

Silence is not always Golden: How to Initiate a Difficult Conversation with a Fellow Team Member



One of the more challenging decisions a nurse may be faced with is initiating a difficult conversation with a team member whose behavior or actions deserve attention. The behavior may include a team member who rarely helps out or a humorless member who is chronically in a bad mood. Taking the first step to initiate a difficult conversation may be just that, scary and difficult; despite the fear you may feel, difficult conversations are possible, and the results may surprise you. Here is a list of recommendations for initiating a difficult conversation with a team member.

1. Acknowledge your feelings: your first impulse may be to diminish your feelings by telling yourself, "It's no big deal, I will just ignore it." If you can truly ignore the other person's behavior and not let it bother you, great; however, if you see that is not the case, then start thinking about how you want to approach your fellow team member.

2. Avoid a lethal build-up of negative feelings: difficult conversations should be initiated before you have built up so much ill will, that your willingness to talk is trumped by intense feelings of frustration and anger.

3. First step, build rapport: building rapport is the first step in establishing any meaningful connection. Start a genuine conversation with topics where you believe there may be some common ground: the topics that usually yield good results, range from sharing information about family issues, a hobby or some other topic that might be of interest. Observe any specific interests of this colleague and use your observations to guide your rapport building efforts.

4. An action plan:

Assessment: after you have started to build rapport, notice if you feel more connected to this person? If you are able to see a shift in your feelings and the dynamic in your relationship has improved, you are on the right track.

Role model the behavior you most want to see: if you want your colleague to help out with patient care, then chip-in and help out your colleague, without being asked.

Make reasonable requests of your colleague: ask for help with a patient; make the request when your colleague is not very busy; this may make it easier for him or her to respond in the affirmative.

Praise: follow-up with specific praise about the type of help you received; specific praise usually helps reinforce a new behavior and hopefully repetition of this behavior will occur.

Stay on this track: if you notice a change in behavior over time, it may not be necessary to initiate the difficult conversation. Instead, compliment your colleague's new behavior in a genuine, respectful way.

5. Efforts to build rapport fail to produce the desired results: if change doesn't result from your rapport building efforts, then it is time to initiate the difficult conversation.

Plan a time to talk: plan a time to talk that is agreeable to both of you: this could be during a slow time, at the end of the shift or during a meal.

Prepare your colleague: tell your colleague that you want to talk about something important to you. It is best if your tone of voice is cordial, not defensive.

Be honest, use "I" statements: your conversation needs to include your feelings and be an opportunity to educate the other person about their actions.

Example:

"This is not easy for me to say, but I need to say it. It is difficult for me when you don't help out; you often seem to be overwhelmed, and then I feel like I can't ask you for any help"

Wait for a response: permit yourself to not fill in the space with words. Simply wait for your colleague's response.

Interpret the response: if you don't like or understand the response you hear, take a minute and try to understand *why* the person might be responding in a particular way; this empathic approach keeps inquiry possible and diminishes automatic blame.

Solution-oriented approach: if your colleague is willing to discuss this problem and possible solutions, be of assistance when you can. Avoid any pull to collude with a team member who wants you to commiserate with a counterproductive behavior. If you hear, "Oh, there's just too much work, I can't handle it", help your colleague by staying focused on possible solutions.

Agreements: try to see if you can find areas of agreement that are tailored to each of your strengths and abilities. Remember, if agreements are too ambitious or unrealistic, they won't be kept.

Follow-up: request a follow-up to the conversation in order to keep the agreements alive and well. If the agreement needs to be altered, discuss what needs to be altered, while keeping your attention on productive ways of working together.

Difficult conversations require a plan that may involve practice and patience; and, these conversations may be particularly difficult to initiate if your work culture doesn't support them. Finally, there is no guarantee that a difficult conversation will produce the desired results. It simply means that you think enough of yourself and your relationships at work, that the potential gains may outweigh the loss of not saying anything.

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