SECDEF Leader's Difficult Conversations Field Book

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SECDEF Difficult Conversations

The information presented in this document seeks to provide leaders across the Department of Defense (DoD) with the tools needed to conduct difficult conversations with their organization's members. Toward that end, we provide a precise definition of difficult conversations, the training's terminal learning objectives (TLOs) and enabling learning objectives (ELOs), talking points, targeted outcomes, and a field book with a facilitation guide and exemplar scenarios to successfully conduct difficult conversations. The information presented here and in other documents is designed to provide leaders with a systematic approach to effectively conducting difficult conversations, but it is not intended to be all-inclusive. The methods, strategies, and recommendations outlined come from the academic research literature and input from subject matter experts.

Suggestions for improvements and additions to these deliverables should be submitted to the DEOMI Research and Development Directorate, 366 Tuskegee Airmen Drive, Patrick Space Force Base, Florida 32925.

Internet Site

The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) website, www.defenseculture.mil, provides a variety of tools, training products, and information to support leaders across the Department of Defense in improving their organizational culture. Scan the quick response code below with a smart device to directly access the website.

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Overview

The modern warfighter is more connected and immersed in current events (Maltby & Thornham, 2016). These include events that take place within the organization (e.g., harassment, hazing) as well as the events that take place external to the organization (e.g., implementation of new policies, geopolitical events). These events can often be difficult for our members to understand and process. When untoward events occur or controversies surface, people can become overly emotionally invested in the subject, process, or outcomes. An organization's mission success may be jeopardized when members' discussions deteriorate into aggression and conflict. Therefore, as leaders, we must monitor members' interactions and recognize when conversations might devolve into conflict.

The purpose of this Leader's Difficult Conversations Field Book is to provide leaders at all levels with a practical framework to recognize, plan, implement, and assess the impact of holding difficult conversations. Mission success depends on fully capable warfighters; if any feel isolated, disregarded, disrespected, or abused, their performance may be negatively impacted and mission success could be threatened.

Successful organizations are able to create an environment where difficult conversations are frequently conducted (Patterson, 2002). Conducting difficult conversations is a process that provides members an opportunity to speak with their leaders in a safe, non-attributional and non-retributive environment to discuss topics that concern them and to hear others' perspectives. Therefore, it is essential that every leader has the knowledge, awareness, and skills to conduct a well-facilitated conversation (see Figure 1).

SECDEF Difficult Conversations

I. **Difficult Conversations Definition:**

A difficult conversation is a formal approach to addressing controversial or sensitive issues that may be negatively affecting an individual or the unit. Difficult conversations are conducted at the individual level or the group level.

1. Individual Level Difficult Conversation: Seeks to resolve a conflict or disagreement between two or more people regarding a specific incident.

2. Group Level Difficult Conversation: Seeks to identify and address our emotional reactions to particular topics or events and how to manage these emotions during the discussion.

II. **Terminal Learning Objectives and Enabling Learning Objectives Difficult Conversations:**

a. **Terminal Learning Objective**

Recognize when the need arises, then schedule and conduct difficult conversations with subordinates to effectively broach sensitive topics in a way that ensures all participants are heard, understood, and whose opinions—however different or controversial—are respected.

b. **Enabling Learning Objectives**

- Identify how sensitive or controversial issues are affecting your members.
- Recognize key personnel who can support conducting the difficult conversation(s).
- Describe which level these sensitive or controversial issues should be addressed (individual vs group).
- Explain how to effectively prepare for conducting a difficult conversation.
- Explain how to structure the opening of a difficult conversation at both the individual and group levels.
- Understand how to conduct a difficult conversation at both the individual and group level.
- Recognize how to interrupt the negative impact of the difficult conversations.
- Identify potential strategies and ways forward resulting from the conversation(s).
- Reassess the need for additional difficult conversations.

III. **Difficult Conversations Talking Points:**

Context for the following Talking Points: The modern warfighter is more connected and exposed to events surrounding them, including events that occur within the organization as well as events that occur externally. Successful organizations are mindful of these events and are ready to address the impact by holding difficult conversations. Difficult conversations is a formal approach to addressing issues that are negatively affecting an individual or the unit. Difficult

conversations need to be part of the leadership framework, helping Commanders remain tuned in to the needs for their warfighters.

