

# **GE Foundation Workplace Skills Program**

## **Module Eight Having Difficult Conversations**

### **Participant Booklet**

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## **Introduction to Module Eight Having Difficult Conversations**

Difficult conversations are anything we find hard to talk about with another person. There are a number of reasons that make certain conversations difficult and an easy conversation can become a difficult conversation very quickly. There are also times when it is important not to engage in a difficult conversation and let it go. This knowledge can help inform your approach to difficult conversations as well as influence the skills and strategies you will use.

Whenever you have a difficult conversation with someone, there are usually three conversations going on at the same time: the “what happened” conversation, the “feelings” conversation, and the “identity conversation.” There are also a number of stages to a difficult conversation as well as specific skills and strategies that will help you participate effectively in these hard discussions. When researchers have studied people who are very successful at difficult conversations they discovered two things: one, problems are solved and two, relationships are maintained and improved.

This module will help you understand the dynamics and reasons why these conversations are so difficult. It will also help you gain some experience in the skills and strategies that are necessary to ensure these conversations go well. We will practice these skills and strategies through the use of numerous role-plays and coaching. Participants will have opportunities to reflection on their attempts at having difficult conversations and learn strategies for dealing with stressful situations and strained relationships.

## What is a Difficult Conversation?

- Difficult conversations are anything we find hard to talk about with another person.
- It could be:
  - Telling someone bad news
  - Asking for a raise at work
  - Giving someone negative feedback about their behavior
  - Ending a relationship
  - Talking about tension points in a relationship
  - Asking for something you need
  - Confronting someone about a problem
  - Making decisions about finances
  - Talking to an instructor about frustrations
  - Challenging a grade on an assignment or test
  - Raising issues with a supervisor or someone in a power position

## Sharing Personal Experiences

Think of a difficult conversation you have participated in within the past six months. Write a few notes related to the questions below. Turn to your partner and share your personal experience about this difficult conversation.

**What was the conversation about?**

**What went well?**

**What did not go well? Why?**

## Why Certain Conversations Are Difficult

- Emotions are usually strong.
- People have very different views about the topic.
- It can impact our self-esteem.
- There is real uncertainty about how it will turn out.
- People worry about it going badly and hurting the relationship.
- Typically people care about the issue and the person involved.
- People have few experiences or models of these conversations going well.
- Often times there is a power difference between the people.

## Negative Self-Talk Related to Difficult Conversations

Self-Talk That Encourages Avoidance

“This problem will only continue anyway.”

“I am not sure I have the courage to take this on.”

“These negative feelings are not going to go away even if I talk to him.”

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Self-Talk That Cautions Confrontation

“The problem is only going to get worse if I confront her”

“I may hurt the person unintentionally.”

“She may attack and hurt me.”

