

Tough Talk dealing with those 'difficult' conversations

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One of the consultation services I offer involves open-ended discussions. I meet with small groups of people for 60-90 minutes and provide some guidance and perspective on the current issues or concerns they are facing. What I find interesting is the amount of common themes that emerge in these discussions. It doesn't matter who the group is or what type of program they work for, most of us are dealing with the same questions.

For example, one of the most common questions I run into is; how do you approach the 'difficult' conversations? When you have to confront, deny, give bad news, or deal with sensitive topics, how do you present the topic in a way that the youth in question can understand and accept the information?

I must admit that when I first started getting this question I struggled with how to present my answer, mainly because I don't accept the premise. Personally, I don't believe that there is any such thing as a 'difficult' conversation, at least not in terms of the difficulty being with the young person. What people perceive as a difficult conversation is really nothing more than a conversation that *they* are uncomfortable with. Like so many other things in the youth work field, so-called 'difficult' conversations are not about the young person -- they're about *you*.

The answer to dealing with difficult conversations is to resolve the issues that make the conversation uncomfortable for you. This requires a bit of honest introspection. There are really only two broad categories of reasons why you might be uncomfortable with a discussion, so let's take a look at them both.

Category 1: You have personal issues with the conversation

Maybe you don't think 14 year olds should be talking about sex. Maybe you have strong personal feelings around domestic violence. Maybe you don't like a particular youth's coping skills and know that this conversation will probably be reacted to with disrespect, or silence, or anger, or some other reaction that you personally don't like to experience. If this is where the 'difficulty' is, remember -- this is all about *you*. No one can give you techniques or words or approaches or tricks that will make this conversation any less 'difficult.' It's going to be difficult until and unless you identify what *your* issue is and you deal with that issue.

In *Street Culture: an epistemology of street-dependent youth*, I talk about mistakes I made early in my career due to a personal issue. I am someone who has strong beliefs regarding property rights, yet I was working with a population that was constantly stealing and vandalizing. The most 'difficult' conversations I had with youth involved issues of theft and property damage. No matter how I tried to approach the subject the conversation was always very challenging for me. It wasn't until after I recognized and came to terms with my *own* issues around these behaviors that the conversations stopped being hard. Today, talking with young people about vandalism or theft is no more 'difficult' for me than talking to them about the weather. Resolving *my* issue resolved the difficulty of the conversation.

As much as we don't like to admit it sometimes, the mirror is always the first place we should look when something seems hard. It is natural to spin our wheels trying to figure out how to approach young people about issues, but the reality is that the problem we're experiencing is usually *us*.

Category 2: You haven't created the proper environment for the conversation

OK, so this isn't about your issues. You're aware of them and have dealt with them sufficiently to feel comfortable engaging in a conversation with a young person -- yet the conversation is still 'difficult.' In this case, the problem is usually that you haven't laid the proper groundwork to *have* the conversation.

One possible problem is the time and place. Regardless of the topic of the conversation, time and place should always receive consideration. Is this person cranky in the morning? Maybe morning isn't the best time to talk to them about their hygiene. Did they just get back after a really hard day at work or school? Maybe the conversation about their anger control issues can wait until tomorrow. *Where* are you having the conversation? Are you in the kitchen, where they always feel inadequate because they don't know how to cook? Are you outside on the street, where they have to maintain a strong image and save face? In my experience we often focus virtually all of our attention on the conversation's content and little to no attention on timing and location.

Anyone who has their own children knows that young people are instinctively aware of the value of time and place. When do they ask you for money or to sign their report card or a dozen other things that you would want time to consider? Is it early in the evening when you have hours to think about it? Not likely. It is usually at the door when you're on your way out late to work. Time and place can be as critical to the success or failure of a conversation as the topic itself and it deserves equal consideration.

But consideration to time and place will not help if you haven't set the stage for the conversation early in your relationship. If you haven't created awareness that certain topics may become issues for discussion then it is going to be extremely challenging when they do. This means that when you are first establishing a relationship you need to define the nature of the relationship and allow for the various directions it may take.

We are predisposed when engaging youth in services to present the benefits we have to offer. What we are less inclined to do is inform the young person of the less attractive features of being involved with us. The result is that when the time comes for us to set boundaries or assess skills and abilities or reflect upon behaviors or apply consequences, it comes as a huge surprise to the young person. All they knew was that things were going to be great and they'd have access to all kinds of goodies and benefits. You never said you were going to be on their case about stuff.

