

Difficult Department Chair Conversations Ignatian Style

2017 Academic Chairperson's Conference






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Janet Kupperman, Ed.D., FACSIM

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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.



Objectives


- Explore different types of difficult conversations department chairs have and reasons for the encounters to be considered difficult
- Introduce an Ignatian framework for having difficult conversations
- Practice elements of having difficult conversations from an Ignatian perspective using case studies

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.

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Academic Chairpersons Conferences	
Thinking on your Feet: Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Situations	
Departmental Fights: Finding Solutions and Maintaining Sanity as Chair	
Conducting Difficult Performance Counseling Sessions	
Applying Motivational Interviewing Techniques to Increase Faculty and Staff Motivation for Change	
Conducting Difficult Performance Counseling Sessions	
Four Essential Strategies: Motivating Faculty Who Are Ambivalent or Resistant to Change	
Evaluating Staff: An Overlooked (and Perhaps Avoided?) Chair Responsibility	
Managing Conflict and Especially Difficult Personalities	
How am I doing? Informing the Faculty of Relative Performance	
Coping and Preventing Conflict and Violence: A Constructive Approach to Difficult Conversations	
Managing Conflict and Especially Difficult Personalities	
Managing Conflict and Colleagues: Mending Cracks in the Ivory Tower	
Seven Steps for Dealing with Difficult Faculty	
Incivility to Civility in the Department: Here Comes the Bully	
Challenges and Change: Motivational Interviewing and Evaluating of Teaching Performance	
Conflict Management: Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower	
Reframing Difficult Conversations: Skill Building for Conflict Resolution	
Managing Especially Difficult People and Conflict Situation	
Leadership, Teamwork and Conflict Management	
Real Life Situations in the Academy: What's a chair to do?	
Empathic Understanding: The Foundation to Effective Communication for the Academic Chair	
Communicating with Your Colleagues: One Size Does Not Fit All	
Easing Discomfort When Managing the Uncomfortable	
Improve Your Communications by Becoming a Better Listener	
Resolving Conflict in Academic Programs	Managing Especially Difficult People 101
Dealing with Difficult Faculty	Handling Conflict in the Department
Resolving Conflict in the Department	Communicating Effectively with Your Colleagues
Council of Independent Colleges Workshops for Division Heads and Department Chairs	
Dealing with Difficult Faculty Conversations (3)	Difficult Conversations
Dealing with Difficult Faculty Colleagues (2)	Conflict Management
Framework for Conflict Management (2)	Conducting Difficult Conversations

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.




Broad Categories of Difficult Chair Conversations

- Faculty and staff performance feedback
- Complaints about or demands made by students, faculty, staff, or administrators
- Conversations about inappropriate, unethical, or illegal behavior.
- Other?

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.




Challenging?

- Chair characteristics
- Perceived pressure
- Issue complexity
- Topic
- Worry about choosing one “right” approach
- Legal issues
- Timing
- Uncertainty about the need for action

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?



Conflict Management Styles

<https://facultyombuds.ncsu.edu/files/2015/11/Conflict-management-styles-quiz.pdf>

- Collaborating
- Competing
- Avoiding
- Harmonizing
- Compromising

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, stallers, 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?

- **Collaborating Style:** Problems are solved in ways in which an optimum result is provided for all involved.
 - Both sides get what they want and negative feelings are minimized.
 - Pros: Creates mutual trust; maintains positive relationships; builds commitments.
 - Cons: Time consuming; energy consuming.
- **Competing Style:** Authoritarian approach.
 - Pros: Goal oriented; quick.
 - Cons: May breed hostility.
- **Avoiding Style:** The non-confrontational approach.
 - Pros: Does not escalate conflict; postpones difficulty.
 - Cons: Unaddressed problems; unresolved problems.
- **Harmonizing Style:** Giving in to maintain relationships.
 - Pros: Minimizes injury when we are outmatched; relationships are maintained.
 - Cons: Breeds resentment; exploits the weak.
- **Compromising Style:** The middle ground approach.
 - Pros: Useful in complex issues without simple solutions; all parties are equal in power.
 - Cons: No one is ever really satisfied; less than optimal solutions get implemented.

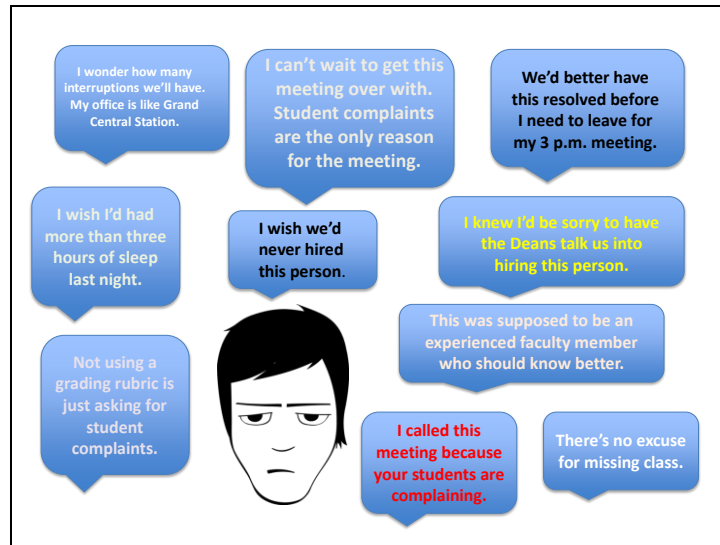
Each style has advantages and disadvantages. Because Department Chairs encounter such a variety of situations, it could even be useful to multiple styles in one's repertoire, but note the advantages of the Collaborating Style.

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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.

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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.)

