



ADVISORY
BOARD
for the ARTS

Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide

Managing Difficult Conversations

May 2022

ABA's Management Fundamentals Series

Understanding that arts leaders at every level may need to stretch their management muscles as they return to in-person interactions, ABA has developed a series of virtual, interactive sessions to tune-up member managerial and coaching skills.

Who Should Join?

Anyone in a management position (providing coaching, performance management and/or delegating work to others) at ABA member organizations is welcome to join. Sessions are capped at 35 participants. We will create multiple sessions if demand warrants.

What is the Time Commitment?

Each session is 2 hours. Sign up for all four or pick those most relevant to your situation.

SESSION 1:

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE



Tuesday April 5 | 11:00 EDT/5:00 CEST

- Identify your communication style
- Understand your reaction to stress and how it affects your interactions
- Learn clues to others' styles and how to tailor your communication

SESSION 3:

COACHING FOR PERFORMANCE



Tuesday May 3 | 11:00 EDT/5:00 CEST

- Understand your role in coaching team members
- Learn how to deploy coaching to increase team performance and support staff development
- Practice key coaching skills

SESSION 2:

GETTING WORK DONE THROUGH OTHERS



Tuesday April 19 | 11:00 EDT/5:00 CEST

- Build your system for prioritizing work
- Understand your personal delegating style and how to adjust your approach for others
- Reflect on your leadership brand

SESSION 4:

MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



Tuesday May 17 | 11:00 EDT/5:00 CEST

- Learn strategies for making difficult conversations (with team or your own manager) more productive
- Prepare for your own upcoming difficult conversations

“It doesn’t matter how much authority or power a feedback giver has; the receivers are in control of what they do and don’t let in, how they make sense of what they’re hearing, and whether they choose to change.”

Our Objective

To help you **engage in difficult conversations** and provide **strategies** to increase the likelihood of **your message being received**

Welcome Participants

- **Alberta Ballet:** Christiana Bennett, Jennifer Bishop, Julie Coleman, Dalma Czipott, Sarah Dick, Janis Galloway, Raven Hehr, Taryn Klassen, Aram Manukyan, Maria Marcon, Hanna Nash, Debbie Nordstrom, Leah Stewart
- **Aspen Music Festival & School:** Lenor Leeds
- **Arena Stage:** Maria Lee Lewis
- **Berkeley Rep:** Jared Hammond
- **Charlotte Ballet:** Yarina Conners
- **Dallas Symphony Orchestra:** Kim Burgan
- **Ford's Theatre:** Andrew Buchsbaum
- **Houston Grand Opera:** Scott Ipsen
- **Joffrey Ballet:** Bradley, Renner Sarah Venuti Yates
- **La Jolla Playhouse:** Ned Collins, Erica Martin
- **Opera Omaha:** Jenny Daggett
- **Pasadena Playhouse:** Kory Kelly, Jenny Slattery, Rachyl Spacca
- **Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre:** Harris Ferris
- **Richmond Symphony:** Amy Buhrman, Ashley Moore
- **Sarasota Opera:** Stephen Baker, Marco Nistico
- **The Old Globe:** Freedom Ballentine
- **The Philadelphia Orchestra:** Rebecca Kier
- **The Santa Fe Opera:** Chelsea Antrim Dennis, Andrea Fellows Fineberg, Tim Hill, Elizabeth Kellogg, Emily Moore, Mike VanAartsen
- **The Wallis:** Christine Bernardi Weil, Rachel Kilroy
- **The Washington Ballet:** Catherine Eby
- **Westport Country Playhouse:** Ivon Katherine Gonzalez Guerrero, Beth Huisking
- **Wolf Trap:** Shana Gerber, Clare Klanderma, Jo LaBrecque, Sara Shaffer
- **Young Concert Artists:** Shannon Gibbons, Erol Gurol

Our Ground Rules

Contribution

Collaboration

Confidentiality



What makes a conversation a difficult conversation?

