

# Difficult Conversations: A Process to Open and Honest Relationships

Meredith Nicholson Elementary


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# Background Leading to this Inquiry

- I transitioned to principal after teaching in the same building for 17 years.
- Conversations came more naturally with new hires. Teachers "expected" that relationship with their principal.
- With existing staff it was different. The mutual respect was there but the conversations were harder due to previous relationship as a peer.



# Purpose of This Inquiry

- The purpose of my action inquiry was to become more confident having difficult conversations with established staff members.
- I tended to avoid conflict and needed to stop “letting things slide” before they became bigger issues.
- I did well affirming staff but knew I had to improve holding others accountable when necessary and respectfully guiding towards reflection when needed.



# My Wondering

- ▶ How does developing a protocol for difficult conversations contribute to their effectiveness/success?
- 



# My Actions

- Read the book *Crucial Conversations*
- Read the book *Fierce Conversations*
- Signed up for the newsletter *Crucial Skills*
- Began taking thorough notes of my planned conversations
- Followed the protocols laid out in the book
- Practiced the conversations with respected peers
- Reflected on each conversation
- I made sure to have purposeful positive conversations with those same staff members in the days following the difficult conversations to maintain positive relationships.



# The Path to Action (Crucial Conversations)

*Start with the Heart*



See/Hear

Tell a  
Story

Feel

Act

# The Process (Crucial Conversations)

**S**hare your facts

**T**ell your story

**A**sk for others' path

**T**alk tentatively

**E**ncourage testing

**A**sk to get things rolling

**M**irror to confirm feelings

**P**araphrase to acknowledge story

**P**ause when you are getting nowhere

**A**gree

**B**uild

**C**ompare



# Data Collection

- ▶ I took anecdotal notes before and after each conversations.
- ▶ I followed up with staff a few days after conversations.



# Data Collection

what do I really want out of conversation?  
share my concerns about recent  
behavior and how it is affecting  
students and staff  
things at home have been  
hard - check in to see if things  
have changed there  
\* Is there something more going on?  
What has changed? Is there more  
I can do to make sure she feels  
supported  
\* Listen when she responds - may  
need to get through her hurt/anger/  
defensiveness  
\* Sincere  
\* Reflect - see if she can see  
a difference  
\* Make a plan for what happens  
next

- Talked with [redacted] about her  
treatment of [redacted] At first she  
became very defensive - paced  
around my office. - I continued to  
listen. After a few minutes she  
sat down - I shared my concerns  
about the conversation in the hallway  
and the emails she had copied  
me on. We discussed how they  
were received - and the steps she  
needed to have done to make it a  
more professional/respectful exchange.  
She offered to apologize to [redacted] -  
Checked w/ [redacted] and she had apologized  
- Does behavior happen again?  
- What will I do if it does?



# My Data

- ▶ When asked what I could do to support a struggling teacher after a difficult observations, the teacher responded,

*“You have already done it. At first I was angry when reading through your feedback. Then I looked at my observation from first semester and realized you were right. This was the wake up call I needed to get back to being myself.”*



# My Data

- ▶ This process has also improved my instructional feedback. As I met with teachers, instead of pointing out concerns in the observation I asked them reflective questions. They started coming to our meetings with those reflections to discuss and had questions of their own. Teachers were asking where they could improve and what steps they could take to get there. These discussions became much more meaningful and beneficial for both of us and their instruction.
- ▶ The strategies also worked with conversations outside of instruction. (*professional behavior, instances that hurt our building's culture, parent concerns*)



# My Discoveries

- ▶ I discovered that some staff needed to be allowed to get the “emotion” out first. Once I listened through their emotion we could get down to the “nitty gritty” of the conversation
- ▶ I knew a few teachers responded better if I went to their room to have those more difficult conversations while others needed to come to me.
- ▶ Some teachers needed me to be blunt- not sugar coating while others responded better if we worked through it together
- ▶ The thorough planning helped me focus on the teacher and less on what I wanted to say. By working through that ahead of time the process set up in the book came more naturally.
- ▶ Conversations will not always go the way you wanted no matter how much planning you do, but I learned a lot even from those that were not as successful.



# Where Am I Heading Next

- ▶ I learned that I haven't been giving myself enough credit for the work I have done. I need to give myself a little more grace.
- ▶ Most teachers appreciate these conversations and want to continue to improve their practice through open, respectful conversations.
- ▶ Moving forward, I will continue this planning/reflection process and apply it to other conversations that I may need to have with other admin or central office staff.
- ▶ I plan discussing during my EOY conversations with teachers to continue to gain their feedback and input
- ▶ It is all about knowing what you want to accomplish with the conversation, feeling confident in what you need to say and doing your best to help others feel safe and comfortable



# Bibliography

- Grenny, J. (n.d.). Crucial Conversations Archives. Retrieved from <https://www.vitalSMARTS.com/crucialskills/category/crucial-conversations/>
- Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & McMillan, R. (2012). *Crucial conversations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Scott, S. (2017). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time*. New York: New American Library.



