



Tips to diffuse difficult conversations

In the process of conducting outreach you may encounter difficult individuals and scenarios. How to communicate effectively can help to reduce these uncomfortable situations. The following are some general tips and guidelines to keep in mind. These are not failsafe methods but give guidance on things to consider.

- Be open and transparent as to what the intent of your outreach process is, being upfront from the get-go of what your outreach objectives are will help set realistic expectations and can reduce disappointment and conflict.
- Ensure you approach outreach with an open mind and that you are there to genuinely listen, and not to debate or solve the issues on the spot.
- Set clear boundaries on behaviors from the beginning – set the stage for a respectful space – no abuse allowed, opportunities to hear from all persons, general respect for those presenting and others in attendance.

If a person becomes outraged or emotional some overarching things to remember are:

- Consider their perspective – where they may be coming from and what may be the cause of their actions and behavior.
- Acknowledge and listen – let them be heard and confirm what they are saying – what do they need (available solutions)?
- It can be helpful to write down what they are saying and report back what you have heard, so they feel like you are genuinely listening.
- In heated exchanges, it can be help de-escalate the conversation by taking the individual to a table where you can sit and listen, maybe grab a coffee and cookie on your way.
- Stay calm – don't escalate with own emotion and maintain control of the situation – refer to the ground rules and the intent of the day – let them be heard and have their say but not take over or influence the input of others.
- Be aware and prepared of the local context and other issues that may influence or create additional emotion and outrage – don't deny past mistakes or situations – striving for continual improvements.
- Commit to a response process and follow through on your commitments - report back timelines and future input opportunities.
- Have alternate assistance and methods available – either other colleagues or methods of input to allow them further discussion and input.
- If necessary remove yourself from the situation – consider your personal safety.
- Reflect and debrief on the situation and scenarios to develop future strategies - striving for continual improvement.
- Utilize trained facilitators or seek further training as part of the planning process.