Defining Difficult Conversations

Conversations become difficult when:



Emotions are High

“Will he be mad at me?”

“People don’t appreciate me.”

“Why doesn’t she get it?!”



Stakes are High

“We won’t achieve goals unless her behavior changes.”

“Her negative energy impacts team morale.”



Opposing Opinions

“He sees this as a strength.”

“They are expecting to get promoted.”

Source: Patterson, Kerry and Joseph Grenny and Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations. Second Edition*, 2012

Sample Conversations

Less Difficult
Conversations

More Difficult
Conversations

Relationship

Coaching/
Development/
Career

Engagement/
Retention

Feedback

Opportunity

Personal

Disciplinary

Initiated by
Manager

“I would like to learn about your background and career interests.”

“I just observed you leading the meeting...how do you think it went?”

“What excites you most about your role?”

“A key opportunity is keeping your stakeholders updated...”

“You were not selected to lead the project team.”

“I feel like you are struggling with stress...”

“You violated X policy”

Initiated by
Team Member

“How would you like to receive project updates?”

“Can we talk about my development in role and my long-term career goals?”

“I don’t feel valued.”

“I feel like you do not give me enough autonomy to make decisions.”

“Is there any opportunity for me to get a promotion or a bigger role?”

“I have been diagnosed with an illness.”

“Silence guarantees nothing will change.”

Alan Eustace
Retired Google SVP of Knowledge

Challenge Your Rationale



It will get better...

- How will the individual know to change behavior without feedback?
- What is the impact to the individual, team, and company if it doesn't get better?



I can fix it...

- If I left my team today, would team members continue to perform?
- If someone else took over my team today, would they be surprised by performance/engagement?



