



Effective Communication in the Face of Conflict

Alnoor Maherali, MWI Trainer

September 5, 2025

10:00 am to 12:00 pm ET



A little about me – Alnoor Maherali

- Diplomat, Mediator, Ombuds, Facilitator
- Foreign Service: Afghanistan + Bangladesh; Disaster Response; Human Rights
- Harvard Kennedy School
- Collaborations: United Nations, foreign governments, Women's rights in Afghanistan
- Coach and train students at Harvard, Yale, and Tufts, as well as corporate clients and civil servants

Agenda

- ✓ Difficult Conversations
- ✓ Communication Skills
- ✓ Techniques for Effective Feedback
 - Giving and Receiving
- ✓ Program Wrap Up
 - Lessons Learned
 - Evaluation
 - Q/A

DISCLAIMER



What makes conflict
difficult?



CONFLICT

What makes conflict difficult?

It makes us feel:

- Uncomfortable
- Awkward
- Fearful
- Vulnerable

It likely involves:

- Our self-esteem
- An important or controversial issue
- An uncertain outcome
- Something or someone we care deeply about

Difficult Conversation – Listening In

Client: Excuse me, there isn't supposed to be food at this event.

Staff Member: I'm so sorry but we typically offer refreshments at these events because people come straight from work.

Client: Look. No one has shown up yet and I am not comfortable with food being served. Can't you get rid of it?

Staff Member: These events are important networking events and we find attendees really enjoy having something to nibble on. Am I just supposed to throw all the food away?

Client: This is my event, and I'm the client. Kindly remove the food.

Staff Member: I don't know what to tell you. I'll have my supervisor speak to you.

Breakout Discussion

- What's difficult about this conversation? Describe the dynamic you are observing.
- If you were to be a part of the conversation the next time...
 - What would a productive goal be?
 - What might you do to achieve the goal?



Debrief: What makes a conversation difficult?

What's difficult?

What would make it go better?

Truths about conflict and difficult conversations

- Conflict is part of life. Where there is conflict, there are difficult conversations.
- The fact that conflict exists is not necessarily a bad thing
- People do those things that they believe are in their best interests, regardless of whether you think it is a good idea or not
- You can't change someone's mind unless you know where their mind is

1. Invite Intentionally

What are some ways **NOT** to open a difficult conversation?

✓ Neutral 

✓ Curious

✓ Hopeful

✓ Buy-In

I would like to discuss:

- How we are communicating
- How we are working together
- The workload distribution
- My compensation
- How the project/paper is coming

✓ Neutral

✓ Curious 

✓ Hopeful

✓ Buy-In

I would like to share my perspective and:

- Better understand your experience/expectations/etc.
- Hear your perspective
- Learn more about how the decision was/is made

✓ Neutral

✓ Curious

✓ Hopeful 

✓ Buy-In


My hope/goal is to:

- Make sure we are on the same page
- Produce the best work possible
- Finish on time
- Work together more effectively
- Find a sustainable way forward

✓ Neutral

✓ Curious

✓ Hopeful

✓ Buy-In 

Their interests/benefit of the doubt:

- I know you care about...

Common Goal:

- I know we both want...

Invitation:

