



Communicate with Integrity Leading Through Critical Conversations

AAEA Summer Conference
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What we will cover...

- What are critical conversations
- Risk of not having critical conversations
- Self assessment
- Learn a simple structure you can use
- What should be documented
- Learn from one another

Who is in the room...



DIFFICULT

CONVERSATION

Difficult or Tough Conversations

- Performance concerns
- Behavior or conduct issues
- Complaints or conduct issues raised by others
- Setting limits or expectations
- Delivering unwelcome information

What makes it high stakes?

- It could lead to discipline
- It should be documented
- Others may rely on how it was handled
- It could be referenced at a later date

What is the Cost of Silence

Why do we avoid tough conversations?

WHEN YOU'RE GOOD BECOME BETTER

LEADERSHIP IS AN ART



WHEN YOU'RE GOOD BECOME BETTER

Leadership is an Art

01

Visionary Guidance

Artful leaders do not merely manage; they paint a compelling picture of the future. They inspire teams by transforming **abstract goals into shared aspirations** and actionable paths forward.

02

Empathetic Connection

True leadership is rooted in deep human connection. It requires active listening, mutual respect, and the **emotional intelligence** to understand diverse viewpoints and support individual development.

03

Continuous Growth

Transitioning from good to better demands a relentless focus on refinement. Great leaders foster cultures of feedback where **critical conversations** become catalysts for collective excellence.

04

Shared Trust

Building a culture of excellence requires **mutual trust and accountability**. True leaders empower others, fostering an environment where collaboration thrives.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin

The Pillars of Effective Conversations

1. Explicit Behavior - What is the concern
2. Objective Impact - Connect to school policy
3. Clear Resolution - Non-negotiable expectations
4. Clear consequences - What happens next

The Pillars of Effective Conversations

01

Explicit Behavior

Focus strictly on **validated**, objective behaviors. Frame issues around **observable facts and data points** rather than subjective interpretations. **What is the concern.**

02

Objective Impact

Connect the observed employee behavior directly to school **policy**, team performance, or the overall learning environment.

03

Clear Resolution

Express a **sincere** desire to support correction and invite feedback. Provide actionable suggestions alongside **non-negotiable expectations**.

04

Clear Consequences

Clearly outline **what happens next** if expectations are not met. Establish transparent accountability and next steps in the process.

01 | Explicit Behavior

Key Principle: Name the Concern



Be Specific

Detail precise, observable actions and direct observations instead of speaking in vague generalities.



Focus on the Behavior

Keep the dialogue centered entirely on concrete actions and verifiable data points rather than personal character.



Avoid Assumptions

Steer clear of subjective interpretations, mind-reading, or assuming underlying intent behind actions.

02 | Objective Impact

Key Principle: Connect Behavior to Outcomes



School Policy

Connect the observed behavior directly to established policies, guidelines, or professional expectations.



Team Impact

Highlight how the behavior impacts colleague collaboration, team morale, and overall operational efficiency.



Learning Culture

Link the behavior consequences directly to student outcomes, classroom dynamics, and the educational community.

03 | Clear Resolution

Key Principle: Outline Actionable Path Forward



Sincere Support

Express an authentic, professional desire to see the employee succeed and support their improvement journey.



Invite Feedback

Create room for open dialog and invite two-way input to build collaborative buy-in for the solution.



Non-Negotiable

State unambiguous expectations clearly, defining the essential baselines that absolutely must be achieved.

04 | Clear Consequences

Key Principle: Establish Accountability and Next Steps



Progressive Action

Define the specific next steps in the progressive discipline process if the behavior continues to occur.



Formal Record

Ensure the conversation is documented in writing, establishing a clear administrative record of the expectations.



Role Impact

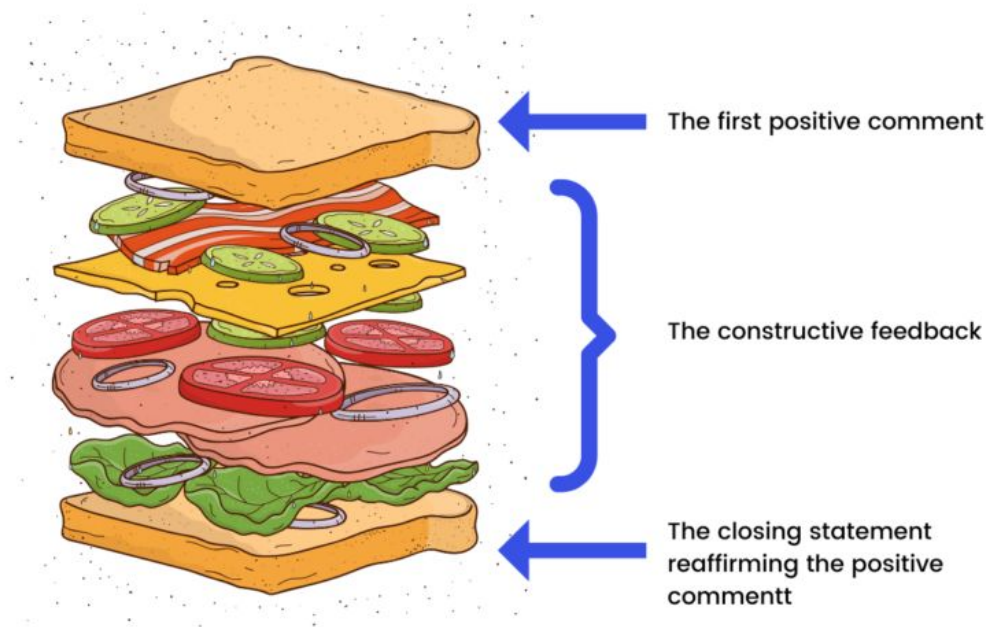
Explain how a failure to improve will affect future professional evaluations and contract status.