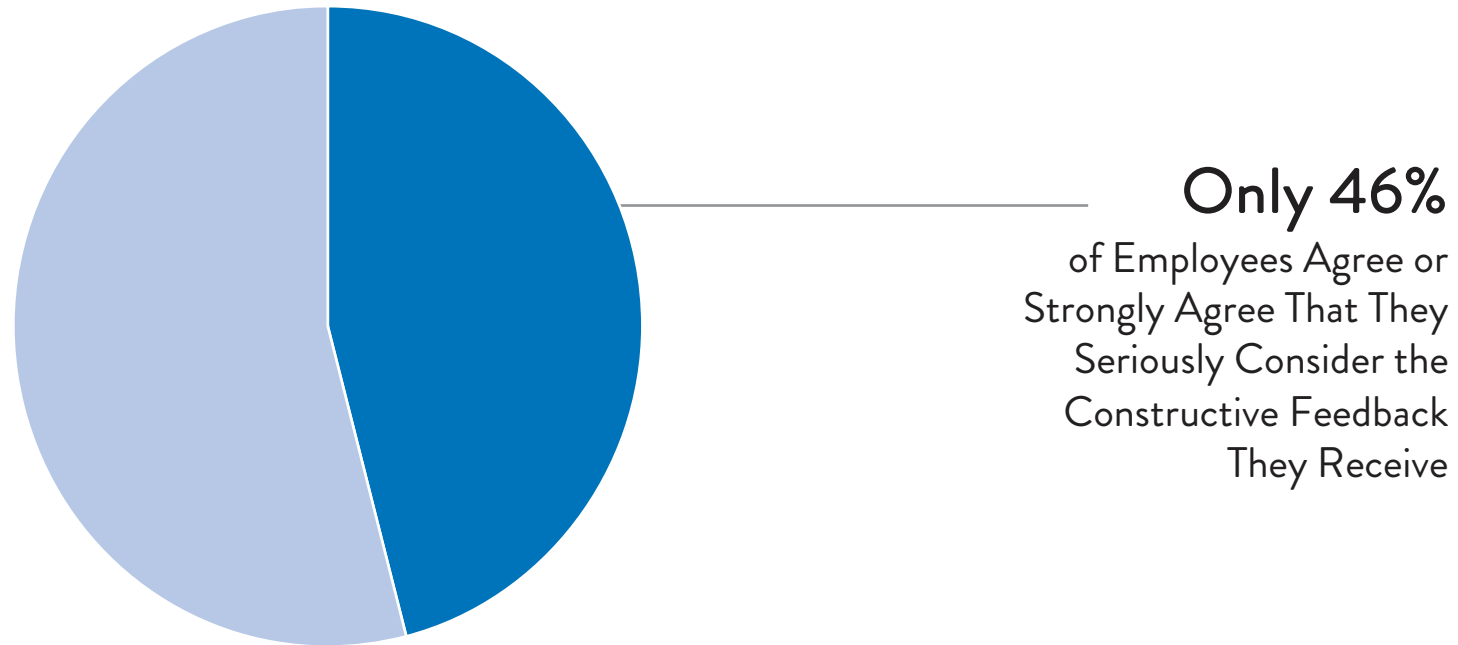
The conversation will make it worse

- What is the worst case scenario if behavior does not change? What is the worst case scenario of the difficult conversation?
- What message am I sending to the team if I tolerate this behavior?

Workbook: Take 2 minutes to capture a difficult conversation that you need to have with a direct report or colleague on your worksheet.

Team Member Role	Conversation Topic	Key Message You Want to Deliver	Why You Should Have This Conversation Now
<i>Direct Report</i>	<i>Feedback on defensiveness</i>	<i>They are starting to be seen as a poor team player – their reaction to suggestions or feedback tends to get defensive</i>	<i>Without feedback, they won't understand the need to change. Others are afraid to give this feedback so I really need to do it. If I wait until their review, it will feel punitive.</i>

Half of Employees Claim They Ignore Feedback



Only 46%
of Employees Agree or
Strongly Agree That They
Seriously Consider the
Constructive Feedback
They Receive

n = 13,617.

Source: Gartner HR Practice Work Environment Survey.

