

Having Difficult Conversations

And knowing when to escalate

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Having Difficult Conversations: an Introduction

- Difficult Conversations are best had the moment the need arises, but this rarely happens in practice
- People are often poorly prepared for such conversations or fear the outcome or emotions that might be generated (focus on facts)
- As a PG Coordinator/leader you may be asked to conduct such a conversation because:
 - The supervisor is ignoring an issue, does not perceive there to be an issue, or is absent;
 - A candidate has hit a roadblock/has been sent a notice of termination/cannot obtain approvals;
 - The institutional policies on the issue are not clear;
 - The academic/candidate is aware that they have dropped the ball and are seeking to avoid a formal complaint or other negative outcome;
 - A supervisor and/or candidate may be perceived as too 'difficult' to confront by peers;
 - A candidate has been reported for possible academic integrity issue;
 - It may be a documented part of your role.

Preparing for a difficult Conversation

- **Why** has this matter come to you? Is the conversation needed and is it needed how and does it need to go to someone else?
- **How** was this conveyed (e.g. do you know all the facts and will you need to conduct several conversations?)
- **What** is the desired outcome and how likely are you to be able to achieve it?
- **When** should this conversation have happened (i.e. what could have taken place earlier to prevent things becoming so difficult)?
- **Who** (if anyone) should also join the conversation (a support person, a notetaker, etc)?

Case Study discussions

- In your small groups, please review and select for discussion one or two of case numbers 3, 4 and 5;
- All of these cases in their own ways require difficult conversations with one or more individuals;
- In your discussion of the questions posed and with regard to your own institutional policies itemise the difficult conversations you might need to have and also note when you might need to escalate the matter;
- Reflect on how the need for such conversations might have been prevented earlier or whether there might be other means to ensure these situations couldn't arise.

Case Study 3: Supervision

- You receive a complaint (submitted by several HDR candidates) about their supervisor's inappropriate behaviour. They are a high-profile academic with a stellar research track record. The candidates report to you that the supervisor is being unreasonably controlling and demanding and they are all requesting a change of supervisor.
- The issues they raised included that their supervisor:
 - threatens them with loss of their scholarship if they do not perform,
 - changes their topics without consultation,
 - treats them like research assistants by telling them what they must do
 - frequently cancels meetings with them
 - does not provide timely feedback on their writing
- relating to the latter point, documents they submit to the supervisor for review are often not returned until 3 to 6 months following their submission.
- **Discussion Questions**
 - What went wrong and what could the supervisor have done differently in this case?
 - How would you as a PGC/AD/Dean manage this matter?
 - What are some of the skills that you could advise the supervisor to develop so that they could be more effective in the future?
 - Given that several students have approached should a discussion about de-registration or suspension of this supervisor be initiated? How is that done and who would be involved

Case Study 4: Candidature and Supervision

- Sal is a part-time student who began their PhD candidature well and passed confirmation within 1 year. However, they are now at mid-candidature review and it becomes apparent that they have failed to make any progress since confirmation. The discussions at mid-candidature review indicate that the student does not maintain regular contact with the supervisors and has not visited the School for more than 6 months. When interviewed Sal comments that there is very little incentive to visit the School because part-time candidates have no assigned space where to work and have to get in early to 'hot desk'. Sal claims that coming to the School only reinforces their sense of isolation. Upon interviewing the primary supervisor it becomes clear that Sal's research topic is not one that interests them greatly but they took on the student to improve performance expectations in research and research training as part of their workload.
- They have confided in you that they're holding out for Sal to withdraw pretty soon as supervision in this case has been a thankless task.

- **Discussion Questions**

- Firstly break down the issues involved here
- What are Sal's options from the point of view of your institution's policies
- What steps are in place at your institution to ensure a match between supervisor expertise and candidate project proposal?
- What important lessons might this supervisor need to learn?
- What are the steps that the School can take to improve Sal's experience?
- How does your institution deal with office space for part-time HDRs and do you require attendance or other evidence of regular contact with supervisors?

Case Study 5: Unsatisfactory Progress?

- Avery had good progress reports up to 2.5 years, but at 3.5 years the thesis was largely incomplete. The supervisors say that the quality of written work had declined over the years and that Avery has started arguing against their advice on what to include, how to write with clarity, and how to organise the thesis. Avery's claim was that the work would be better if written without the supervisors' interference.
- The supervisors agreed to trial a period of non-interference, but then gave extensive written feedback on the first two chapters when delivered. They described the writing as torrents of unrelated statements that were often irrelevant; the supervisors were also troubled by what they described as emotive and inappropriate comments on past literature. (Some of the material was on a direction that had been discarded early in the project because the claims the candidate wanted to make were contradicted by the primary sources.) They believed that the suggested changes created a more coherent work that was still in the Avery's words and that they were being supportive.
- Avery claimed the supervisors had described the chapters as 'garbage'. Avery threw away their written comments, which the supervisors claimed represented several days' work, and also discarded Avery's source files. No copy of this material was retained. Despite having collaborated well for the first 2.5 years, at 3.5 Avery declares that they need a new supervision team and that the existing supervisors must agree to not be authors on any published work derived from the thesis.
- **Discussion Questions**
- How do you manage next steps in Avery's candidature?
- What advice might you give the present supervisors a) in relation to Avery; b) in relation to future candidature management?
- What guidelines are provided to candidates about thesis preparation and publication intentions?
- What is your institution's approach to late supervision team changes such as this?

Ingredients for a 'good' difficult conversation?

- **Prepare yourself:** is there an ideal outcome; should you have speaking points; are you carrying preconceptions that might influence your response?
- **Clarify your position:** You will keep the conversation confidential unless there are claims of integrity, safety and wellbeing concerns
- **Manage expectations** (can you resolve their problem or only advise on next steps?);
- **Reserve judgement** (and resist temptation to respond prematurely or emotionally to any details shared);
- **Listen** with curiosity and until they are finished and try not to interrupt too much (or respond to any implied attacks or criticism)
- **Hear** – make sure you convey the impression that they are heard and you understand their perspective
- **Clarify** that hearing a perspective is not a licence for name-calling or making groundless claims
- **Make notes** during the meeting and explain you may need further time to reflect/consult afterwards;
- **Timing** – do not squeeze the conversation in between other key meetings; do not deliver bad news on a Friday;
- **Problem-solve** – you probably need to follow up, but take time to reflect & consult

How to Escalate Effectively

- Who do you need to include to arrive at an outcome/solution?
- Have you explored all options at your level (e.g. School, Faculty)?
- Can you clarify the issues and explain why escalation is necessary (may require a formal briefing with recommendations)
- Do your institution's rules/policies support you?
- Are you able to advise on steps to prevent similar issues/complexities happening in future?

Personal Resilience

- Your 'administrative' persona may conflict with your 'collegial' one – e.g. if you're talking to a colleague who is a neglectful supervisor;
- Complex situations can arise from numerous quite simple causes: try to remain empathetic and show willingness to find a fair resolution;
- You may need to be open and frank if you fear that a positive outcome will be difficult for the individual – that is not easy for most people. Policies help here.
- Difficult conversations get less difficult with practice (in terms of managing emotions, etc).