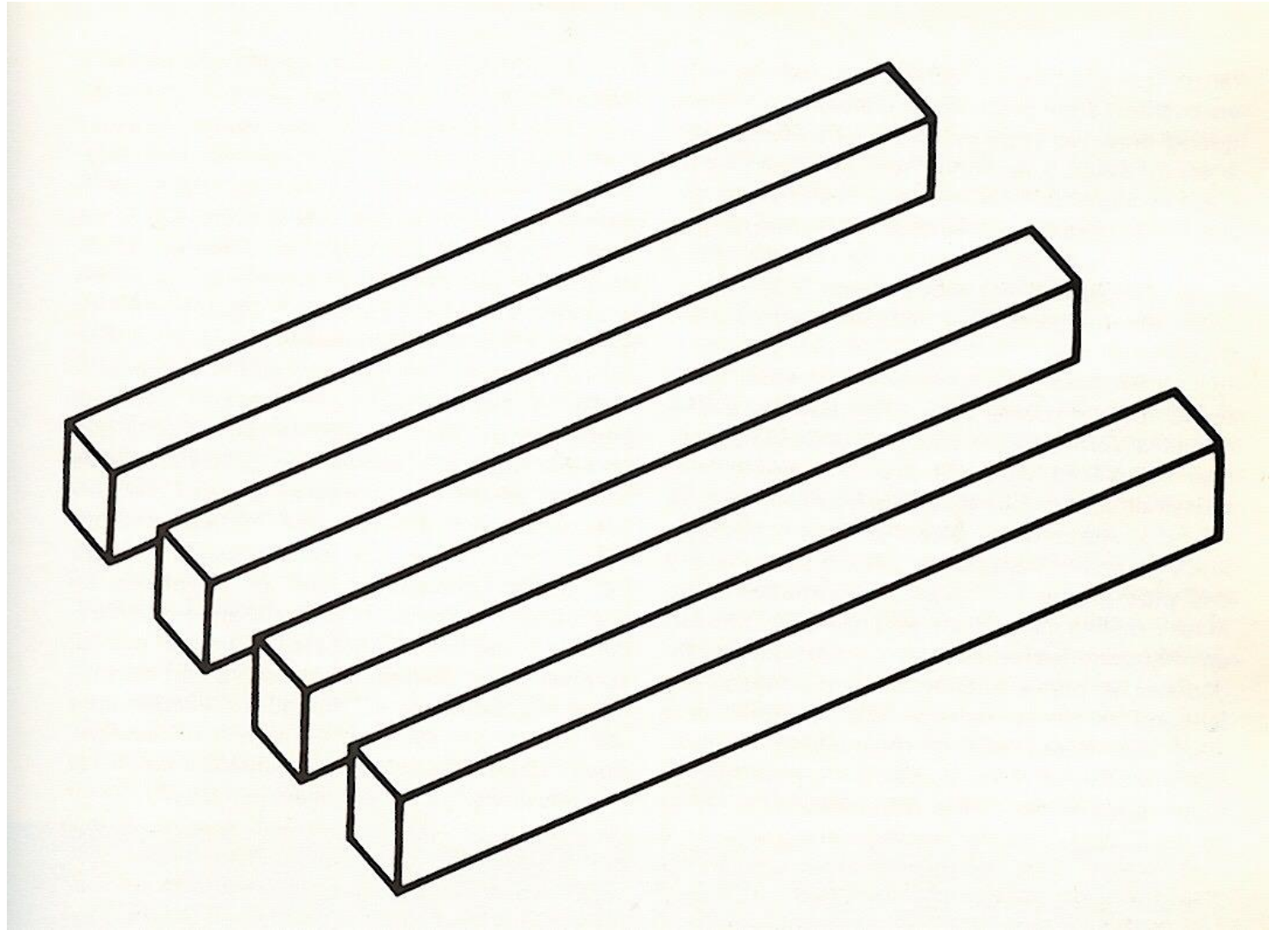
- Would you be open to meeting to discuss...?

Their timeline:

- When would work best for you?

2. Cultivate Curiosity

How many
rectangular
boxes do you
see?



What could be happening here?

Laila, a case manager, and a case worker, Rana, clash over deliverables. Laila frequently sends last-minute requests for changes to the upcoming workshop and expects immediate responses, while Rana's team is already at capacity and needs more lead time. Rana feels the client doesn't respect boundaries; Laila feels their urgent needs aren't taken seriously. The relationship starts to fray, with curt emails and missed calls adding to the strain.

3. Express Effectively

A difficult conversation

- Think of a recent difficult conversation where you walked away from the conversation dissatisfied with the result
- Transcribe what was actually said or done during the most difficult part of this conversation
 - ▶ Create a dialogue in an “I said”/“They said” format



Difficult Conversation – Personal Case

I said:

They said:

I said:

They said:

I said:

They said:

Difficult Conversation – Example

Client: Excuse me, there isn't supposed to be food at this event.

Staff Member: I'm so sorry but we typically offer refreshments at these events because people come straight from work.

Client: Look. No one has shown up yet and I am not comfortable with food being served. Can't you get rid of it?

Staff Member: These events are important networking events and we find attendees really enjoy having something to nibble on. Am I just supposed to throw all the food away?

Client: This is my event, and I'm the client. Kindly remove the food.

Staff Member: I don't know what to tell you. I'll have my supervisor speak to you.

Key Communication Skills

INQUIRY

Asking how they understand it

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
Demonstrating understanding of their
view and empathy with their feelings

ADVOCACY

Explaining how you understand it

LISTEN – Attentively, and with an open and curious mind

Difficult Conversation – Example

Client: Excuse me, there isn't supposed to be food at this event.

A

Staff Member: I'm so sorry but we typically offer refreshments at these events because people come straight from work.

A

Client: Look. No one has shown up yet and I am not comfortable with food being served. Can't you get rid of it?

A

Staff Member: These events are important networking events and we find attendees really enjoy having something to nibble on. Am I just supposed to throw all the food away?

A

Client: This is my event, and I'm the client. Kindly remove the food.

A

Staff Member: I don't know what to tell you. I'll have my supervisor speak to you.

A

Score your case

Consider only the statements you made in the conversations

- Write an “A” next to every advocacy statement
- Write an “I” next to every question
- Re-evaluate your “I”s — are they genuine inquiries or disguised advocacy?