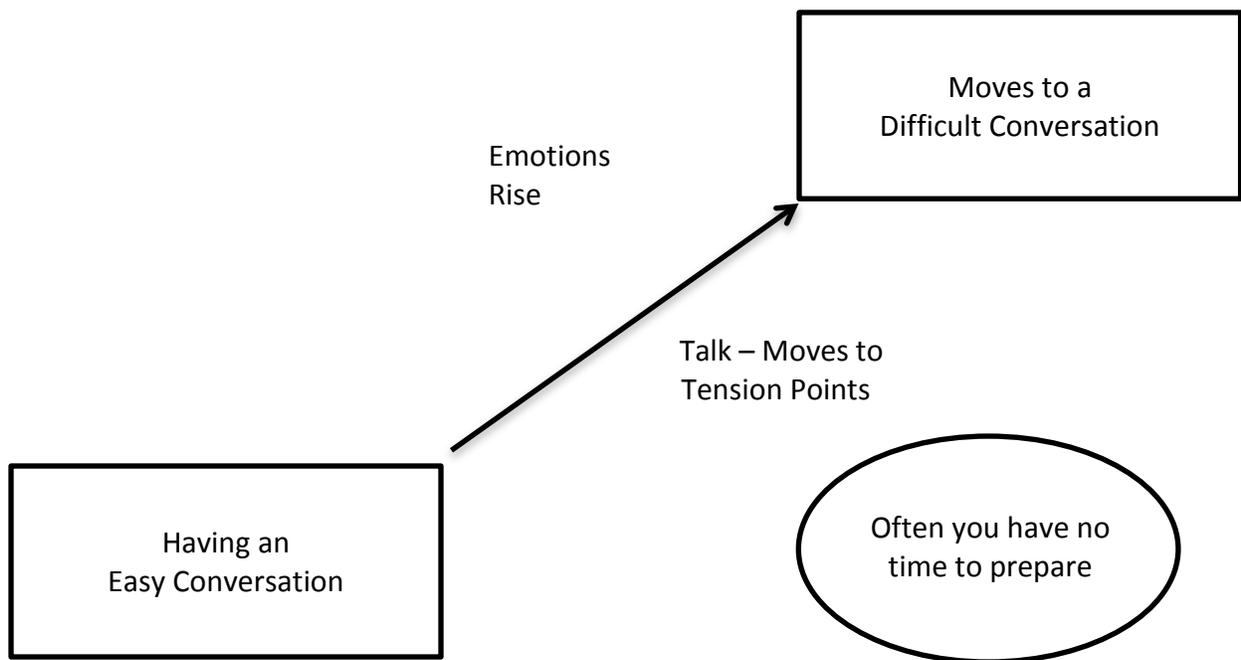
“These conversations usually go bad for me.”

**This self-talk can stop you from having difficult conversations.**

## When Conversations Move From Easy to Difficult

People typically:

1. Go Silent
2. Drop Hints
3. Withdraw
4. Use Force  
(cut people off, argue, attack ideas, insult, harshly debate, threaten)



Source: Patterson, K., Grenny, J., MacMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2005). *Crucial conversations*. New York: McGraw Hill.

## Let It Go

When you are considering having a difficult conversation with someone, it is important to step back and think about whether or not you should stop and let it go. There are times when having a difficult conversation is a bad idea.

They include:

- when the tension or conflict is within you, not between you
- when there is another way to resolve the tension other than talking about it
- when you are not clear on your purpose in having the difficult conversation
- when emotions are very high

