Difficult Department Chair Conversations
Ignatian Style
2017 Academic Chairperson’s Conference
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I bring you greetings from Rockhurst University, a small, private, Jesuit, liberal arts university in Kansas City, Missouri with 55 undergraduate majors and graduate programs in Business, Occupational and Physical Therapy, Communication Sciences and Disorders, Nursing, and Education.
The session will explore different types of difficult conversations department chairs have and reasons the encounters may be considered difficult, introduce an Ignatian framework for having conversations, and give participants practice having difficult conversations from an Ignatian perspective.
Few Department Chairs receive training in advance of their appointments, and being hired as a Chair does not result in automatic enhanced communication skills. This is not the only session related to the topic at our current conference. Furthermore, each annual program available online for previous Academic Chairpersons Conferences (2003-2016) and Council of Independent Colleges Workshops for Division Heads and Department Chairs (2007-2016) includes at least one presentation related to difficult conversations. Based on this pattern, the issue is ongoing, and chairs seem to be receptive to improving skills for handling these situations. I commend you, not only for your receptivity, but also for risking indigestion at lunch time talking about a subject that may be connected with memories that are less than pleasant.
We’ve all had challenging experiences as Chairs. Broad categories of different types of difficult conversations Department Chairs have include

- Faculty and staff performance feedback
- Complaints about or demands made by students, faculty, staff, or administrators
- Conversations about inappropriate, unethical, or illegal behavior.
These types of encounters may be considered challenging for a variety of reasons such as

- Chair temperament, experience, training, and personal bias
- Perceived pressure to support the position of faculty or other constituent group
- The level of complexity of the issue
- Perception that the topic itself is taboo
- Concern about the need to respond in one correct manner
- The potential for legal complications
- The need to respond immediately in some circumstances
- Uncertainty about whether action is needed.

Are there other broad categories or reasons conversations are challenging that come to mind?
It’s not unusual for sessions on difficult Department Chair conversations to address different categories of difficult people such as bullies, passive-aggressives, complainers, know-it-alls, pessimists, stalkers, and overly agreeables. Additionally, there may be opportunities for reflection on personal conflict management styles. For example, a 15-item Likert scale response questionnaire from https://facultyombuds.ncsu.edu/files/2015/11/Conflict-management-styles-quiz.pdf reveals the following five conflict management styles. If you’ve ever completed this or a similar assessment, you may remember thinking that your response to items might depend on the situation. Even your style could be affected by the scenario. And is there anyone else who is reluctant to respond, “always,” to survey questions?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Conflict Management Styles</th>
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<td>Collaborating</td>
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<td>Competing</td>
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<td>Avoiding</td>
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<td>Compromising</td>
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Each style has advantages and disadvantages. Because Department Chairs encounter such a variety of situations, it could even be useful to multiple styles in one’s repertoire, but note the advantages of the Collaborating Style.
The faculty member is the spouse of a highly recruited, highly paid, high profile faculty member who was hired as a full professor with tenure – very unusual at the institution – in another department. For two years, your department had been seeking permission to add a tenure track faculty member, and you were hopeful that you'd be able to begin a search by the following year when you were "asked" to hire the spouse whose discipline aligned with your department. You didn't feel like you had a choice, and you needed a faculty member so you agreed. Students in Faculty Spouse's classes have complained to you about the number of class meetings that have been cancelled and about feedback on their work. While many of the complaints were emotional and not measurable (doesn't care about us, is boring, has vague expectations, provides harsh or no feedback, etc.), several students provided examples of feedback and specifically indicated which days classes were cancelled. Some classes were cancelled with emails sent two to seven minutes prior to the start of classes stating only, "Class is cancelled today."

While both of these tactics are worthwhile, we’re going to take a different approach. Before introducing an Ignatian framework for having discussions, we’re going to establish a challenging scenario and ask two people at each table to take a very short break from lunch to role play Chair and faculty parts. I appreciate your participation! Here’s what we know about the situation.
First, we’re going to skip to what may be the fun part, and remember, everything you say – your interactions with Faculty Spouse stay in this room. What role plays in New Orleans stays in New Orleans.

