Effective Conversations Strategies

Effective conversations are a structured and systematic approach to addressing external issues that can socially divide units; they include verbal communication in the form of facilitated discussions that are respectful, objectives-driven, and learning-focused.

Effective conversations are important when something is socially dividing a unit. For example, political differences are causing tension and preventing efficiency. These conversations are structured to provide an open, respectful space for all group members to be heard. Effective conversations strive toward achieving peace and harmony for the entire group.

Additionally, strategies for having effective conversations can be applied to most any topic where there may be differences in opinions, perspectives, or experiences within a group or unit. The structure of the effective conversation framework helps participants learn about themselves and their group members, clears up misunderstandings, and give voice to unheard or misunderstood feelings and emotions.

Understand

- Psychological safety
    - the ability for an individual to believe they can express themselves freely, without fear of negative consequences such as rejection, criticism, punishment, or reprisal. It is a sense of being comfortable, taking risks, asking questions, being vulnerable, and sharing feedback without fear of negative consequence to self-image, status, group membership, or career (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990; Murray et al., 2022; Veestraeten et al., 2013).
    - During a group setting or a one-on-one meeting, individuals feel comfortable and safe to discuss whatever is necessary without fear of being judged
- Active listening
    - a communication skill that consists of three main components: a) nonverbal involvement, which consists of nonverbal cues such as posture and eye contact that conveys to the speaker that the listener is paying attention to their message; b) restating or paraphrasing the speaker's message; c) asking questions that encourage elaboration on the part of the speaker (Weger et al., 2014).
    - During a discussion, active listening skills can be used to show the individual(s) you are present in the conversation.
- Pause strategy
    - a communication technique where the speaker takes a breath or allows for a moment of pause at key points in their efforts to communicate. This pause, where applicable to effective communication, can create space for the speaker and listeners to regain a mindful approach about communication (Links et al., 2021).
    - During a group discussion, the pause strategy can be used as a time for reflection and gathering thoughts before continuing the conversation.

Effective Conversation Strategies

Prepare

- The mindset
    - Prepare the mindset by collecting information and consulting with subject experts on the topic to understand the scope of the issue. Examples include the following:
        - Look at command climate surveys and reflect on notes taken about relevant situations or specific accounts that have been shared with you.
        - Speak with the command chaplain, EO and EEO officers, and other unit leaders about their perspective of the issue and the gravity of its effect on the unit.
- The space
    - The space concerns both the location and the time of the effective conversation. The location should be one that provides appropriate privacy and is free of or
    - minimizes distractions as much as possible. The time should be one that the participants will be mentally fresh, such as at the beginning of a work day.
- The support
    - Support may consist of other staff present during the effective conversation or staff that is acknowledged as direct resources after the effective conversation.

Begin

- Set the tone
    - Welcome participants.
    - Introduce any support staff.
    - Convey the value of each participant to the effective conversation.
- Provide structure
    - State the purpose and goals of the effective conversation.
    - Establish ground rules of conduct and respect. Examples include the following:
        - No speaking over anyone.
        - No demeaning or derogatory language.
        - Briefly explain emotional and kinetic self-control.
- Establish initial rapport and trust
    - Address and reassure any hesitancies due to differences in rank or group status.
    - Highlight the shared goals of the group.
    - Bring attention to shared perspectives or related experiences.
    - Convey warmth and genuine interest in having the effective conversation and what the participants will share.

Effective Conversation Strategies

Facilitate

- Ask thoughtful questions
    - Open-ended questions can encourage speakers to elaborate on their unique perspectives and feelings, allowing for deeper understanding for the listener.
    - Avoid leading questions, or questions that encourage or pressure someone into answering a certain way.
    - Avoid loaded questions, or questions that directly conflict with or attack a perspective or idea that someone has already shared.
- Recognize diverse experiences
    - Be mindful that personal experiences can vary widely. Even when multiple individuals share the same event, it can be experienced differently.
    - Encourage participants to share their unique thoughts and experiences.
    - Refrain from making judgments or assumptions about these experiences.
- Establish credibility
    - When appropriate, use expert knowledge/experience from other participants and encourage participation and discussion by sharing control of the discussion.
- Emphasize the value of each individual
    - Use group members' names.
    - Acknowledge speakers verbally or nonverbally when they make a relevant contribution.
    - Periodically paraphrase members' statements to clarify their points (as needed).
- Use the pause strategy
    - Pause the conversation for a moment when:
        - emotions on a topic might be running high;
        - diverse perspectives aren't being respected;
        - much has been said and should be reflected on; and
        - efforts to refocus on common perspectives or goals may be needed.
    - Use open-ended or how/what questions or reframing statements to refocus and resume the effective conversation.
    - NOTE: The pause strategy is not intended to assess performance or to criticize past or present behavior, statements, or actions.

Follow Up

- If appropriate, send an email to participants that summarizes the effective conversations, including thanking them for their participation and informing them of any plan of action or steps that will be taken in response to the effective conversation.
- Conduct an after-action report (what were the highlights from the session…what went well and what needs to be adjusted for future sessions?).
- Consider following up with any individuals who were involved in the conversation.

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