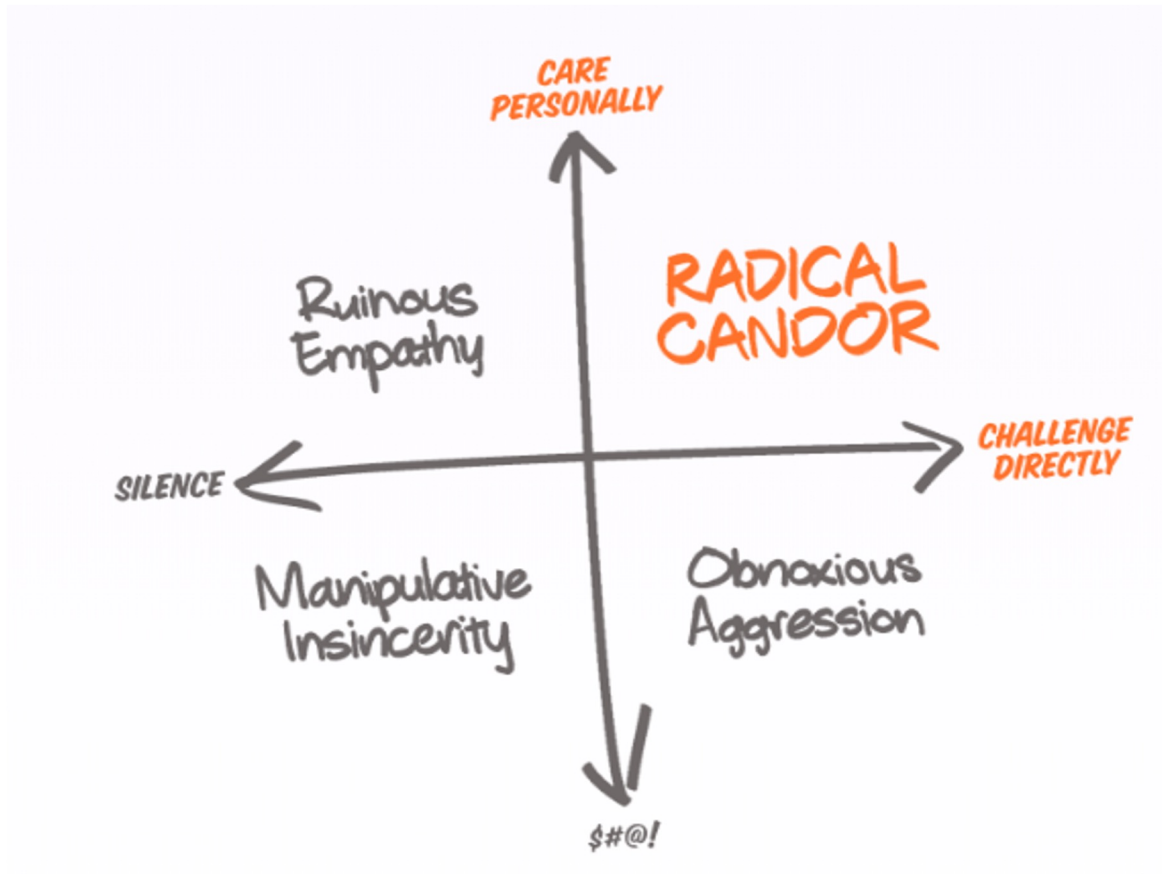


What makes a difficult conversation
unsuccessful?

Going Down the Wrong Path

- Not having a positive relationship
- Not engaging the direct report in the conversation
- Making assumptions about problems and causes
- Ignoring feelings

Care Personally, Then Challenge Directly



Source: Radical Candor, Kim Scott

Change Posture From Telling to Learning

Telling

I assume intent of actions

The focus is on what
I want to say

I react to statements

I determine next steps



Learning

We discuss impact of actions

The focus is on what
we both say and feel

We reframe statements

We determine next steps

Four Strategies

Telling

I assume intent of actions

The focus is on what
I want to say

I react to statements

I determine next steps

Learning

We discuss impact of actions

The focus is on what
we both say and feel

We reframe statements

We determine next steps

Strategy

Focus on Impact vs. Intent

Use Warming Language

Reframe the Negative

Ask High-Gain Questions

Making Assumptions About Intent

Your team member rarely asks any questions and comes to 1:1 meetings with no agenda

How does this make you feel?

What assumptions regarding intent could you infer?

Workbook: Take 2 minutes to answer these questions for your difficult conversation

Preparing for the Conversation: Separating Impact from Intent

1. What did the individual actually say or do?

At the last two team meetings, they disagreed with the majority of feedback from their colleagues. When Julie made suggestions to align with the agenda, they got really frustrated.

2. What was the impact (outcomes and feelings) on me and others?

Julie and everyone else also just withdrew from the conversation. It made me want to back off and avoid talking to them too.

3. Based on this impact, what assumption might I make about what the individual intended?

They wanted to be in charge and make the final decision, even if it didn't reflect the team's perspectives

4. What might be an alternate explanation for the action?

Maybe they are not comfortable with criticism and don't quite know how to handle it. Or perhaps they don't really understand how assertive they are coming across.

The Opening Statement

Unproductive Opening Statements

“I need to talk to you again about your collaboration problems. I know you think your ideas for that content piece are best, but you need to care about other people’s ideas and also take feedback.”

“So how do you think you performed in that meeting?”

The Opening Statement

Unproductive Opening Statements

“I need to talk to you again about your collaboration problems. I know you think your ideas for that content piece are best, but you need to care about other people’s ideas and also take feedback

“So how do you think you performed in that meeting?”

Productive Opening Statement “PICI”

Problem and examples

“I’d like to discuss some recent examples related to your receptivity to feedback. At the last two team meetings, you disagreed with the majority of feedback from your colleagues. Additionally, when your colleague made suggestions to change your content to align with the agenda, you appeared frustrated and questioned her judgement.

