ADVISORY
BOARD
for the ARTS

Transforming Arts Organizations Worldwide

Managing Difficult Conversations

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.

SESSION 1:
UNDERSTANDING YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

- 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

- 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 5:
RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING BIASES

- Understand concepts of unconscious bias
- Identify and practice awareness of bias in the workplace and recruitment
- Practice calling out biases and prepare apologies for when you make a mistake

SESSION 2:
BUILDING YOUR PERSONAL OPERATING MODEL

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

SESSION 4:
MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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

SESSION 6:
NORMING YOUR TEAM AROUND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Understand the importance of individuality and how to set and enforce team norms
- Encourage team reflection and input
- Share power to boost team trust

Visit us online: www.advisoryarts.com

"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."

Douglas Stone, Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

Our Objective

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

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
Direct Report	*Feedback on defensiveness*	*They are starting to be seen as a poor team player – their reaction to suggestions or feedback tends to get defensive*	*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.*

Half of Employees Claim They Ignore Feedback
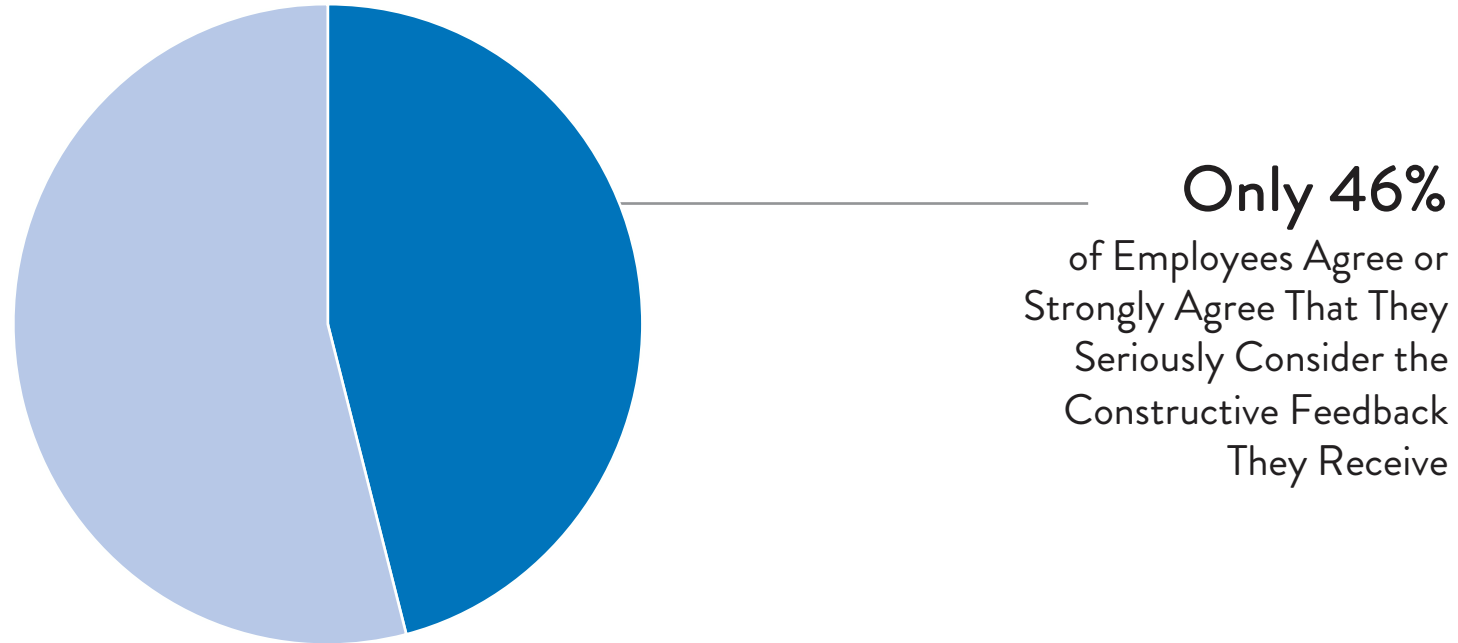
Only 46%