Talking Points: Difficult conversations…

1. are a formal process for Commanders and members to address the issues that could be negatively affecting readiness
2. are an essential part of the leader's toolkit that provides an opportunity to address the needs for the members
3. provide opportunities for Commanders to interface with their members through a meaningful and thoughtful process
4. create an environment where issues can be addressed before they trigger personnel problems
5. provide a framework to address the issues that are impacting morale
6. provide opportunities for Commanders to address barriers to mission accomplishment
7. can enhance performance and strengthen working relationships

IV.   Difficult Conversations Outcomes:

This program will increase the knowledge, awareness, and skills of leaders to plan, implement, and evaluate the effect of holding difficult conversations. By having frequent difficult conversations leadership can expect to see the following outcomes (Bradley, 2016):

1. Increased communicative behaviors
2. Increased cohesion
3. Increased operational performance
4. Increased feeling of inclusion
5. Improved command climate (morale)
6. Increased exposure to a diversity of ideas and perspectives
7. Decreased conflict among members
8. Decreased aggression
9. Decreased stress
10. Decreased feelings of isolation
11. Decreased feelings of confusion

V.   Difficult Conversation Scenarios

The following scenario is designed to assist leaders in understanding how to hold a difficult conversation at the group level.

Scenario 1

The Commanding Officer has been informed that a member is feeling isolated from his fellow members after reporting a popular member for inappropriate behavior.

Context for discussion: Given the nature of the issue, there will be alternative avenues to directly address the compliant, but the need to conduct a group level difficult conversation is still necessary. Inappropriate behaviors are in direct contradiction to the DoD's Core Values and contribute to poor order and discipline. Therefore, the Commanding Officer needs to hold a difficult conversation about the impact that inappropriate behaviors have on good order and discipline and impair operational success. Additionally, the Commander should stress the need for all members to adhere to the standards of conduct, their responsibility to report instances of misconduct, and the prohibition against retribution and reprisal against those reporting misconduct.

Scenario 2

The members of the unit have strong feeling about DoD policy changes that triggered recent events in the Middle East. They post their opinions on social media sites and share them openly during working hours. This is causing conflict among the members, and mission essential tasks are being delayed.

Context for discussion: Subordinate leaders are concerned about the reaction some members are having to the impact of recent DoD policy changes in the Middle East. The conversations are becoming aggressive, and people are sometimes openly hostile to one another. The Commanding Officer decides that that conducting a difficult conversation is needed to resolve the conflict, and remind members about the oath they took to join the military.

Scenario 3

Recent changes to the grooming standards have sparked a debate among members about how the military is becoming too sensitive to the needs of a small group. There are additional reports that some members are making inappropriate comments about the changes to grooming standards. Recent discussions have led to arguments about race and racism, and some members are reporting to their leaders that they feel uncomfortable and unsafe.

Context for discussion: Given the nature of the issue, leadership has decided to hold a group level difficult conversation. The Command group is concerned about the best ways to approach these issues within the context of larger issues around race and racism occurring nationally.

Leader's Difficult Conversation Field Book

Facilitation Guide

This section will provide you with the necessary tools and techniques to conduct a difficult conversation. Remember, the goal of guiding a difficult conversation is to explore and assess the impact of internal or external issues that are affecting the individual or unit. The outcomes of the difficult conversation is not to convince members why they are wrong, rather to understand their perspectives and create an environment wherein issues can be resolved.

Difficult Conversation Defined

Leaders need to be aware when issues are negatively affecting an individual or multiple unit members. While there are many formal processes for addressing issues within the DoD, including Service-specific instructions and manuals, there remains a need to hold difficult conversations with our members. Difficult conversations can be an effective method for reducing stressors, increasing cohesion, and improving operational performance.

A difficult conversation is a formal approach to addressing issues that are negatively affecting an individual or multiple unit members. Difficult conversations are conducted at the individual level or the group level.

1. Individual Level Difficult Conversation: Seeks to resolve a conflict or disagreeing between two or more people regarding a specific incident.

2. Group Level Difficult Conversation: Seeks to identify and address our emotional reactions to particular topics or events and how to manage these emotions during the discussion.