Actions like this can make people feel hesitant to be honest with you and can take away from the great quality of your work. This makes me feel nervous even trying to give you this feedback. I really want to hear your perspective, understand if anything I or others are doing is contributing to these actions, and discuss next steps.”

Impact

Invite

Contributions

Protecting the Innocent

Sample identities you can use
(or choose your own!)



Maya Newman
40 years
Opera Singer



Lily Welch
24 years
Major Gift Officer



Gilbert Marshall
31 years
Stage Manager



Jeanine Lawrence
38 years
Board Member

Source: [ThisPersonDoesNotExist.com](https://thispersondoesnotexist.com)

Take 3 minutes and start to craft an opening statement for the difficult conversation you need to have. Be prepared to share in a small group.

Your Opening Statement (PICI-Problem and examples, Impact, Contributions, Invite)

“I’d like to discuss some recent examples related to your receptivity to feedback. At the last two team meetings, you disagreed with the majority of feedback from your colleagues. Additionally, when your colleague made suggestions to change your content to align with the agenda, you appeared frustrated and questioned her judgement. Actions like this can make people feel hesitant to be honest with you and can take away from the great quality of your work. This makes me feel nervous even trying to give you this feedback. I really want to hear your perspective, understand if anything I or others are doing is contributing to these actions, and discuss next steps.”

Breakout Activity: Take turns sharing your opening statement and solicit feedback. (4-5 mins a person; 15 mins total)

Say “hi”—make sure your video is on and you are unmuted

Share a quick background of conversation you need to have

Share opening statement out loud (consider PICI)

Peers share feedback on opening statement

Use Warmers

	Chillers	Warmers
Focus	Is on me - I speak more than I listen	Is on the other person - I balance speaking and listening
Feelings	Ignore or dismiss feelings (Don't worry about that...; You're overreacting)	Seek out and acknowledges feelings
Body Language	Closed	Open
Verbal Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use vague and absolute language (“always” and “never”)• Overreliance on “you”• Use of the word “but”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use clear and specific language focused on observable behavior• Balance of “you” and “we”• Use of the word “and”

Help Them Feel Heard



Reflecting



Paraphrasing

Two Response Tendencies



Blame Absorbers

They fail to explore the intersection of the problem and how everyone contributes. They take the whole blame, which sometimes it means they feel terrible about it. They can easily build resentment over time.

Blame Shifters

They do not acknowledge their roles in the problem. “It’s him, not me,” “it’s the new update that screwed up everything,” “it’s a set up against me.” It’s exhausting to always have to shift blame.

Where would your team member fall?

Lift Up and Reframe

From...	To...	For Example
One Truth	Different Stories	<p>Team member: <i>I did exactly what was asked of me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I want to ensure I understand your perspective of what happened as I sense you feel strongly about it. I would also then like to share my perspective on the situation.</i></p>

Lift Up and Reframe

From...	To...	For Example
One Truth	Different Stories	<p>Team member: <i>I did exactly what was asked of me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I want to ensure I understand your perspective of what happened as I sense you feel strongly about it. I would also then like to share my perspective on the situation.</i></p>
Blame	Contributions	<p>Team member: <i>It's not my fault—James gave me the wrong deadline.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>It sounds like you are feeling falsely blamed for the outcome—that is not my intention. Rather than discussing whose fault it is, I'd like to focus on how we all contributed to the situation and what we can do differently moving forward...</i></p>

Lift Up and Reframe

From...	To...	For Example
One Truth	Different Stories	<p>Team member: <i>I did exactly what was asked of me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I want to ensure I understand your perspective of what happened as I sense you feel strongly about it. I would also then like to share my perspective on the situation.</i></p>
Blame	Contributions	<p>Team member: <i>It's not my fault—James gave me the wrong deadline.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>It sounds like you are feeling falsely blamed for the outcome—that is not my intention. Rather than discussing whose fault it is, I'd like to focus on how we all contributed to the situation and what we can do differently moving forward...</i></p>
Accusation/ Intent	Impact	<p>Team member: <i>You don't trust me. You always check-up on me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I get the sense that you feel angry about what I did, which is upsetting to me. I trust you and it was not my intention give you the impression I don't trust you. Can you tell me more about how my actions impacted you?</i></p>