## Continued Conversation With Your Partner

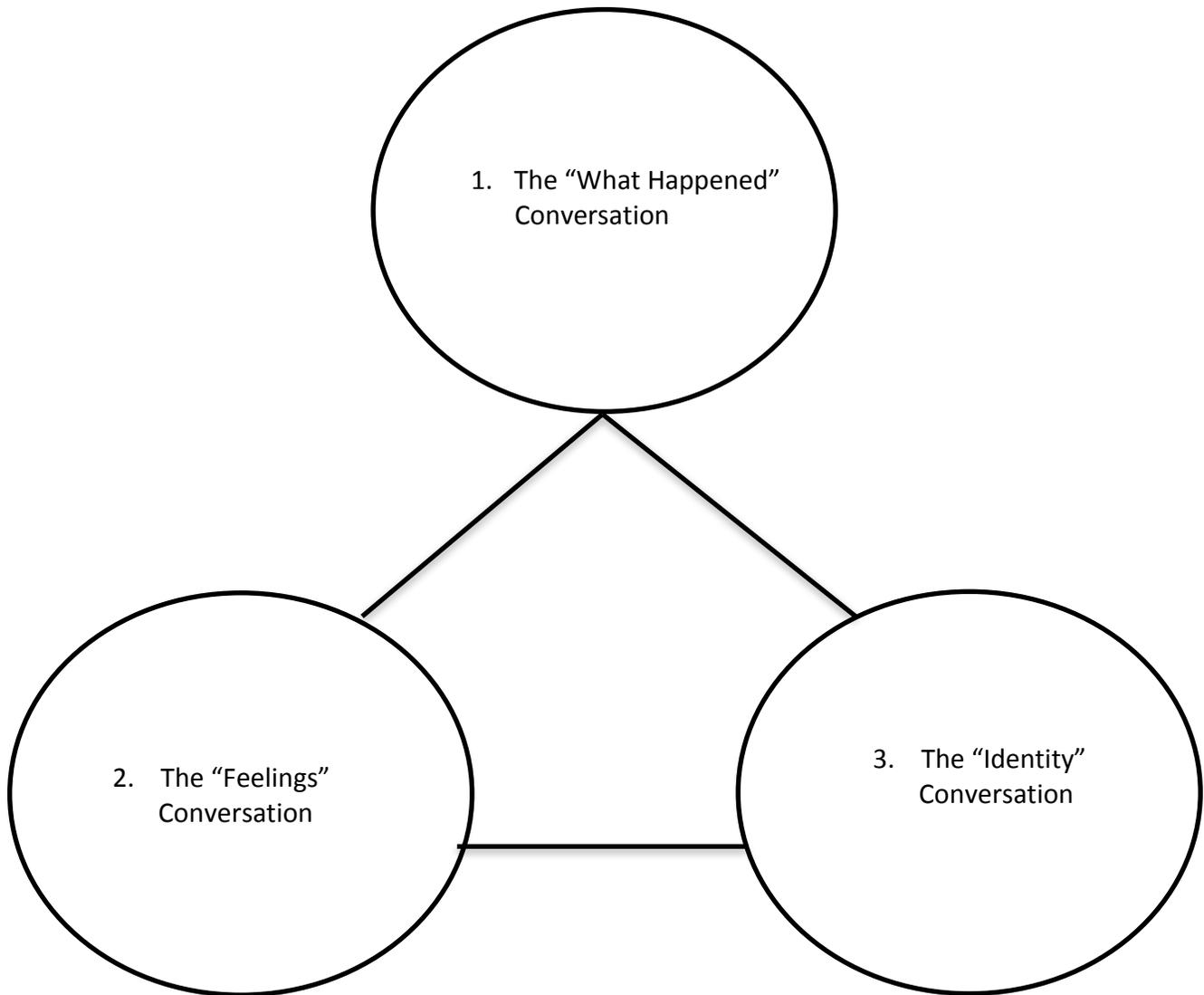
**What made your conversation difficult?**

**What self-talk was going on in your head before, during, and after the conversation?**

**Can you think of a time when you decided to let an issue go and not have a difficult conversation? Why?**

## Three Conversations Going On

Whenever you have a difficult conversation with someone, there are usually three conversations going on at the same time. You need to pay attention and sort out all three conversations.



Source: Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. New York: Penguin Books

### **The “What’s Happened” Conversation**

This typically involves people disagreeing about what really happened or what should have happened. It is based on the assumption that I am right and you are wrong and it often leads to arguing and debating. This is where people spend most of their time during difficult conversations. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who’s to blame? Who did their part and who did not? This conversation is often filled with many assumptions that are not true, which increases the complexity of the problem. People often get locked into their story being the right story and seeing the other person as “the problem.”

### **The “Feeling” Conversation**

This conversation is about what we should do with our emotions and how to identify and manage strong feelings when they arise. And feelings will come to the surface in a difficult conversation. People talk to themselves about remaining rational during difficult conversations and often struggle with expressing and understanding their feelings. Bringing up emotions can be a risk and it can make people feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. The two hardest and most challenging tasks in a difficult conversation are expressing feelings and listening.

### **The “Identity” Conversation**

This conversation is often under the surface, a quiet conversation we have inside ourselves. It is about who we are and how we see ourselves. There are many identity questions we ask ourselves before, during, and after difficult conversations. We may question how the difficult conversation will change our self-esteem or self-image. In other words, will it change my sense of who I am? Will it expose my self-doubts? How will people see me afterwards? How will I see myself afterwards? These questions and concerns are especially relevant when difficult conversations do not go well.