When you are first establishing your relationship with young people they need to be shown the complete picture of what the relationship involves and what it may look like. Later, if you need to have a 'difficult' conversation, it won't be quite as difficult because the young person had advance knowledge that these types of conversations were going to be part of their experience.

For example, let's say you're enrolling someone in a job readiness program. It's fine to tell them the benefits; that involvement in the program will give them marketable job skills and help them gain employment. But what happens if, after enrollment, your assessment determines that they really aren't employable right now. Perhaps you discover mental health issues that need to be addressed first. This could be a very 'difficult' conversation if the young person hadn't been told that such assessments were going to be taking place. If, however, the orientation to the program included such information then the conversation is not only less difficult, it is expected.

Laying the groundwork for these conversations in advance for the need to have them also gives you the opportunity to discover the best way to convey the information. For many years I was the director of a transitional living group home for street-dependent youth. The orientation provided once a youth was accepted into the program was always very amicable. The young person was excited to be moving in and they had a completely clean slate. This made the orientations very pleasant and comfortable for us both and we generally were getting along great. Yet I knew that there would come a time in the future when things weren't going to be so great, so now was the time to set the stage. In preparation, the orientation included a canned speech that went something like this:

"Part of my job is to enforce limits and give you feedback on your choices and actions. Sometimes we're going to disagree and I'm going to be giving you feedback that you might not like, or we're going to be on different sides of a conflict. When this happens, how do you want me to deal with you?"

This speech had two benefits. First, it set the stage, letting the young person know my role and what our relationship might look like as it develops. Second, it gave me valuable information on how to get through to the young person when inevitable conflict takes place. I remember one young woman told me; *never say 'you need to ...' If you do, I'll probably go ballistic.* Trust that I made a mental note of that and never used that phrase when setting limits with her. Another advantage of this approach is that, when in conflict with the youth, a part of them registers that you are dealing with them as they

requested to be dealt with. This serves as a sign of respect that goes a long way toward de-escalating the conflict.

Note that this is a negotiation. If you ask how they want you to deal with them and you get a response like; *'shut up, back off, and leave me the f*ck alone!'* ... just think to yourself, *that's an interesting opening position.* You then come back with something like; *my job requires that I don't do that, so what's another option we can consider?*

Final thoughts

If you have resolved your own issues with the conversation, considered time and place, and have adequately laid the groundwork for the conversation to happen, you are well on your way to eliminating 'difficult' conversations from your worry list. Now all you have to do is *have* the conversation, and here are four guidelines for making that go as smoothly as possible.

#1: Be Clear

Don't use two paragraphs when two sentences (or two words) will do. Excess verbiage tends to confuse issues. Don't use \$16.00 words when there are simpler words that mean the same thing. Don't be general when you are dealing with specifics. For example, don't say *you're pushing the limits* if the problem is that they're using the computer too much. The clearer and more specific you can be, the easier will be the conversation.

#2: Be Direct

Don't be hesitant or reluctant. Don't beat around the bush. Get to the point and say it. This not only helps with clarity (#1), but it also helps with honesty (see #4) -- or, at least, reduces the appearance of dishonesty. When we are hesitant or indirect it can be interpreted by the young person as us withholding information or being dishonest or manipulative. Avoid euphemism. When confronting youth about an issue, don't allude to it, just say it.

#3: Be Matter of Fact

This isn't personal. It doesn't make you happy, or sad, or angry, or contemptuous ... it just *is*. You are simply stating facts and giving information. The more you can just present the information with the same level of assuredness as you would present any other factual information, the easier it will be for the young person to hear you.

#4: Be Honest

The more dishonesty creeps into your conversation, the more 'difficult' it will be. Does the young person *need* to be quieter, or are *you* bothered by their volume? Is there a program reason why they need to look at their behavior with their partner, or do *you* resent the way they are treating him or her? Note that either of the options in these examples can be legitimate topics for conversations, as long as you're honest about what the issue *really* is. Don't say things like *you can't do that here* if there are no program rules or guidelines that prohibit the behavior. This doesn't mean that you can't intervene, it just means that your intervention shouldn't be justified based on a rule that you just made up. Young people are extremely skilled at detecting dishonesty (and hypocrisy, by the way) and, after detection, they will tend to tune out *everything* you are saying.

Deal with your issues, lay the groundwork, consider time and place, and be clear, direct, matter of fact, and honest. You'll find that conversations with young people, even those about sensitive or challenging topics, don't have to be 'difficult' at all.