Lift Up and Reframe

From...	To...	For Example
One Truth	Different Stories	<p>Team member: <i>I did exactly what was asked of me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I want to ensure I understand your perspective of what happened as I sense you feel strongly about it. I would also then like to share my perspective on the situation.</i></p>
Blame	Contributions	<p>Team member: <i>It's not my fault—James gave me the wrong deadline.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>It sounds like you are feeling falsely blamed for the outcome—that is not my intention. Rather than discussing whose fault it is, I'd like to focus on how we all contributed to the situation and what we can do differently moving forward...</i></p>
Accusation/ Intent	Impact	<p>Team member: <i>You don't trust me. You always check-up on me.</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>I get the sense that you feel angry about what I did, which is upsetting to me. I trust you and it was not my intention give you the impression I don't trust you. Can you tell me more about how my actions impacted you?</i></p>
Focusing on the Negative	Contrasting Statements (Don't vs. Do)	<p>Team member: <i>How can I continue working on the project when I know no one thinks I am good enough?</i></p> <p>Manager: <i>This conversation is not about the value of your work, of which there is a lot, but instead around how we can ensure the work you put in targets the parts that will have the most impact for our mission.</i></p>

What Could be a Reframe Response?

Situation

Your direct report starts your weekly check-in with this opening statement:

Direct Report Statement

“I really want to understand why I was overlooked for promotion and Emma got one. I work really hard and was doing everything she did, but maybe that doesn’t matter.”

Reframe Response

?

From...	To...
One Truth	Different Stories
Blame	Contributions
Accusation/ Intent	Impact
Focusing on the Negative	Contrasting Statements (Don't vs. Do)

Use High-Gain Questions

High-Gain Questions



Open-Ended: Broaden the conversation



Targeted: Narrows the field of possibilities to make the question more concrete



Visual: Creates an experience with the question



Thought Provoking: Removes anticipated constraints on conversation topics

Use High-Gain Questions

High-Gain Questions



Open-Ended: Broaden the conversation



Targeted: Narrows the field of possibilities to make the question more concrete



Visual: Creates an experience with the question



Thought Provoking: Removes anticipated constraints on conversation topics

For Example: Low-Gain to High-Gain

- *Do you feel disengaged?*
- *So I guess you want me to stop asking for updates?*