Imagine that the following statements represent what is going through the mind of the individual who has been kind enough to be the Faculty Spouse’s Chair. We all know that, even without describing an Ignatian conversation, you would never actually speak to one of your faculty members in this manner. This will be your chance to set a bad example.
Additional instructions

• Freely express your feelings and opinions.
• Feel free to blame, threaten, and embarrass the faculty member.
• Make demands.
• Use “you” statements.
• Be rushed.
• Concentrate on what you want to say while the faculty member is talking.
• Hide your lack of preparation for the meeting.
• Focus on your perceptions of all the faculty member’s faults.
Role playing conversation...
(Inquire how both felt in their roles.)
If our Chair had followed the following general advice for supervisors who are in challenging situations, the conversation might have gone differently.

**General Advice**

1. Become aware of your role in and techniques for escalating or de-escalating the conflict.
2. Know your conflict resolution style.
3. Help people see the logic behind your argument.
4. Don’t withhold a necessary apology.
5. Let go of the need always to be right.
6. Don’t lose sight of the higher purpose.
7. Don’t lecture.
8. Keep your goal in mind.
9. Separate feelings from the issue.
10. Differentiate between avoidance and appropriate timing.
11. Avoid blaming, threatening, and demanding.
12. Use “I” statements.
13. Listen to understand rather than to prepare a response.
14. Choose an appropriate setting for the conversation.
15. Consider leaving some thoughts unsaid. Shirdi Sai Baba, a 19th century Indian spiritual master, advised to ask the following before responding, “Is it kind, is it necessary, is it true, does it improve on the silence?”
16. Remember, “everybody is somebody's difficult person at least some of the time.” In (Dealing with People You Can’t Stand: How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst by Dr. Rick Brinkman and Dr. Rick Kirschner)
17. Your additions…
Saint Ignatius of Loyola, born in 1491, was a Spanish gentleman who had a conversion experience while recovering from an injury received in battle. He founded the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. One of his special qualities was a particular manner of having conversations that he modeled and advocated. Fundamental to these conversations is the assumption that there is some truth in the point of view of all participants, that all have something of value to offer. When a participant believes that a statement is incorrect, working to understand the statement is considered important. If necessary, with respect and love, an alternate point of view can be expressed. Exchanges held in an Ignatian manner are characterized by respect and openness, regardless of conversation participants’ relative position and history with one another. Hallmarks include being slow to speak, listening attentively, seeking the truth in what others are saying, disagreeing humbly, respectfully, and thoughtfully, and allowing the conversation the time it needs. This aspect of a Jesuit education can be helpful for having difficult conversations regardless of whether an educational institution approaches education from a Jesuit viewpoint that has faculty-student collaboration resulting in competence, conscience, and compassion as a goal.
Let’s try the conversation again, Ignatian style. How might the conversation be different if, instead of thinking of student complaints as the reason for the meeting, you focus on your goals of promoting the highest quality educational experience for students and supporting faculty excellence. Instead of, “I called this meeting because your students are complaining,” you began with, “I asked you to join me for coffee because I’m concerned that, because you are an experienced faculty member, I may not have made sure you were familiar with expectations at this university.”
Role playing conversation...
(Inquire how both felt in their roles.)
• Respect and openness, regardless of conversation participants' relative position and personal history
• Being slow to speak
• Listening attentively
• Seeking the truth in what others are saying,
• Disagreeing humbly, respectfully, and thoughtfully, and
• Allowing the conversation the time it needs
What aspects of Ignatian conversations are most challenging for you? Most natural? What is one aspect of Ignatian conversations that you feel would be especially valuable for you to try to incorporate?

- Respect
- Openness
- Thinking before speaking
- Seeking truth in others’ viewpoints
- Disagreeing humbly and thoughtfully
- Allowing enough time for the conversation

(Discussion)
It is not unusual for conversations that are anticipated to be difficult to be preceded by reminders about the hallmarks of Ignatian conversations. The Office of Mission and Ministry provides the cards pictured on this slide to use when reflecting on the challenges of integrating Ignatian conversation elements as a customary way of interacting.
Thank you for the opportunity to share Ignatian strategies for managing difficult conversations.