# Role Plays

Form triads. Two people engage in a conversation. The third person gives feedback on what helped and what hurt the conversation.

## Role Play One

Riley and Casey are friends. Riley promised to go to a party on Friday night with Casey. At the last minute Riley backed out without giving a real reason. Casey did not feel comfortable going to the party alone. They missed a great opportunity to break in with a new group of friends. It is Monday morning and Casey is upset and wants to talk about it with Riley.

## Role Play Two

Dakota and Sidney are friends and classmates. They are working on a group project together that is due within a week. Dakota is not doing his share of the work. He keeps showing up without his part of the work completed. Sidney is not happy and is tired of carrying the load, but they need a good mark on the project which is 10% of their overall grade.

## Role Play Three

Taylor is an employee at Arrows Supermarket and Peyton is the supervisor. Taylor has been working at Arrows for two years. Peyton routinely asks Taylor to cover shifts for other employees, to do the more difficult tasks, and to go the extra mile. Taylor wants to talk to Peyton about a raise. Peyton is known for not giving raises to employees.

## Role Play Observer Feedback

Name	Name
<b>What the person said or did that HELPED the conversation</b>	<b>What the person said or did that HELPED the conversation</b>
<b>What the person said or did that HURT the conversation</b>	<b>What the person said or did that HURT the conversation</b>

## During Difficult Conversations

“Don’t take the conversation away from the other person and fill the airtime with your stories. This practice of taking the conversation away from the other person and making it about ourselves goes on every day and is a huge relationship killer and a waste of time.”

Scott, S. (2004). *Fierce conversations*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group.

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“What I most regretted in my life were my silences. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you. We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid.”

Lorde, A. (Poet)

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“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

## **Six Stages of a Difficult Conversation**

1. Getting Started
2. Inviting the Person to Participate (Your Opening Statement)
3. Creating the Third Story  
(The Core of the Conversation)
4. Listening Deeply
5. Speaking With Clarity and Conviction
6. Solving Problems Collaboratively  
(Reaching Agreement on the Way Forward)

## Getting Started

Your first decision is to consider whether or not you want to proceed with the difficult conversation. Is there another more effective way to solve the problem? Should you just let it go because the issue is not important enough and/or the relationship risk may be much greater than the possible gain?

### Activity 4 Getting Started

Think about a time that you had a difficult conversation that went badly. If you had your time back what would you do differently? Why? Would you even have the conversation?

## Inviting the Person to Participate

- Once you have decided to initiate the difficult conversation it is very important to be clear on your purpose or intention. What is it that you are hoping to achieve or change by having this conversation?
- It is also very important to write out and refine the content of your opening statement. This is where many difficult conversations begin to fail. It is very hard to recover from a poorly crafted and poorly delivered opening statement. Your opening statement can be viewed as an honest invitation or it can be perceived as a threat that actually shuts down the other person. This is why it is critical to write down and rehearse your opening statement until you are satisfied that it communicates exactly what you want to say. Your opening statement has the greatest chance to influence a positive result. It can also be the most stressful part of the conversation.
- In your opening statement it is important to do the following four things:
  - Describe your purpose (mutual understanding, problem solving)
  - Talk about the need to figure out how to go forward.
  - Clearly share your own view of the problem or issue.
  - Invite them to share their perspective or story.

# Framework for the Opening Statement in a Difficult Conversation

## Invitation to Engage

- I was wondering if we can talk about \_\_\_\_\_
- I am not sure I am correct in my thinking about \_\_\_\_\_
- I want to check with you about how \_\_\_\_\_

## Expressing Your Purpose

- I want us to express our different points of view about \_\_\_\_\_
- I intend to hear how you see the problem
- I want to reach agreement on how to go forward with you

## Describing the Gap

At this point it is important to describe the gap between what has happened and what was expected

- Example – “I have not seen you follow through or complete assigned tasks between team meetings. For example, at the last two team meetings you agreed to find information about the construction site and bring recommendations to the team based on this information. I am beginning to wonder about your commitment to the team and your ability to do this work. All team members need to carry their fair share of the workload.”