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General Advice

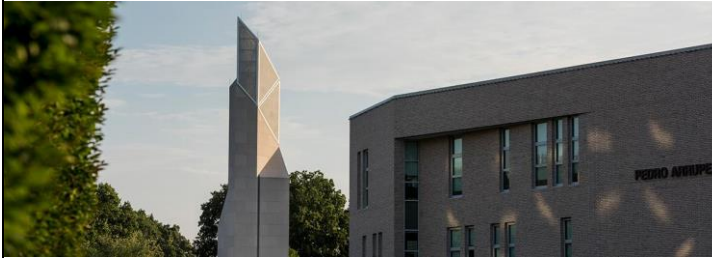
1. Become aware of your role in and techniques for escalating or de-escalating the conflict.
2. Know your conflict resolution style.
3. Help people see the logic behind your argument.
4. Don't withhold a necessary apology.
5. Let go of the need always to be right.
6. Don't lose sight of the higher purpose.
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...

If our Chair had followed the following general advice for supervisors who are in challenging situations, the conversation might have gone differently.



Ignatian Framework for Conversations

- 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



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 view point that has faculty-student collaboration resulting in competence, conscience, and compassion as a goal.

- Focus on your goals, to promote the highest quality educational experience possible for students and to support faculty excellence as they pursue professional goals like tenure and promotion.
- Assume that the faculty member has buy-in for these goals – quality educational experiences for students and high standards for faculty.
- Let go of your hiring history with this faculty member.
- Imagine that you've chosen a public yet private location for your meeting where there won't be interruptions.
- Silence your electronic device(s).
- Imagine what it might be like to have a "star" for a spouse.
- Remember what it was like to be new to a university or college and new to a community.
- Consider that the information you have from students is from their points of view and might not be 100% accurate or tell the entire picture.
- View the conversation as an opportunity to connect with the faculty member to learn facts from his or her point of view as well as his or her feelings.
- By hiring this faculty member, you, your department, and the institution made as much of a commitment to him or her as he or she did.
- If you determine that the departmental standard of excellence is not being met, figure out likely barriers.
- Be truly open to learn about the faculty member's situation. Maybe you'll learn that the "star spouse" expects the coat tail spouse to be responsible for child care and running the household as well as traveling to star faculty conferences so that the star will see the children daily. Maybe both faculty members' teaching schedules are incompatible – whatever that means. While it may be unlikely, the faculty member could be using rubrics on all assignments except the one about which you received complaints. There could even be a medical issue relating to absences.


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**



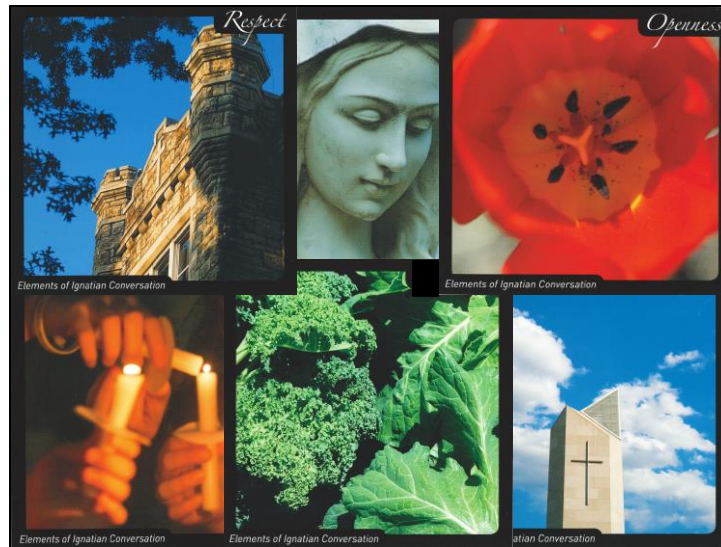


What aspects of Ignatian conversations are most challenging for you? Most natural?
What is one aspect of Ignatian conversations that you feel would be especially valuable for you to try to incorporate?

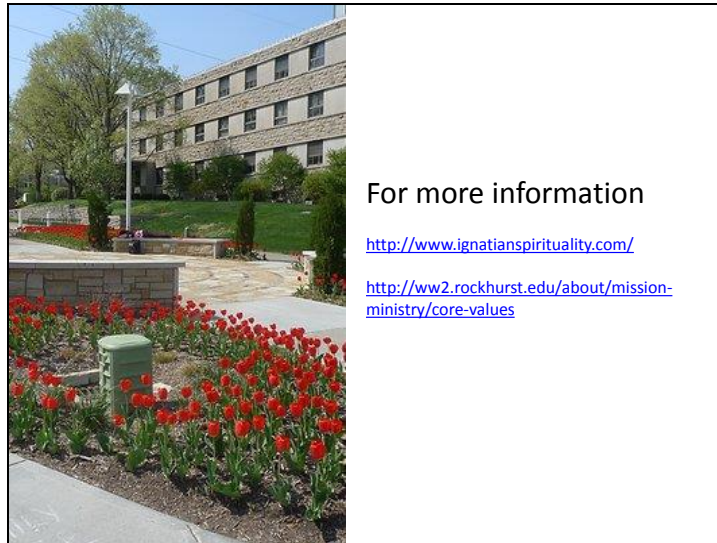
- **Respect**
- **Openness**
- **Thinking before speaking**
- **Seeking truth in others' viewpoints**
- **Disagreeing humbly and thoughtfully**
- **Allowing enough time for the conversation**

(Discussion)

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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.

Janet Kupperman, Ed.D., FACSM
Chair, Exercise and Sport Science Department
Rockhurst University
1100 Rockhurst Road
Kansas City, MO 64110
816-501-4750
janet.kupperman@rockhurst.edu

