

# Difficult Conferences

Excerpts from *Leading the Learning*  
by Paula Rutherford

No one likes to deliver bad news and few relish the need to help a staff member develop a new picture of his/her own performance and its impact on student learning. Doing this, however, is one of the responsibilities held by supervisors, evaluators, and, in some instances, mentors.

Careful planning of these difficult interactions is essential. In many difficult conferences, whether or not the conference is a formal part of the supervisory process, there are additional people present. This might include parents, students, colleagues, or association representatives. It is important to consider the role each plays.

Peggy McNeil McMullen provides an excellent framework for identifying the issues we should think about before, during, and after difficult conferences.

## Begin with the End in Mind

Prepare in advance by identifying for yourself the outcomes you want to achieve, as well as the messages you want to convey.

Be realistic in setting the agenda. Rather than planning to bring up multiple issues, focus on what is both doable and would make the most difference in terms of teacher performance and student learning.

Prepare written "talking points" so that you can check back through them as the conference progresses.

Outline agenda to include "If this, then...".

Gather appropriate documents and have available copies as needed.

As appropriate, provide participants information prior to the conference so they can be better prepared to participate in the conference.

## Communicate Information Clearly

Present the agenda and the purposes at the beginning of the meeting.

Establish time frame of meeting.

Tell the person your concerns and feelings directly. Do not "sugar coat," but also do not bring up unrelated issues.

Refer to examples, quotes, or data of some form to illustrate your concerns.

Consider the quality, intensity, and/or frequency of the problem as you explain your concerns.

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## **Stay Flexible**

Within the boundaries of your goals and beliefs, consider alternative explanations or solutions.

Be willing to discuss other interpretations of what you see as a problem or negative pattern.

Move into a problem solving mode when appropriate. See the six step problem solving process on page 197.

## **Focus on the Needs of the Child**

Do not lose sight of the fact that you must be focused on what's best for the child's learning and emotional needs.

## **Acknowledge Contributions/Strengths as Well as Areas of Growth/Improvement**

Acknowledge positive contributions, assets, skills, and motives of the teacher/parent/child so it's clear that the focus is on behavior and not a general attack on him/her as a person.

This is a particularly important one if the conference is with a teacher who contributes in powerful ways to the social and/or extracurricular systems in the school, but whose classroom performance does not meet standards.

While we want to acknowledge those "beyond the classroom" contributions, we have to be clear that without the classroom performance, they are insufficient.

## **Include All Participants**

Ensure that all participants feel included in the conference and have ample opportunity to express their views.

Include introductions as appropriate.

Check for understanding, agreement, and/or commitment frequently across all participants.

## **Respond with Calm**

Show emotion only in a controlled way.

Do not get defensive or "hooked."

Understand that others may get emotional and that crying may be essential to moving toward resolution. Be kind but focused.

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## Respond with Calm continued...

If the emotions of others get out of hand, terminate the conference and reschedule.

## Listen

Listen as objectively as possible.

Watch the non-verbal behavior and listen to the language used by others and match your own language and response to the exhibited information processing and communication styles (i.e., I feel/I think, analytical/global, intraverted/extraverted).

Pay attention to attributions. When others make external attributions respond with, "Given that you see it that way, how might you/we ...?"

Pause, probe, and paraphrase.

Tolerate silence.

Resist using the communication road blocks.

## Refocus

Refocus discussion to the outcomes you identified if and when the talk moves off target for an extended period.

Acknowledge the importance of the issue or point that is a distraction and state that while it is important/interesting, this is not the correct forum or time to discuss that issue.

While allowing for input and differing viewpoints, be sure that agenda items are addressed.

## Plan Follow-Up

Summarize key points.

Specify the next steps.

Articulate expected actions and time lines for action as well as the support systems that will be provided by you or the school system.

Check for understanding, agreement, and commitment to both the key points and the next steps.

If there are consequences for lack of follow through, identify the consequences.

Set a date and time for another meeting if necessary.

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## Document

Create a written report of the conference.

Distribute it to all participants and other appropriate personnel.

## Analyze and Reflect

Consider how what happened during the process matched what you wanted to happen.

Do a mental cause and effect analysis.

Make a mental list of what you would do differently next time.

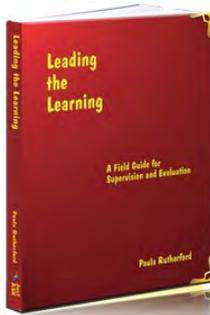
Take any additional action you may need to take based on the match between desired and actual outcomes.

# After a Difficult Conference...

**When all is said and done, we can control only one person's behavior...our own. Whether the conference was focused on instruction, professional behavior, or parent issues, as we analyze and reflect on how it went, our own behavior is where we begin. Administrators in *Leading the Learning workshops* suggest that we consider the following variables:**

- I was appropriately honest. I carefully identified the issues that had to be surfaced.
- I supported what I said with data.
- I actively listened.
- I was clear and direct.
- I provided constructive suggestions for improvement.
- I gave the person the opportunity to reflect and return to talk with me.
- I owned the critical comments that I made.
- I was fair, respectful, courteous and confidential.
- I expressed support and worked to identify ways to improve the situation.
- I checked for understanding.
- I summarized and put the summary of the conference and any agreements in writing, if appropriate.
- I was organized, prepared, and rehearsed for both the cognitive and affective parts of the conference. I prepared "if this happens, then I will say ..." statements.
- I remained calm.
- I didn't get emotionally "hooked" or sidetracked by extraneous issues.
- I did not take ownership of "stuff" that wasn't mine.
- I believed and articulated expectations that change could occur.
- I maintained dignity and integrity.

**I did it in the best interests of the students.**



See book description and ordering information for ***Leading the Learning*** at <https://justaskpublications.com/ltl>