## The Question

End you opening statement with a question that invites the other person to present how they see the problem. For example, “Do I have this right or am I missing something?” **NOW LISTEN!**

# Practice Opening Statements

Work in triads. Go back to the role plays on page 13. Each person picks one of the role plays and writes an opening statement that includes the following components. Then, practice delivering your opening statements.

## Invitation to Engage

## Express Your Purpose

## Describe the Gap

## Ask the Question

## Creating the Third Story

- Creating the third story is a critical part of moving the difficult conversation forward and in a positive direction.
- You have your story and they have their story. It is important not to get locked into your stories.
- You need to shape or develop a “third story” that describes the problem as a difference.
- Example – “We have different experiences or views on this. I am questioning your commitment and ability to do the work and you are telling me other people on the team and in the company are not cooperating in providing the information you requested. Tell me more about this lack of cooperation.”
- Once you create the “third story” both people feel their individual story is acknowledged and it is being considered as a real part of the conversation. The “third story” helps to create buy-in and a sense that we need to solve this problem together. As long as you stay in your story and they stay in their story, it will be difficult to move the conversation forward.

## Practice Creating “The Third Story”

Form new triads. Two people are in the conversation and the third is observing. The third person is responsible for creating the “third story” when the two people stop talking.

### Role Play Four

Claire is a student. Derek is an instructor. Claire has received a low grade on an assignment. She is caught off guard since all her other assignments have received good grades. The instructor has a reputation of marking harder as the semester unfolds and is known for rarely changing marks. Claire has asked for a meeting with Derek.

### Role Play Five

Jesse is a foreman who wants to be liked by his team and he avoids confrontations. He goes to Sage, his supervisor, and informs him about some issues that are developing. While he has good trades people, their work is slipping and not up to quality. Jesse wants Sage to go reprimand the workers. Sage believes it is Jesse’s responsibility to deal with problems on his team.

### Role Play Six

Jenna is a 16-year old who has proven that she is a safe and defensive driver. She has plans to meet friends on Saturday night. The weather is turning bad and the temperature is dropping. The forecast is not good. Jenna wants to go driving anyway and meet her friends. Patricia, her mom, does not think that this is a good decision.

## Observer Template

The observer writes notes on story one and story two. Then, the observer creates the third story and shares it with the people in the role play.

**Story One**

**Story Two**

**Third Story**

## Listening Deeply

- In the early stages of a difficult conversation, following your open statement, it is very important to listen more than you talk. Use your active listening skills, with the intention of understanding their story, before elaborating on your story.
- Ask open-ended questions and gather as much information as you can about what they see happening, how they are feeling, and how they view themselves in this situation. This will help to touch on each of the three conversations (what happened, feelings, identity).
- Ask targeted questions at times so the person has an opportunity to clarify what they are saying. This will help to avoid you misunderstanding or misinterpreting pieces of their story.
- Listen to your internal voice. What is your intuition or gut feeling telling you about what you are really hearing and what you need to say?
- It is important to understand that acknowledging you hear and understand someone does not mean that you agree with them. Example: “I can understand why you could see a lack of recognition for employees as the problem in this company. I see it differently, I \_\_\_\_\_.”