Language to Use



Skip the Compliment Sandwich

The Feedback Sandwich



Language to Use

Address the Issue

"This conversation is to address..."

State Expectations

"The expectation moving forward is..."

Define Next Steps

"If this continues, the next step may be..."

Conversation Guidelines

- Stay focused on expectations
- Avoid justifying
- Acknowledge feelings
- Active listening

Scenario One - Chronic Tardiness

Ms. Johnson is a veteran 5th-grade teacher at Lincoln Elementary School. Over the past six weeks, the principal has documented that she has arrived after her contracted start time on nine occasions. She has also been late to her morning bus duty five times.

Form pairs and practice delivering feedback using the critical conversation framework:

1. Address the Issue

"This conversation is to address..." (How will you describe his impact on school climate?)

2. Connect Behavior

"Your actions have..." (Connect the behavior to policy, school culture, team impact.)

2. State Expectations

"The expectation moving forward is..." (Define the standard for professional attitude.)

3. Define Next Steps

"If this continues, the next step may be..." (Outline clear consequences.)

Scenario Two - Resisting Constructive Feedback

The Case of Dr. Miller

Dr. Miller is an experienced elementary principal. During recent performance walk-throughs, the leadership team noted several operational areas needing improvement. When presented with constructive feedback, Dr. Miller became immediately defensive, dismissing the data, interrupting the assistant superintendent, and attributing systemic issues entirely to staff resistance rather than taking personal accountability.

Practice delivering feedback to the principal using the critical conversation framework:

1. Address the Issue

"This conversation is to address..." (How will you describe his defensive reaction to feedback and its impact on leadership trust?)

2. Connect Behavior

"Your actions have..." (Connect the defensiveness to leadership development and administrative growth.)

3. State Expectations

"The expectation moving forward is..." (Define standards for modeling professional growth and accountability.)

4. Define Next Steps

"If this continues, the next step may be..." (Outline clear formal evaluations or progress monitoring protocols.)

Documentation Checklist for Critical Conversations

1. Specific dates and times of occurrences

Document exact dates, times, and concrete occurrences. Avoid emotional generalizations, subjective adjectives, or speculative language regarding intent.

2. Policy or Standard Reference

Explicitly link the documented behavior to established school board policies, employee handbook guidelines, or professional leadership standards.

3. Specific behaviors and improvement directives

Clearly detail the direct consequences of the behavior on student safety, school culture, instructional quality, and operational trust within the building.

4. Clear Expectations & Timeline

Define precise standard behaviors moving forward. Establish immediate and measurable alignment goals, complete with specific milestone timelines.

Employee Acknowledgement & Progress Monitoring

Always ensure a formal signature block is provided for receipt acknowledgement, regardless of agreement. Establish a structured follow-up meeting schedule within 14 business days to review progress and provide continuous feedback support.

Scenario Three - Escalation to Written Documentation

The Case of Mr. Davis

Mr. Davis has received repeated feedback framed as instructional support regarding lesson planning and classroom management. Despite multiple coaching sessions and supportive interventions, no sustained change was observed. When recently issued a formal written reprimand, he expressed shock and confusion, claiming he believed the previous interactions were informal chats rather than warnings about potential disciplinary action.

Analyze the transition from supportive feedback to formal reprimand using the framework:

1. Document Supportive Efforts

"Previously provided support..." *(Detail specific dates of coaching, resources shared, and how the feedback was explicitly structured as help.)*

2. Establish Transition Point

"The shift to formal discipline is due to..." *(How will you document the lack of progress that necessitated moving from coaching to a written reprimand?)*

3. State Written Reprimand Grounds

"This written reprimand addresses..." *(Define the clear boundary line where supportive coaching ended and formal disciplinary expectations began.)*

4. Define Future Consequences

"Failure to sustain improvement will result in..." *(Outline the exact next formal steps, up to and including contract non-renewal.)*

Always document coaching and support interactions

- Early documentation - every instance of feedback, coaching, and support
- Clear expectations and follow up
- Transparency - Support is part of the formal record
- Consistency across employees - all staff in similar situations should receive the same levels of support/documentation
- Monitoring - continue to provide guidance and check-ins to help the employee to succeed

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Thoughts & Questions?



Tanya Sharp
Chief Operating Officer
tsharp@bentonvillek12.org
(479) 254-5015