Difficult Conversation Conceptual Framework

Difficult conversations need to be conducted in a systematic and collaborative manner. The conversations need to be respectful, deliberate, and action-focused. Difficult conversations are not opportunities to belittle, implement hidden agendas, or retaliate against others for divergent beliefs; instead of resolving conflict, these approaches will only increase confusion, anger, fear, or anxiety. The point of having difficult conversations is to provide members with an opportunity to interface with leadership and each other and engage in focused dialogue designed to reduce conflict associated with issues that may negatively affect performance or mission accomplishment.

It is important to recognize that difficult conversations are not meant only to address external issues (e.g., current political movements), but can be used to effectively resolve internal issues (e.g., individual behaviors that conflict with Core Values, or communicating how new policies need to be implemented when members do not understand). It is equally important to recognize that not all difficult conversations need to occur at the group level; instead, leaders can address issues at the individual level when needed. Difficult conversations at the individual level may offer opportunities for leaders to address issues that would otherwise trigger emotions of

embarrassment or fear of retaliation. However, choosing the correct level to hold the difficult conversation can be overwhelming. Leaders are encouraged to use the DEOMI Difficult Conversation Decision Model to identify the best approach to conducting a difficult conversation (see Figure 1).
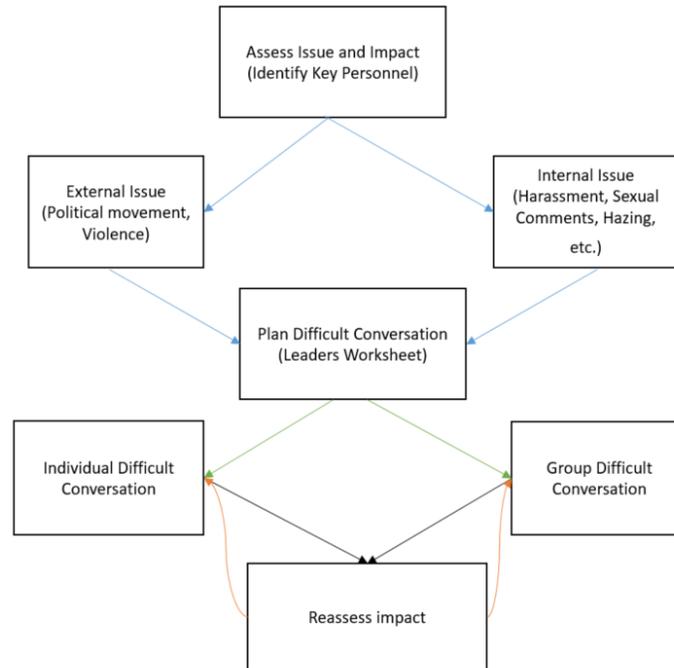
Figure 1. DEOMI Difficult Conversations Decision Model

The DEOMI Difficult Conversation Decision Model is a practical guide for leaders to determine the correct approach for steering a difficult conversation. To use this model, leaders need to first identify whether the issue is either internal or external to the organization. Internal issues are typically associated with incidents that occur internal to the organization. For example, harassing or isolating an individual for reporting misconduct of a fellow member is inconsistent with Core Values. Conversely, external issues are typically associated with events that occur outside the organization, such as political movements that generate national or international news coverage. Internal and external events can have a profound impact on individual and unit readiness and operational performance. It is key for leaders to correctly identify the level of the event and assess its potential impact before conducting a difficult conversation.

The best method for assessing the correct level of the event is for leaders to leverage the expertise of key personnel that have specialized training (e.g., Equal Opportunity or Equal Employment Opportunity representative, Public Affairs Officer, or other special staff member). These key personnel can provide insight to the appropriate level of the issue, assess its potential impact, and make recommendations for the type of difficult conversation to conduct.

Additionally, these key personnel can assess in the implementation of the difficult conversation, as either co-facilitators or subject matter experts to address questions or concerns that arise.

Upon identifying the appropriate level, leaders should complete the Leader's Difficult Conversation Worksheet (see Table 1). On a practical level, you should first identify time in the work/training schedule to hold difficult conversation. This worksheet will help you carefully plan the difficult conversation. While key personnel can assist in answering the Leader's Difficult Conversation Worksheet, it is important that the leader personally reflect on the steps outlined in the worksheet. By taking ownership of the response and process, leaders will be better prepared to conduct the difficult conversation.

