bcpvpa ReSource

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The Conversation You Might Be Avoiding

Is there someone on your staff with whom you need to have a difficult conversation? Is there a parent whose advocacy has shifted into challenging behavior, leaving staff feeling unsettled? Is there a colleague whose comment made you feel uncomfortable, but you have chosen not to address it? As school leaders, we all encounter situations that require conversations that are difficult. Often our natural response is to delay, avoid, or hope the issue resolves itself.

The reality is that avoidance rarely improves a situation. Unaddressed issues can grow, relationships can become strained, and misunderstandings can deepen. Addressing concerns respectfully and directly helps create a culture of professionalism, accountability, and mutual respect. Difficult conversations are not simply about solving problems; they are about maintaining healthy relationships and clear expectations.

Consider how conflict affects you personally. Are you an avoider? Does disagreement make you anxious or defensive? What emotions do you experience when you think about having a challenging conversation? Understanding your own reactions to conflict helps you establish how you need to approach this work. Do I need to ask for support? Do I need to dive deeper into why I avoid such conversations? Am I worried about the repercussions of having the conversation? What is causing me not to act or overreact? How do I regulate my emotions while I am in those difficult conversations?

Before entering a challenging conversation, it is important to take time to prepare. Start by identifying the facts and separating them from assumptions or emotions. Ask yourself, what specifically have I observed? What impact is this having on students, staff, or the school community? What outcome am I hoping to achieve?

Research on difficult conversations suggests that leaders are most successful when they focus on observable behaviors rather than personal judgments and approach the discussion with curiosity rather than blame.

Anticipate how the other person may respond and prepare questions that encourage dialogue rather than defensiveness. Equally important is planning how you will follow-up afterward. The goal is not simply to get through the conversation but to preserve dignity, strengthen understanding, and maintain the relationship moving forward.

Difficult conversations become easier when they are built on a foundation of trust, care, and respect. When people know they are valued and respected, honest discussions become opportunities for growth rather than conflict. Effective leaders understand that avoiding discomfort today often creates greater challenges tomorrow. Silence rarely solves problems; it simply gives them time to grow. Timeliness when addressing issues with courage, empathy, and clarity, is ultimately an act of respect for the other individual.

If you want to dive deeper into this topic, look for workshops offered by your BCPVPA.