## Speaking With Clarity and Conviction

- The other person needs to hear your story. When you have the opportunity to elaborate on your story, you need to talk about:
  - What you see happening
  - Why you see it the way you do
  - How you feel about the situation or problem
  - What you value related to the content of the conversation
- It is important for you to have the courage to be honest and say what needs to be said. Difficult conversations are often about standing up for yourself and being assertive about expressing your wants and needs.
- During the early stages of “telling your story” say what is at the heart of the matter for you.
  1. What is most important to me is \_\_\_\_\_
  2. What I’m really feeling is \_\_\_\_\_
  3. For me, this is about \_\_\_\_\_
- When telling your story you need to be very clear. Do not use vague language and generalizations such as “always” and “never.” Your primary role at this point is to help them understand you, so it is important to check in with them for their understanding.
  - What are you hearing me say?
  - What is the main point I am trying to get across?
  - Is there anything you don’t understand in what I am saying?
- Try not to present your story as “the truth” or the right interpretation of what is happening. Your tone, as well as your words, can break down communication during a difficult conversation. Again, remind the other person that it is the way you see it and it is okay to see the problem differently. At this point, it is important to talk about the “third story,” a combination of both your stories.

## **Practice Listening Deeply and Speaking Clearly**

### **Role Play Seven**

Jamie is a basketball player on the college team and he is frustrated that he is not getting enough court time and thinks that he and a few of the other players are being treated unfairly. Certain players are playing as individuals and are concerned about scoring, while others are focused on teamwork. Dallas, the coach, feels that Jamie is not giving his best effort and that he has an arrogant attitude. The coach has scheduled a meeting with Jamie.

### **Role Play Eight**

Kerry is the foreman on the factory floor in a car plant. He talks negatively and criticizes people in front of other workers. He is tough and demanding and threatens to fire people. The power of being a foreman has gone to his head. He thinks he can get away with pushing people around. The work group has identified Jordon as the spokesperson to go speak with Kerry and to call him on the bullying. Jordon's father is the CFO with the company. Jordon is not worried about the job because he is going back to college.

### **Role Play Nine**

Robin wants to travel and work in South America. She believes strongly that people need to reach out and help those who are less fortunate. She is a risk taker and loves adventure. Her friend Jo thinks this is very dangerous and that Robin is naïve about the possible things that could go wrong. Jo is worried about robbery, Robin getting sick and not having access to proper medical care, hostage taking, and her simply disappearing. Jo wants Robin to stay home and do "good work" within her own country.

# Observer Notes

Use the following questions to guide your observations.

Listener	Speaker
<p>Where did the listener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use open-ended questions</li><li>• Paraphrase</li><li>• Summarize</li><li>• Check for thinking and feeling</li><li>• Follow the speaker's story</li></ul>	<p>Where did the speaker:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clearly explain their viewpoint</li><li>• Express their feelings</li><li>• Share what they value</li><li>• Explain their thinking</li><li>• Highlight what is most important</li></ul>

## Solving Problems Collaboratively – Agreeing on the Way Forward

- At the stage where you have both listened to one another and you have reached a common understanding of the essence of the problem, it is now time to move into problem solving. Both of you need to focus on finding solutions and talk more about the present and the future versus the past.
- Brainstorming creative ways to solve the problem is a good strategy when you move into problem solving. You want to bring as many options as possible into your conversation. Remember the rules for brainstorming: no discussion or judgment about ideas, record all ideas, generate many ideas, wild ideas are okay, build on each other's thinking.
- Following the brainstorming session, where possible solutions have been identified, you both need to step back and begin to discuss what options or solutions meet both your concerns. This part of a difficult conversation will likely require compromise and paying attention to your own needs as well as the needs of the other person.
- You may get stuck at this point in the discussion because not every difficult conversation can be resolved by mutual agreement. If you get stuck and cannot agree on a solution or the path forward ask the following questions:
  1. What is still missing?
  2. Have we considered all our possible options?
  3. Do we need to consult someone else to help us find a solution?
  4. Why are we stuck?
  5. What changes can we make to any of the promising options that will satisfy both of us?
  6. Where else can we compromise?

- At this stage, you may need to discuss the following critical question:  
Are we both prepared to walk away and accept the consequences of not reaching an agreement?

