might get worse! May be rejected, attacked, might hurt the other person in unintended ways, may hurt the relationship
  - (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010)

The myth of tact and diplomacy
- Tact is good, but does not make the conversations easier
- No amount of diplomacy makes it easier to fire an employee or confront lacking professionalism in a graduate student
- Stone et al (2010) suggest that “delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade”…no matter how sugar coated, the grenade still does damage

Three conversations
- All difficult conversations have common structures
  - Some is spoken, much is unspoken
  - Gap between what people are thinking and what people are saying is part of what makes the conversations difficult
- The three conversations
  - “What happened”
  - Feelings
  - Identity

“What happened” conversation
- Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what happened or what should happen.
- Who said what?
- Who did what?

The Feelings conversation
- Every difficult conversation asks and answers questions about feelings
- Are my feelings valid and appropriate?
- What do I do with the other person’s feelings
The Identity conversation

- Conversations with self: What does this situation mean to me?
- Our competence/incompetence
- Are we a good person?
- Self-image and self-esteem

“What happened” conversations—where many difficult conversations live

- Three assumptions
  1) The truth is the truth!

- Three assumptions
  2) Intention Invention
     • We assume we know the intent of others
     • We attribute it to be “bad”
     • We can’t know intent of others

Feelings conversations—how to handle the strong feelings that WILL arise

- Belief: Avoid feelings and stay “rational”, stick to “business”
- The simple fact: Difficult conversations involve feelings
- Feelings are not a “by-product”, they are an integral part of the conflict
- Avoiding feelings in these discussions can save time and reduce anxiety in the short term
- However, in some cases, feelings ARE the issue, then they must be addressed

Identity conversations: Most subtle and most challenging

- Offers management of anxiety and improve other conversations
- Introspection: who I am and how I see myself
- Role of self-esteem, self image and the impact of the difficult conversation on these
- What do I say about myself to me…
- The question…asking my “boss” for a raise, really addresses how is my sense of self-worth valued here?
- Difficult conversations are always about YOU, even if you are the one delivering the “bad news”—you may be perceived as “the villain”
The solution proposed by the Harvard Negotiation Project

**The Learning Conversation**
- The initial intent for most difficult conversations is related to delivering a message—you want to persuade and get your way
- The learning conversation suggests that the position to begin with is to seek to understand what happened from the other person’s point of view
- Inviting the other person into a conversation, to help figure things out

**Learning conversation goals:**
- Explore each person’s perspective, how we understand the situation from the other’s perspective
  - Requires moving from certainty to “curiosity”
  - The “And Stance”: Don’t chose between two stories, accept (“embrace”) them both: Can assert the full strength of your view/feelings without diminishing those of someone else
  - Results in this: “Now that we really understand each other, what’s a good way to manage this problem?”

**Two exceptions:**
- When you’re right: However, it may not matter, if you don’t understand their perspective (e.g. a student who is drug addicted and that behavior is interfering with their clinical performance)
  - Even if everyone agrees with you, may not impact the student’s willingness to change
- Breaking bad news: In firing/termination, cutting budgets, etc., the “what happened” conversation is less relevant than the Feelings and Identify conversations. In these cases, an outcome is being imposed unilaterally

**The joint contribution system is the focus**
- When something goes wrong, usually all parties contribute in some important way (e.g. expectations in a 4th year)
- However, we usually experience contribution and see it as singular… it’s the other person’s fault
  - The science behind attribution theory… If you’re “to blame”, you can attribute it to factors outside of your control; if someone else is “to blame”, it’s their fault

**Acknowledging feelings matter:**
- The concept of it’s important to express feelings after you negotiate with them…
  - Feelings are not static and nonnegotiable
  - Feelings can be altered by thinking about a situation… again, understanding “what’s happened” and the “contribution” situation
- No venting… describe feelings carefully—it’s not a rant! Difference between being emotional with expressing emotions clearly (the goal is the second)
Learning conversation goals:

• Acknowledge that difficult conversations threaten our identity
  • This may be true for many of us in here...may be more difficult for our students who are unstable in their identity
  • Three things of particular concern:
    • Am I competent?
    • Am I a good person?
    • Am I worthy of love?

• Identity issues:
  • Empower the situations with three truths (e.g. identity is not “all or none”)
    • You will make mistakes
    • Your intentions are complex
    • You have contributed to the problem

Learning conversation goals:

If you choose to raise an issue:

Three purposes:
  1) Learn their story
  2) Express your views and feelings
  3) Problem-solve together

Providing the missing data

• Using video to demonstrate the behaviors in question
• Having the student identify their behavior when viewing the video
• Brings a new perspective to “the truth”

Concepts of “how to make a switch”

• For things to change, somebody has to start acting differently
• Insert that person(s) photo here!
• Each person has an emotional elephant with a rational rider
• Both sides must be reached...and that’s your job!
• You also have to clear the way for them to succeed (this is the difficult part for many of us...we want things to change but we aren’t willing to facilitate those changes)

Elephants and riders:

Switch
1) Direct the rider:
   • Find the “bright spots”: Find what’s working and “clone” it! (This came up in small groups yesterday)
   • Script critical moves: Don’t think big picture…focus on specific behaviors
   • Point to the destination: Change is easier if we know where we’re going and why it’s worth it (e.g. use this with AuD students in learning pediatric audiology)

2) Motivate the elephant
   • Find the feeling: Knowing something doesn’t change your behavior, it’s the feeling that results in a change
   • Shrink the change: Break it down so the elephant is no longer spooked (e.g. CHANGE IS INCREMENTAL)
   • Grow your people: Cultivate identity and growth mentality…that’s what’s valued here must be communicated

3) Shape the path
   • Tweak the environment: When the situation changes, the behavior changes…so change the situation (e.g. a number of issues that came up yesterday)
   • Built habits! When behavior is habitual, it doesn’t tax the rider: The concept of “action triggers” until it becomes habitual
   • Rally the herd: Behavior is contagious

IDA Institute: versatile tools

Resources to support “Switch”
http://heathbrothers.com/resources/

A versatile tool set
- Ida Institute tools for AR
- Anyone can become a member of Ida: idainstitute.com
- Tools designed to enhance communication with patients and their families
- A number are strong tools for facilitating “difficult communication”
A specific tool to frame conversations

- Reflective journal
  - ...about inspiring ...professionals to start thinking and working in a new way by looking back at what occurred to improve outcomes for the future. By understanding your own behavior, you can make modifications, i.e., becoming more effective with an eye toward reducing stress, becoming more time efficient and raising awareness about your patients.
  - Have taught this tool to students for peds AR, however they started to generalize it for difficult conversations, including those with clinical supervisors.

Creating a culture for difficult conversations

- Feelings are fine...express the emotion without being emotional
- Seek to understand without blame if things are going to change and problems are going to be solved
- Participate in joint decision make...not designed to be unilateral
- Share a common approach to “difficult conversations” in a workplace
  - Example of Jennifer, one of our PhD students

WHY?

- Faculty member perspective:
  - My chair shared with me that if I’m going to be a leader, I need to learn to address my emotions

- Student perspective:
  - “No one ever told me these things before. No one has really been honest with me...this has made me a better professional and a better person...”