Difficult Conversations: A Nonjudgmental Exercise

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE: To understand nonjudgmental responses and practice making them. The ability to frame your responses to potentially incendiary questions or statements nonjudgmentally is one of the most powerful skills in conflict resolution.

In each of the ten situations below, pretend you are the recipient of a complaint. Decide initially what the complainer’s interest really is. Then think of a response that recognizes the complainer’s interest and initiates a discussion, thereby avoiding an argument. On the form below, fill out your carefully-constructed responses under “Interest” and “Nonjudgmental response.”

1. “I never get overtime and I need the money.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

2. “Things have gotten very confused in the shop; it looks like no one’s in charge.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

3. My group talks too much. I can never get anything done.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

4. “So I made the same mistake Harry made, but he never got chewed out like I did.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

5. “The night shift always leaves the place in a mess.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

6. “I had to show the engineer how to fix it, but he took all the credit himself.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

7. “Whose idea was it to change the Chart of Accounts?”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

8. “If we can dress casual on Friday, what’s wrong with casual all week?”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

9. “Todd always comes to me for help, but then he cuts me off in the parking lot and laughs at me.”
   Interest: ________________________________
   Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

10. “I knocked myself out on that cover shot, but then the director calls in an outsider to take over.”
    Interest: ________________________________
    Nonjudgmental response: __________________________

When completed, compare your responses with the suggested replies on the next page.

Keep in mind that there are many correct answers, each based on its own context.
SUGGESTED RESPONSES TO THE EXERCISE

Each complaint listed below is followed by a statement that recognizes the complainer’s “Interest,” and then a suggested nonjudgmental response that meets the criteria.

1. “I never get overtime and I need the money.”
   Interest: ACCESS TO SUPPLEMENTAL INCOME
   Response might be: “We know that overtime can put money in your pocket quickly. Can you think of other ways to improve your paycheck?”

2. “Things have gotten very confused in the shop; it looks like no one’s in charge.”
   Interest: ORGANIZATIONAL LAXITY
   Response might be: “It’s sure no fun working in a place that’s not well organized. I would guess you have some ideas to correct the problem.”

3. “My group talks too much. I can never get anything done.”
   Interest: ANNOYING CONVERSATION UNRELATED TO WORK
   Response might be: “It must be hard to work when others are talking all the time. Any thoughts on what we can do to lower the voice level?”

4. “So, I made the same mistake Harry made, but he never got chewed out like I was.”
   Interest: PERCEIVED INEQUITABLE TREATMENT
   Response might be: “Do you believe you’re being treated unfairly? We can talk about that.”

5. “The night shift always leaves the place in a mess.”
   Interest: COOPERATION BY FELLOW EMPLOYEES
   Response might be: “Why do you think this annoying situation is going on? What approaches might resolve the situation?”

6. “I had to show the engineer how to fix it, but he took all the credit himself.”
   Interest: ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
   Response might be: “I think it’s great that you were able to make the fix. Now we have to see to it that you get all the credit you deserve.”

7. “Whose idea was it to change the Chart of Accounts?”
   Interest: CONSIDERATION OF THE EFFECT OF CHANGE ON OTHER PEOPLE
   Response might be: “It must be very frustrating working with an obsolete Chart of Accounts. It sure makes your job twice as hard. What do you think we can do to correct the situation?”

8. “If we can dress casual on Friday, what’s wrong with casual all week?”
   Interest: COMPANY IMAGE
   Response might be: “You’re saying that the dress code seems inconsistent. Could be… Why do you think there is a dress code?”

9. “Todd always comes to me for help, but then he cuts me off in the parking lot and laughs at me.”
   Interest: INGRATITUDE
   Response might be: “That’s really too bad that Todd shows no gratitude for your help. Can you think of any reasons why?”

10. “I knocked myself out on that cover shot, but then the director calls in an outsider to take over.”
    Interest: PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP
    Response might be: “Sounds like you feel that your good efforts go unappreciated.”