Managing Crucial Conversations in the Library

Crucial conversations can be found in many aspects of our lives: work, home, romantic relationships, and friendships. Patterson et al. define crucial conversations as "a discussion between two or more people where (1) stakes are high, (2) opinions vary, and (3) emotions run strong (2002)." In crucial conversations, the end result can affect one's quality of life. Unfortunately, due to our bodies' fight-or-flight instinct, the more charged a conversation, the more likely it is to be handled without rational thought. These kinds of exchanges can occur within the library in numerous places – such as board or staff meetings, staff evaluations, or even in more casual social interactions. It is imperative to handle these situations sensitively and competently, particularly when in a library management position.

The first piece of successfully navigating crucial conversations is to know the desired outcome before the discussion; this allows evaluation of each interaction and response through a calm, rational lenses. Avoid giving into the desire to save face, win the argument, get revenge, staying safe, or black and white thinking. As part of avoiding dichotomies, one should clarify what one really wants; clarify what one really doesn't want; and brainstorm potential solutions that satisfactorily address those issues.

Be attentive to silence and violence; these are signs that people are afraid and reacting from a place of fear. This can be evident through people forcing their ideas on others or purposefully abstaining from offering their ideas. Both are evidence of a fear reaction - either fear that people are not accepting the idea or fear for their safety in some way. People who feel unsafe can lash out with aggressive verbal exchanges; instead of responding in kind, one should respond to the base feeling of fear by seeking to restore safety to the situation.

To make conversations safe, there needs to be both mutual purpose and mutual respect. To have mutual purpose, others must believe the group or interaction is working towards a common goal. When

mutual purpose is not present, people do not believe in all parties' benevolent intent and begin to defensively debate the issue at hand. To have mutual respect, others must feel the group respects them and their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. When mutual respect is not present, people will feel disrespected and begin to defend their dignity in a highly charged manner.

When either mutual purpose or mutual respect are at risk in a conversation, a safe conversation must be reestablished. When a mistake has been made, apologize for the pain or difficulty caused to others. When others misunderstand one's intent, use contrasting. Contrasting is not apologizing: it addresses the concern that was said was meant to be disrespectful or inconsiderate and clarifies the purpose of the misunderstood exchange.

During crucial conversations, intense feelings often occur. Evaluating and addressing one's individual feelings is key to controlling reactions. It's important to examine which internal stories are being told and distinguish them from the reality of the present situation. Look at internal stories closely for three common templates: victim (it's not your fault), villain (it's all their fault), and helpless (there's nothing I can do). These templates allow avoidance of responsibility for one's actions in the conversation. Instead, examine the story and compare it to the present reality.

Be sure to explore others' facts and personal experiences. Clarify, paraphrase, agree when possible, and build on others' ideas. In sharing information and personal experiences, talk tentatively. Be humble and open, using language that indicates an opinion. When asking for others' opinions, invite opposing views, and use language that makes it clear legitimately feedback is being solicited. To facilitate the free flow of meaning, express interest in the other person's point of view; acknowledge the feelings others are expressing; summarize what they've said; and if others are holding back, take an educated guess at what they might be feeling and thinking. As facts and stories are shared, be sure to

agree when possible, build on what others have said, and compare views when there are significant differences rather than presenting one as wrong.

To turn conversations into good decisions, unclear expectations and inaction need to be avoided. Make the final deliverable clear to all parties and set a time to follow-up. Keep a record of the responsibilities, follow up, and hold everyone accountable for their work.

To help prepare for crucial conversations and deal with issues in the moment, these seven steps can be followed: 1) Determine which outcomes are desired and which are not. 2) Notice when a conversation becomes crucial and pay attention to threats to safety which can lead others to be silent or violent. 3) Help make it safe by apologizing when appropriate, explain intent to fix misunderstandings, and seek common ground. 4) Examine internal dialogue, understanding which parts of a reaction are due to the present and which are due to past experiences. 5) Share facts, tell personal experiences, ask for others' facts and personal experiences, talk tentatively, and encourage others to ask questions. 6) Explore others' facts and personal experiences. Clarify, paraphrase, agree when possible, build on others' ideas, and compare ideas when there is a lot of contrast. 7) Decide how a decision will be reached, document it, and follow up after with the responsible parties.

Facilitating positive interactions is an important skill for library employees, especially those in managerial positions where policy creation, establishing collaborations, and delicate negotiations can be commonplace occurrences. Crafting a collaborative space where people feel encouraged, embraced, and supported to be creative can transform the library as staff members feel invested in pursuing excellence in the work place.

References

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.