This discussion can often break the impasse and people will back off on holding tight to certain options. You may need to discuss what the natural consequences of no agreement will be.

- Hopefully at this late stage in the difficult conversation you can reach agreement on a solution that is fair and workable for both people. You need to be very clear what the agreement means for new individual behavior and follow-up actions. In other words, this agreement means:
  - we both will \_\_\_\_\_
  - you will \_\_\_\_\_
  - I will \_\_\_\_\_
- Plan to meet for a follow-up conversation within 30 days to ensure there is movement on the agreement. A difficult conversation may need a number of meetings to solve the problem and establish new behavior patterns.

## Solving Problems Collaboratively

Where did you observe participants engaged in ...

Creative Brainstorming	
Discussing Options	
Compromising	
Trying to Get Unstuck	
Pushing for a Final Win-Win Agreement	

## Strategies for Difficult Conversations

1. Stop arguing about who's right. Explore each other's story. Arguing is not helpful, it simply increases anger, hurt, and frustration and interferes with the clarity of your thinking.
2. Avoid thinking that "they are the problem." Catch yourself thinking "they are selfish, they are controlling" and remember "they have their own story."
3. Acknowledge the different stories during the conversation. We each take in different information, which become our observations. We then reach our own conclusions based on different interpretations.
4. Move from "I'm right" to "I'm trying to understand." People almost never change without first feeling understood. To get anywhere in a disagreement we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense.
5. Never assume you know a person's intention. It is a critical and common mistake when people are trying to resolve their disagreement. Our assumptions are frequently wrong and we often think the worst when engaged in discussing tension points in a relationship.
6. Abandon blame. It is more important to understand how each person contributed to creating the problem. Blame is often a big issue in many difficult conversations. Focusing on blame usually limits our ability to learn what is really causing the problem. Blame is about judging and looking to the past. We need to focus on understanding and looking forward for solutions.

7. When there is a need to have a difficult conversation with someone, there are always ways in which you contributed to the problem. Both people must talk about and take responsibility for how they are contributing to the conflict.
8. People need to identify their feelings during difficult conversations. Recognizing our feelings is often challenging and more of a problem than people acknowledge. Feelings are very good at disguising themselves, especially those feelings that create discomfort.
9. Many of us cannot identify our own feelings because we have learned somewhere along the line that the feelings of others are more important than ours. Avoid this thinking trap. Expressing your feelings is as important as understanding their emotions.
10. Encourage the other person to express their feelings before you start down the road of problem solving.
11. The path to changing your feelings is through changing your thinking. As long as you continue to think that someone is intentionally trying to hurt you this thinking will greatly influence your feelings. It is important to monitor your thinking and check the assumptions you are making.
12. We all have our hot buttons or sensitivities that can trigger quick reactions. It is important for you to know your hot spots and try to remain calm and stay balanced when someone pushes your buttons.
13. If the stress or tension is rising during your conversation, take a break and regroup. Talk with one another about what's happening at the time (tension rising or an impasse) and come back to the conversation later.

14. Beware of one-sided and “either-or” thinking. This is where people fall into the trap of the solution needing to be either \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_. Also, the solution has got to be \_\_\_\_\_. This way of thinking is about winning or losing.
  
15. If you find yourself hesitating to engage in a difficult conversation, examine what is going on inside your own personal story. Our stories create meaning for us and strong feelings or judgments. Get in touch with these feelings and closely examine your story.
  
16. Try to reach a win-win agreement on the solution to the problem. Do not assume silence or going along with suggestions is an agreement. Schedule a follow-up meeting to talk to the other person about what’s changed related to the agreement.

Strategy	Why This Strategy?

## Summary Thoughts

1. What are your most important lessons learned in this module on difficult conversations?

2. What will you find most challenging in difficult conversations?

3. What is one part of difficult conversations that you are going to work on in the next 30 days?