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

n = 13,617.
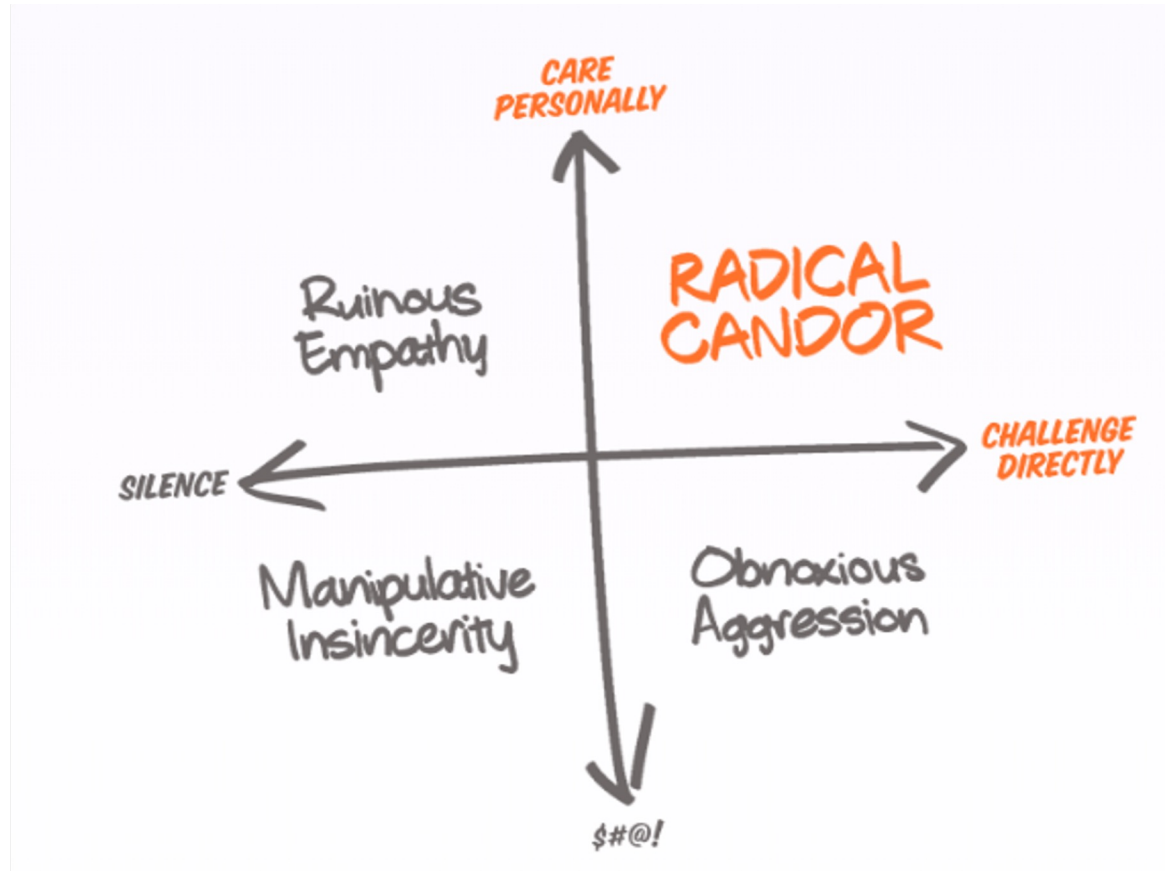Source: Gartner HR Practice Work Environment Survey.

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		Learning
I assume **intent** of actions		We discuss **impact** of actions
The focus is on what **I want to say**		The focus is on what **we both say and feel**
I **react** to statements		We **reframe** statements
I determine next steps		**We determine** next steps

Four Strategies

Telling	Learning	Strategy
I assume intent of actions	We discuss impact of actions	Focus on Impact vs. Intent
The focus is on what I want to say	The focus is on what we both say and feel	Use Warming Language
I react to statements	We reframe statements	Reframe the Negative
I determine next steps	We determine next steps	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 <u>receptivity to feedback.</u> 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 <u>can make people feel hesitant to be honest with you</u> and can take away from the great quality of your work. This makes me <u>feel nervous</u> even trying to give you this feedback. <u>I really want to hear your perspective</u>, understand if anything I or others are <u>doing is contributing to these</u> 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://blogs.oregonstate.edu/cassidieblog/2019/11/24/personas-personas-personas/

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	• Use vague and absolute language ("always" and "never") • Overreliance on "you" • **Use of the word "but"**	• 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	**Team member:** *I did exactly what was asked of me.* **Manager:** *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.*

Lift Up and Reframe

From…	To…	For Example
One Truth	Different Stories	**Team member:** *I did exactly what was asked of me.* **Manager:** *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.*
Blame	Contributions	**Team member:** *It's not my fault—James gave me the wrong deadline.* **Manager:** *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…*

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Accusation/ Intent	Impact	**Team member:** You don't trust me. You always check-up on me. **Manager:** *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?*

Lift Up and Reframe

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Focusing on the Negative	Contrasting Statements (Don't vs. Do)	**Team member:** *How can I continue working on the project when I know no one thinks I am good enough?* **Manager:** *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.*

What Could be a Reframe Response?

