

Coaching Students to Manage Challenging Conversations

Look for teachable moments to help students learn how to address challenges with fellow classmates. Small-group work and communication missteps in both live and asynchronous discussions may lead to tension between students. If these arise, there is an opportunity to coach students to help them gain skills to effectively address their concerns with their classmates. The skill to handle crucial conversations will also serve them well in their future.

Handling a Challenging Conversation

- **Help your students manage their emotions.** According to Kerry Patterson, the author of *Crucial Conversations* (2002), an important first step is to deal with the emotions a student is feeling by asking the following questions:
 - What emotions are you experiencing? Are you angry? Frustrated? Disappointed?
 - What story has led you to these emotions?
 - What facts do you have that support this story?
 - Can you retell this story using the evidence that you have? What information is missing?

These questions will help the student understand what, if any, assumptions they are making about the situation and will help them clarify what information they will need to know. For example, they may be feeling frustrated because a fellow group member missed an online meeting and may assume that the student just forgot about it. However, the student may have had an emergency that caused them to miss the meeting.

- **Ask questions to help them create a plan of action.** Asking questions about what the student wants to accomplish with a conversation will help them gain a better understanding of the reasons for the conflict and help uncover the goals they have for resolving it. Encourage them to think about the situation from the other student's point of view by considering what that student may expect to get out of the conversation as well.
- **Practice the conversation.** Role-playing the plan of action can build your student's confidence and help them learn how to think on their feet and respond to different scenarios that may arise.
- **Model active listening.** Using interested facial expressions and body language and rephrasing their responses will not only support your student, but also models the skill of active listening.

Coaching your students through challenging conversations can give them skills that will serve them well not only in your course, but also in future courses and careers.

Source

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