## [Difficult Conversations: A Process to Open and Honest Relationships]

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### **Background Leading to My Inquiry (Slide 2)**

- Transitioned to principal after teaching in the same building for 17 years
- Difficult conversations came more naturally with new hires. Teachers "expected" that relationship with their principal
- Conversations were harder with existing staff due to previous relationship as a peer

### **The Purpose of My Inquiry (Slide 3)**

- The purpose of my action inquiry was to become more confident having difficult conversations with established staff members. I tended to avoid conflict and needed to stop "letting things slide" before they became bigger issues. I did well affirming staff but knew I had to improve holding others accountable when necessary and respectfully guiding towards reflection when needed. (both in instruction and culture/professionalism)

### **My Wondering (Slide 4)**

- With this purpose, I wondered *How does developing a protocol for difficult conversations contribute to their effectiveness/success?*

### **My Actions (Slide 5)**

- Read the book *Crucial Conversations*
- Read the book *Fierce Conversations*
- Signed up for the newsletter *Crucial Skills*
- Began taking thorough notes of my planned conversations (5-10 mins)
- Followed the protocols laid out in the book
- Practiced the conversations with respected peers
- Reflected on each conversation (5-10 mins)
- Made sure to have purposeful positive conversations with those same staff members in the days following the difficult conversations to maintain positive relationships

## Process (Slide 6)

A Path to Action (discussed in the book Crucial Conversations). They talk a lot about “starting from the heart” for both sides of the conversation.

See/Hear---Tell a Story-----Feel-----Act

## My Process (Slide 7)

The point of the process is to help the other person feel safe to talk/share. Often times people clam up or don't say anything because they are not feeling safe

### **STATE**

Share purpose of meeting

Tell things from my perspective, concerns, observations,

Allow time for them to share even it is more of a “blow up”, figure out how best to continue if they clam up/ respond,

Talk tentatively means (soften wording when necessary “It's clear” to “I wonder”).

Encourage testing allows time for them to be open honest/be heard when responding

**AMPP** – **Ask** others to share their path/story **Mirror** to confirm their feelings “pointing how tone/body language doesn't align with what they are saying- **Paraphrase** their story- **Priming** means take your best guess as to what is going on- an of good faith, making you vulnerable, it is taking a risk- building safety with the hope of them sharing their meaning

**ABC** Agree when you agree- move on, **build** on the story if pieces of info are left out- **compare** the differences in the stories

## My Data (Slides 8)

Qualitative data- took notes before and after meetings, and followed up with teachers in the days after

## My Data (Slides 9)

I will share excerpts from two journals- one preconference and one post

## My Data (Slides 10)



Teacher quote about how my feedback helped her see how much she was struggling  
**My Discoveries (Slides 11)**

- ▶ This process has also improved my instructional feedback. As I met with teachers, instead of pointing out concerns in the observation I asked them reflective questions. They started coming to our meetings with those reflections to discuss and had questions of their own. Teachers were asking where they could improve and what steps they could take to get there. These discussions became much more meaningful and beneficial for both of us and their instruction.
- ▶ The strategies also worked with conversations outside of instruction. (*professional behavior, instances that hurt our building's culture, parent concerns*)

### **My Discoveries (Slide 12)**

Like a lot of things, it is all about relationships. I discovered that some staff needed to be allowed to get the “emotion” out first. Once I listened through their emotion we could get down to the “nitty gritty” of the conversation. I knew a few teachers responded better if I went to their room to have those more difficult conversations while others needed to come to me. Some teachers needed me to be blunt- not sugar coating while others responded better if we worked through it together. The thorough planning helped me focus on the teacher and less on what I wanted to say. By working through that ahead of time the process set up in the book came more naturally. Conversations will not always go the way you wanted no matter how much planning you do, but I learned a lot even from those that were not as successful.

### **Where I Am Heading Next (Slide 13)**

I learned that I haven't been giving myself enough credit for the work I have done so far in this position. Most teachers appreciate these conversations and want to continue to improve their practice through open, respectful feedback

Moving forward, I will continue this planning/reflection process and apply it to other conversations that I may need to have with other admin or central office staff.

I plan discussing during my EOY conversations with teachers to continue to gain their feedback and input

It is all about knowing what you want to accomplish with the conversation, feeling confident in what you need to say and doing your best to help others feel comfortable

### **Bibliography (Slide 14)**

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