Table 1. Leader's Difficult Conversation Worksheet

Steps	What are you planning to say and do?

1. Prepare mentally and frame the issue:
   a. What is your purpose for having the conversation and what do you hope to accomplish?
   b. What would an ideal outcome look like?
   c. Are any of your "buttons" being pushed or strong emotions triggered?
   d. What would happen if you did not have the conversation?	

2. Identify key personnel who can:
   a. Provide subject matter expertise?
   b. Put this issue into context?	

3. Seek to understand the members' perspective of the issue.
   a. What about this issue is causing a reaction?
   b. How does this issue make me feel?
   c. How would I feel if I shared this person's circumstances?	

4. Share your perspective of the issue in a non-judgmental way.
   a. Offer insight into your thinking process.
   b. Offer insight into your feelings about this subject.	

5. Share your expected outcomes. a. Have a discussion that is solution-focused.	

After completing the Leader's Difficult Conversation Worksheet, leaders need to identify time/date and location to hold the difficult conversation. Time and location are important aspects to consider, since they can influence the tone and outcome of the difficult conversation.

External factors, such as loud noises or busy hallways, can disrupt the flow or impact candid discussion. Additionally, holding an individual difficult conversation in the leader's office gives the impression of an established power distance. A subordinate may be less willing to share the underlying feelings and emotions associated with the issue if they feel they been called before their Commander. Time can also be a major factor. While the training/work schedule will be a major factor in scheduling a difficult conversation, it may be less effective if held near the end of the workday or on a Friday. Therefore, it is essential that time and location be given equal attention when planning the difficult conversation.

Conducting the difficult conversation is the next step in the DEOMI Difficult Conversation Decision Model. Table 2 outlines the six steps in having a difficult conversation.

Table 2. The six steps to having a difficult conversation at both the individual and group level.

Six Steps to Having a Difficult Conversation
1. Getting started (identify key personnel to support)
2. Formally invite members to participate
3. Plan for the difficult conversation (time/date, location, structure)
4. Active listening
5. Speaking emphatically and with conviction
6. Generating action-focused solutions collaboratively (desired outcome)*

Note: *Not all difficult conversations have solutions, but it is necessary to focus on pathways forward to ensure members are feeling heard and respected. This table was informed from the GE Foundation Workplace Skills Program: Module Eight, Having Difficult Conversation).

Step 1: Getting started (identify key personnel to support)

The leader needs to identify and coordinate with key personnel, such as Equal Opportunity and/or Equal Employment Opportunity representative, or other special staff members, to attend and help answer questions or provide responses to difficult questions. Additionally, spend some time to identify how you feel about the issue. What are your preconceived notions or beliefs? By reflecting first, you can recognize your own internal biases, better preparing you to discuss the issue with a non-judgmental mindset.

Step 2: Formally invite members to participate

The leader needs to invite members to participate in the difficult conversation. It may be good practice to have key personnel draft or review invitations to ensure the purpose of the difficult conversation is accurately reflected. Formal invitations should be delivered through conventional methods (e.g., emails, command formations, etc.) so that members recognize and understand the invitation's purpose. Formal invitations also express to the members that the planned difficult conversation has the support of leadership.

Step 3: Plan for the difficult conversation (time/date, location, structure)

In this step, it is essential to plan the structure of the difficult conversation. The following points will help you structure the difficult conversation.

1. Welcome your group: To create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, welcome everyone when they arrive. If possible, arrange the chairs in the room in a circle so that participants can maintain eye contact with whoever is speaking. Inform them that you are facilitating a discussion with them on a specific topic (e.g. race, gender, or ethnicity). Remind them that their open participation is important for the discussion to be productive. Explain the discussion process.

2. Establish the ground rules: Explain what the ground rules are, that they are nonnegotiable, and how they apply in the current setting. Use ground rules to provide order to the discussion, while allowing each participant the opportunity to speak and be heard. Ask the group if they would like to add to the list of ground rules. If there are additional suggestions, add them if appropriate. Post the ground rules in a prominent place so all can see them. Refer to the ground rules occasionally during the session if any are being violated. Suggested ground rules include:
   a. No interruptions when others are speaking; only one person speaks at a time. Give members the opportunity to complete their comments.
   b. Disagreements are okay; personal attacks are not. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, just as you are entitled to yours. Respect that everyone will not always agree. In other words, agree to disagree.
   c. Respect others' opinions and concerns. Reflect upon what was said before you respond.
   d. Avoid judgmental questions beginning with the word "Why."
   e. Set and use guidelines for handling self-disclosures and/or extraneous diversions.
   f. If offended by something said, provide the speaker feedback about what you reacted to.
   g. Agree to participate fully; be truthful and honest in your answers.
   h. Allow all participants an opportunity to voice their views.