Personal Case

	What was actually said in the conversation
	I said:
	They said:
	I said:
	They said:
	I said:
	They said:
	I said:
	They said:

BREAK

Guidelines for effective Inquiry

- Elicit their point of view, their feelings, and the impact of your actions on them
- Help them explain their reasoning path, and seek to better understand the information, assumptions, and interpretations that comprise it
- Get curious
 - ▶ “What am I missing?”
 - ▶ “What might they know that I don’t?”
- Consider that they may have considered particular facts or issues, even if it is not apparent that they have



Guidelines for effective Acknowledgment

- Work to paraphrase their perspective as eloquently as they put it
- Check the accuracy of your understanding
- Test whether the other person feels heard
- Acknowledge their feelings, as well as their views on the issue(s)
- Convey empathy — the sense that you understand their feelings in the context of their story, and that you care
- Remember that you can demonstrate empathy without agreeing with them, or letting go of your own perspective

Acknowledgment ≠ Agreement



Guidelines for effective Advocacy

- Put your point of view forward as a theory to be tested
- Explain your reasoning path, including the information, assumptions, and interpretations that comprise it
- As appropriate and useful, share your feelings, and the impact of their actions on you (avoid assumptions about their intentions)
- End with a request for comment, especially about what is missing, unaddressed, unclear, or unpersuasive



Buy-Sell Exercise

- You will be placed in random pairs
- Person who has their birthday next is the BUYER; the other person will be the SELLER
- SELLER, find an item around you that you will try to sell to BUYER. You will have 2-3 minutes to try to sell the item

Guidelines for effective Listening

- Stay in the moment, and give the other person your full attention
- Listen to understand, not to prepare your response
- Look for clues that the other person feels heard and understood (including facial expressions and body language) — or not
- Avoid interrupting
- Accept moments of silence
- Pay attention to your body language and the messages it is sending



Balance Advocacy with Inquiry and Acknowledgment

Inquiry

Asking how they understand it

“How do you see this differently?”

“What is it that leads you to that story?”

“Can you give me an example?”

Acknowledgment

Demonstrating understanding of their view and empathy with their feelings — without agreement

“What I hear you saying is...”

“I understand why you are feeling that way.”

“What did I miss?”

Advocacy

Explaining how you understand it

“What I observed is... I heard you say... and it felt like...”

“How I make sense of that is... My perspective is...”

A more productive conversation

- In a moment, we'll send you out into breakout rooms in pairs; Briefly introduce your situation to them.
- With your partner, take a look at your Personal Case “I said” statements
- Restate some of your ineffective statements using skillful Advocacy, Inquiry, Acknowledgement, and Listening
- Be prepared to share questions and lessons learned when we return to plenary

Difficult Conversation – Example

Client: Excuse me, there isn't supposed to be food at this event.

Staff Member: I'm so sorry but we typically offer refreshments at these events because people come straight from work.

Client: Look. No one has shown up yet and I am not comfortable with food being served. Can't you get rid of it?

Staff Member: These events are important networking events and we find attendees really enjoy having something to nibble on. Am I just supposed to throw all the food away?

Client: This is my event, and I'm the client. Kindly remove the food.

Staff Member: I don't know what to tell you. I'll have my supervisor speak to you.

4. Effective Feedback

Pobody's Nerfect

Three Kinds of Feedback

Appreciation

To see, acknowledge, connect, motivate, or thank.

Evaluation

To rate or rank against a set of standards, to align expectations, or to inform decision making.

Coaching

To help receiver expand knowledge, sharpen skill, improve capability OR to address the giver's feelings or an imbalance in the relationship.

Three Kinds of Feedback

Appreciation?

Evaluation?

Coaching?

1. I have some ideas for how you might improve next time – consider...
2. Kudos to Juan for his excellent work on that last project!
3. It has been frustrating working with you because you frequently don't respond to my emails or chats.
4. The system you created was incredibly difficult to use and not at all what we discussed.
5. I really admire the way you....
6. You are lazy.

1. Be Curious

What might they be experiencing?

Where is this coming from?

What do you know?

What do you not know?

What do they know?

What do they not know?

What was their intent? How do they view the matter?



2. Be Timely



3. Be Specific



Fishbowl: Downward Feedback with Resistance

Characters

- Employee (Alnoor): Team member who has been asked to come to his manager's office.
- Manager: Needs to address company expectation of arriving at and starting work on time

Situation

- The manager notices a staff member often arrives late to work, and when informally addressed, becomes annoyed and complains about being singled out in front of others.

Instructions

Manager

- Use tools discussed today to have a conversation in a productive way to elicit the outcome you are seeking.

Fishbowl: Lateral Feedback with Resistance

Characters

- Employee (Alnoor): Team member who brings lunch to work
- Employee (Volunteer): Co-worker annoyed by the smell from Alnoor microwaving fish and broccoli.

Situation

- A staff member repeatedly raises concerns about colleagues' use of the microwave (often cooking fish or broccoli), saying it shows insensitivity, while other staff feel the complaints are excessive.

Instructions

Employee (Volunteer)

- Use tools discussed today to have a conversation in a productive way to elicit the outcome you are seeking.

5. Wrap-Up

Key Takeaways

- What are you glad you learned today?
- What's one tool you'll implement immediately?



Workshop Evaluation

<https://airtable.com/appXVetXvVnmni9R3/shrSIYdeDz3f22r3p>



Q/A

What questions do you have?



References / Articles, Books, and Videos

- Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most
- Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High
- Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In
- Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations
- Just Listen: The Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone
- Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team
- Nonviolent Communication: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships
- and more!



www.mwi.org/waw-resources