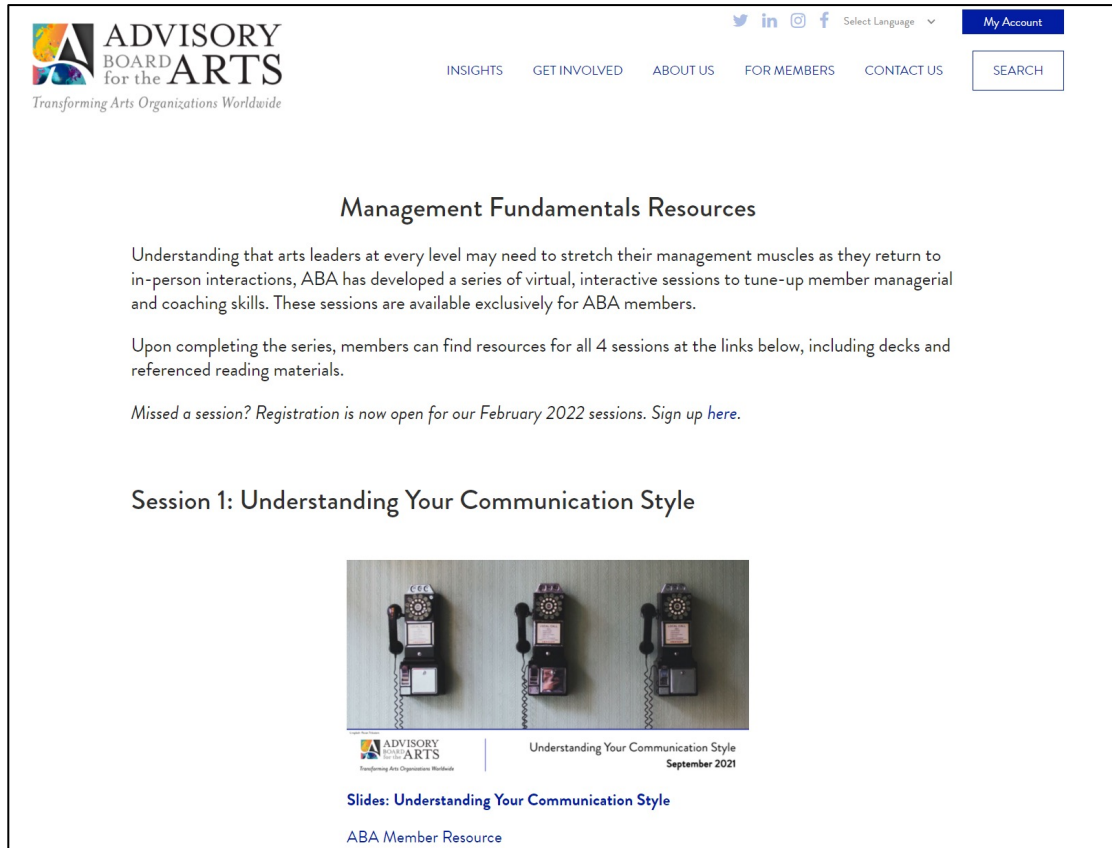
- *If we could change one thing to increase your engagement tomorrow, what would it be?*
- *What two actions would you suggest if you were in my shoes?*



Are there any other strategies for managing difficult conversations you want to share?

Wrapping Up

Materials From All Sessions on Our Website



The screenshot shows the website header with the logo "ADVISORY BOARD for the ARTS" and the tagline "Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide". Navigation links include "INSIGHTS", "GET INVOLVED", "ABOUT US", "FOR MEMBERS", and "CONTACT US". A search bar and a "My Account" button are also visible. The main content area is titled "Management Fundamentals Resources" and contains the following text:

Understanding that arts leaders at every level may need to stretch their management muscles as they return to in-person interactions, ABA has developed a series of virtual, interactive sessions to tune-up member managerial and coaching skills. These sessions are available exclusively for ABA members.

Upon completing the series, members can find resources for all 4 sessions at the links below, including decks and referenced reading materials.

Missed a session? Registration is now open for our February 2022 sessions. Sign up here.

Session 1: Understanding Your Communication Style

The session image shows three vintage payphones. Below the image is the text: "ADVISORY BOARD for the ARTS Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide | Understanding Your Communication Style September 2021".

Slides: [Understanding Your Communication Style](#)

ABA Member Resource

<https://www.advisoryboardarts.com/management-fundamentals-resources>

To Finish

From the Sessions

- Complete preparations for your difficult conversation
- Continue building your systems for coaching, delegating
- Check in on your leadership brand and energy quarterly
- Create your “user manual” for your teams

For Us

- Provide feedback on today’s session using the poll
- Give feedback on the full series

Managing Difficult Conversations Worksheet

team member Role	Conversation Topic	Key Message You Want to Deliver	Why You Should Have This Conversation Now

Preparing for the Conversation: Separating Impact from Intent

1. What did the individual actually say or do?
2. What was the impact (outcomes and feelings) on me and others?
3. Based on this impact, what assumption might I make about what the individual intended?
4. What might be an alternate explanation for the action?