3. Introduce the group to the process. Reiterate the welcoming remarks and the importance of their participation and maintaining an open mind.
4. Group Conversation. Guide the group through the discussion. Ask questions that are relevant to the topics, then give members a moment to reflect. Ensure all members have had the opportunity to provide their views. Key points to watch for:
   a. Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. During most effective discussions, leaders often say little, but are constantly thinking about how to move the group toward its goal.
   b. Don't be afraid of silence. Use it to your advantage. It will sometimes take a moment of reflection before someone formulates a thoughtful comment.
   c. Don't let anyone dominate the conversation; try to include everyone. Draw out the quieter, reticent members.
   d. Ensure that each comment made to the group is acknowledged in some way, even if non-verbally.
   e. When trying to decide when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Don't allow the group to make you the "answer person."
   f. Help participants identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

5. Key Points & Summary. Summarize for the group the conversations of the session. Reflect back upon the initial group expectations and what the group has accomplished.
6. Closing. Be sure to thank the members for their participation and candid remarks.
   a. If there were any areas not fully explained or defined, facilitators should use the closing as an opportunity to provide additional information, and encourage members to conduct additional research on that topic.
   b. If there were areas where members might have been offended, explain why this may have happened and discuss the consequences of offending someone.
   c. Explain the importance of communicating and discussing concerns to better understand situations from others' point of view; identify some strategies on how to inform someone when you are offended or treated unfairly.
   d. Explain the positive results of an organization whose members work together, look after others, and trust each other.
   e. Respect others' opinions and concerns. Reflect upon what was said before you respond.
   f. Reinforce that the conversation was conducted in a non-attributional and non-retributive environment.
   g. Conclude the session with a sense of completion by tying together some of the comments from the conversation.
   h. Leave the group on a positive footing, and provide your envisioned way forward.

In addition to planning the structure, it is essential to coordinate with subordinate leaders to identify a time, date, and location to hold the difficult conversation. Conversations can take place either in physical spaces[*] or through DoD approved online virtual platforms. When planning for either, it is a best practice to keep the groups small (~15-20 people), and try to get a diverse selection of individuals. Group size and demographics are important and may determine the level and quality of the participation.

Physical site preparation is important. Create a discussion-friendly environment to enhance participants' receptivity. Select a room with adequate acoustics, lighting, and ventilation. Additionally, other potential considerations include the:

1. Arrangement of seats, tables, audio visual aids, room for spreading out discussion aids

2. Participants' access to audio-visual material and placement of easels and their ability to see clearly

3. Room temperature

4. Supplies, including pens, pencils, and note taking paper for participants' use

5. Arrangement of all handout materials in a sequential, orderly, accessible fashion, with enough for all participants

6. Site has been checked in advance to ensure the setup is properly arranged

7. Seating is comfortable, and tables are available if needed

8. Multimedia visual aids, if used, are working

9. Signature forms to record members' attendance (when applicable)

Other considerations include the setting for conducting your conversation. Can you comfortably fit everyone in the room? Are you doing this through an online "chat" system? Will all members have access to an online camera so that they can be seen? How will you manage the group/process in an online system? Are all participants familiar with the aspects of an online chat and how to access the available controls? Modify your plan to fit the appropriate setting.

*note: COVID-19 conditions need to be considered before scheduling in-person conversations.

Step 4: Active listening

Active listening is the deliberate process of listening attentively, reflecting and paraphrasing, and withholding judgment and advice. Active listening is a learned skill that requires focus and attention while remaining aware that we are susceptible to internal and external distractions.

1. Internal distractions – thoughts developed while someone else is talking. Sometimes these thoughts are related to what the person is saying; other times you may be thinking about the next question you might ask. Try to eliminate these internal distractions that keep you from focusing on what is being said.
2. External distractions – things happening around you that compete with the speaker (noises outside the room, other people whispering, etc.) Try to prevent these, or try not to let them distract your attention.