Situation	Direct Report Statement	Reframe Response
Your direct report starts your weekly check-in with this opening 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."*	?

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

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For Example: Low-Gain to High-Gain

- *Do you feel disengaged?*
- *So I guess you want me to stop asking for updates?*
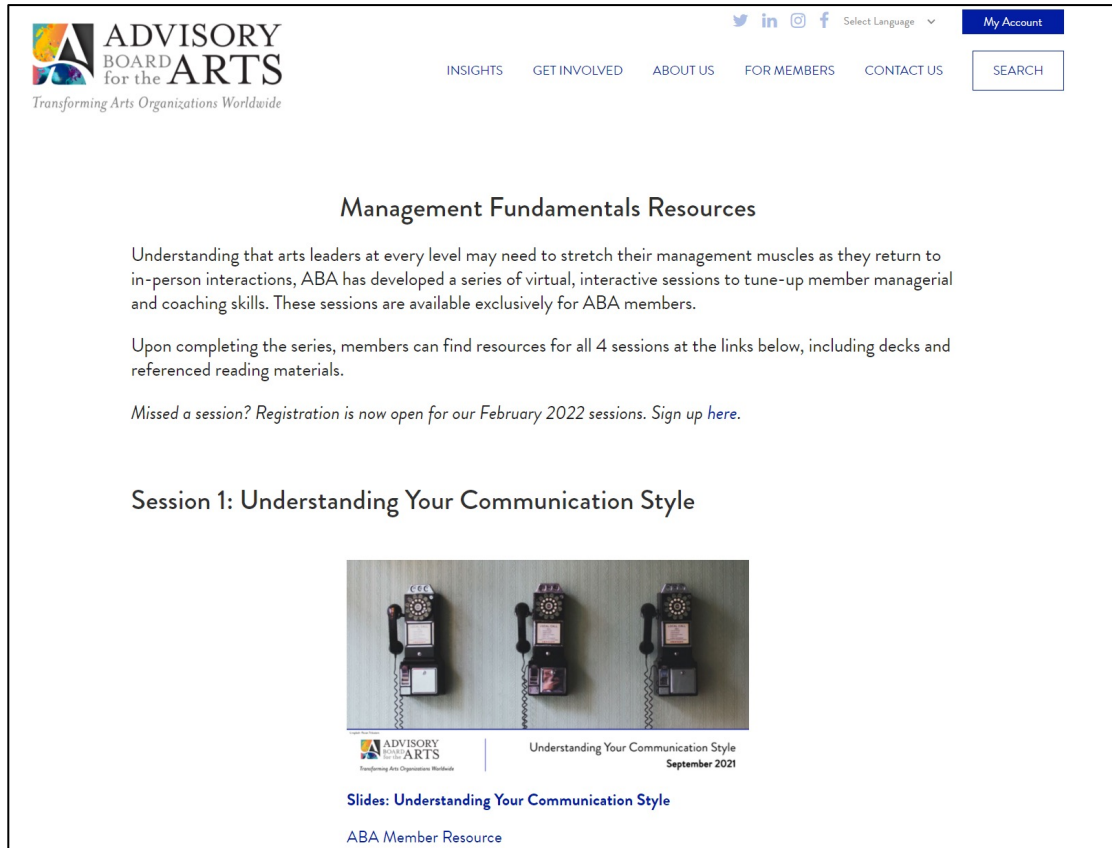
- *If we could change one thing to increase your engagement tomorrow, what would it be?*
- *What two actions would you suggest if you were in my shoes?*

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

Next Steps

Materials From All Sessions on Our Website

Reflections

From the Sessions So Far...
- 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

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?

Managing Difficult Conversations Worksheet

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

Potential Reactions

Potential Reframes and High-Gain Questions