Active listening also builds trust, rapport, and encourages participation. The following points should be considered to ensure a successful outcome:

1. When establishing rapport with your group and building their trust and confidence in you as a leader:
   a. Project warmth and genuine interest
   b. Actively listen to what is being said and read between the lines, i.e., what is *really* being said
   c. Paraphrase to clarify
   d. Empathize, but do not take sides
   e. Encourage participation and discussion by encouraging openness and sharing control
2. When establishing credibility
   a. Use expert knowledge/experience from members in your audience
3. Additional supportive facilitator techniques:
   a. Learn your group members' names, and use them
   b. Validate and affirm relevant comments, observations, and interventions
   c. Acknowledge participants' experience and expertise
   d. Establish clear boundaries
   e. Make yourself available to address individual/group concerns
   f. Tailor the program to use participants' ideas and address their concerns

The goal of the difficult conversation is to create a space where dialogue occurs. Attempt to listen and understand the intentions behind the emotions and the words that are being exchanged

between members. It is imperative that we do not become focused on convincing others of our judgments and conclusions.

Step 5: Speaking emphatically and with conviction

Leaders should speak emphatically and with conviction. This can be accomplished by asking open-ended questions, seeking specific clarification, and providing examples that demonstrate understanding. By speaking emphatically and with conviction, you help to establish an environment that fosters greater participation. Here are a few considerations when making your selections:

1. Open-ended questions: Elicit a more complete response and more effective participation and require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. The majority of your lead-off questions should be open-ended questions that can begin with "how" or "what," to stimulate as many responses as possible.
2. Direct questions: Ask explicitly for a reply on a specified topic. Use the: who, what, when, where, why (as previously mentioned, be careful on how you use this one), and how strategy. These questions are more likely to be directed at a specific individual and should not be used to pressure a member to self-incriminate.
3. Paraphrased questions: The facilitator repeats the participant's last response in his/her own words, then follows with a question seeking additional, related information.
4. Narrow questions: The facilitator selects the subject matter to discuss and refines the question to acquire specific information.
5. Polling questions: An uninvolved group member (e.g., participant who is quiet or displaying body language that signals a lack of interest or an unwillingness to participate) is a challenge. To encourage quiet or withdrawn group members, it is helpful to use a polling technique in order to elicit each participant's feelings about a particular issue. Avoid serial questioning (i.e., asking each participant to comment in the same order on every issue).

Step 6: Generating action-focused solutions collaboratively (desired outcome)

The goal of holding difficult conversations is to generate action-focused solutions that foster an environment free of fear and aggression. Action-focused solutions are agreements, not expectations. Do not dictate the solution, as this could create greater conflict. There needs to be collaboration when generating solutions. Be prepared to ask and answer these questions: What are reasonable expectations? What are we agreeing to do next? What support are you/they committed to provide? What obstacles might prevent change? What is the plan to overcome the obstacles? How will you/we evaluate progress?

While action-focused solutions represent the preferred outcome, be aware that complex issues may not have any immediate solutions. Be prepared to have ongoing difficult conversation about complex issues, particularly ones that generate strong emotions and reactions.

The final aspect of the Decision Model is to reassess the impact of either the external or internal issues after conducting the difficult conversations. This final step is essential, because it offers leaders the opportunity to understand the process involved with and impact of conducting difficult conversations. Leaders are encourage to utilize the Difficult Conversation After Action

Worksheet (see Figure 4). This worksheet is will help you examine the process for and impact of the difficult conversation. By examining the process and assessing its impact, leaders will have a better understanding on what worked and what did not. If the process and impact produced the intended outcomes, leaders can be confident in employing the process in future difficult conversations. If the process and effect did not produce the intended outcomes, leaders need to identify areas where this failure may have occurred and consider a different approach in the future.

Figure 4. Difficult Conversation After Action Worksheet.

Difficult Conversation After Action Worksheet

What was the difficult conversation about? (Internal or external issue?)

What are the action-focused solutions?

What self-talked prevented you from listening?

What went well? Why?

What did not go well? Why?

Source: Adapted from GE Foundation Workplace Skills Program: Module Eight Having Difficult Conversation