Workplace conflict checklist

- Consider using this workplace conflict conversation checklist as a tool to prepare for your conversation:

> *"People never get defensive with you because of what you are saying. People get defensive because of why they think you are saying it. It is their belief of your intent, not the content, that provokes defensiveness. Your job is to reassure them about your intent and to purify the content."*

Pre-Conversation considerations:
- What is the goal of the conversation and what are you hoping to get out of it?
    - Consider that your goal needs to be realistic. For example: to set a boundary, to mend a relationship, to have a good working relationship moving forward.
- What is your ideal outcome?
- What are you prepared to say?
- What are you not prepared to say and why?
- What triggered you into a feeling of conflict?
- Where did you feel threatened i.e. needs, values, identity?
- What is the actual behaviour that impacted you?
- What was the specific impact that this behaviour had on you?

Name a time and location that meets both parties needs.

- Consider where/when you plan to invite them.
- Try to assess if they are busy or not. Disturbing someone if they are already focused may make them defensive.
- Invite them to a meeting privately, discussing sensitive topics publicly may make someone defensive
- Do you plan to invite them via email or in person?
- Do you plan on having the meeting in a private in-person space where everyone feels safe?
- Does the other person prefer zoom vs in-person?
- Consider context setting: Some prefer being given a heads up on what the discussion will be about. For example: "Hi Alex, I'd really like to set aside some time for us to chat about something that happened in our team meeting yesterday that I was curious about. Do you have time this week to meet? Do you prefer in person, or via zoom?" Setting the context allows the other party to be made aware of what you want to discuss, gives them some time to prepare and think about what they would like to say.

Tangible tips to consider:

- Identify the key messages you want to convey.
- Strongly consider the use of your tone of voice. Typically, in a conflict conversation people tend to respond better to a calm, neutral tone of voice. Once voices start to get raised, it can tend to make the conversation feel unsafe and unproductive.

- Consider what the other person may want to convey during the conversation.
- Name what the other person may do or say that will be a trigger and how you plan to respond this time.
- Take some time to be introspective. Have you contributed to this conflict in any possible way? Perhaps some of your behaviours have contributed in some way, to this existing conflict and/or you may not be aware of this. During the conversation, you can ask: "Have I done something that I am not aware of that has offended you? I would like to know so that I can work on it or explain my side of things and my goal is for us to have a great working relationship moving forward.
- Think about your tone of voice and body language that you intend to use to get across your desired outcome. Remember that in-person body language is different from body language in zoom meetings.
- Name the behaviour that triggered your feelings of conflict. Be specific and think about descriptive vs evaluative language. For example, "I have noticed you are missing deadlines" is evaluative and too general and will get someone to become defensive. "I have noticed you missing deadlines. For example, your assignment about the engagement survey was not submitted until one week after the January 15th due date. Also, the performance evaluation submission was due two weeks ago and yours was submitted just yesterday." This is descriptive because it describes specific examples of behaviours where you noticed the person was missing deadlines. Practice describing the behaviour so that you go in prepared with tangible examples.
- Consider during the conversation, sharing something about yourself that may make it easier for the other party to understand why this has an impact on you (only if you feel comfortable sharing out about yourself). For example, you can share out a value or belief. "I have a strong value about my time being respected. I had a best friend who was always late for our meetups and it always made me feel as though my time was not valued. I always try to be on time as a sign of respect to the other person and if not, I like to let them know if I am going to be running late. I am sharing this with you so that you have some form of personal context as to why this is important to me".

Rehearsing before the conversation:

- Are you keeping your goal at the forefront?
- Are you including messages you intend to convey?
- What is being expressed (or not expressed) in your tone and body language?
- Consider that in the workplace we want to be respectful and professional in our conversations.
- Are you coming across in the way you want to come across?
- Have you practiced how you plan to respond to triggers?
- Are you practicing your calm and neutral tone of voice?

During the conversation:

- Name the behaviour that triggered your feelings of conflict. Again, be specific and think about descriptive vs evaluative language. For example, "I have noticed you are missing deadlines" is evaluative and too general and will get someone to become defensive. "I have noticed you missing deadlines. For example, your assignment about the engagement survey was not submitted until one week after the January 15th due date. Also, the performance evaluation submission was due two weeks ago and yours was submitted just yesterday." This is descriptive because it describes specific examples of behaviours where you noticed the person was missing deadlines. Practice describing the behaviour.

- Use "I" statements. "You" statements tend to sound threatening and can trigger the other person to feel defensive. It does not result in a positive outcome in a conflict conversation. Focusing on "I" statements during the description of behaviour and impact part of the conversation helps the other party understand how the behaviour made you feel.

  - For example: "I noticed you have been 15 minutes late to our last 3 meetings (descriptive behaviour/use of "I" language). The impact that this is having on me is that I am feeling as if my time is not being respected and it is causing me to be late for my next scheduled meeting (Impact). Just to share out a little bit about me (sharing something personal): I have a really strong value around my time and I always try to make it on time to my meetings so that I can always make it to my next meeting. Can we discuss some ways that this can be worked out so that we are both making it on time for our scheduled meetings (kindly asking for support to make things better)? My goal here is to try and ensure you and I both respect each other's time and have a great working relationship (realistic goal that works for both parties)."

- Consider your own tone and body language when you are talking, are you using a neutral or calm tone of voice?

- How are you sitting, are your arms crossed or are you open, are you facing the person?

- Try to change your judgement to curiosity – consider asking curious questions and focus on listening to hear, instead of listening to respond.

- Paraphrase back what you heard the person say, "What I think I heard you say is X, is that correct?"

- After hearing out the person(s), can you reflect on what role you may have played in the conflict?

- What part of the conflict do you own and what can you commit to doing better in the future for your own personal/professional growth journey?

- Discuss how you both can address conflict in the future. Are there any common goals you can agree on? Consider framing things in such a way that you both have a common goal you are passionate about and are working towards that goal. For example, if you are both on a project together and both desire to see it be a success, focus on that goal. Creating a larger picture and vision can often help people find something in common they are both working towards. IT oftentimes makes a smaller conflict seem less important when we consider the larger objectives at play.

- Are there any common workplace goals that you can both focus on working towards to think about the larger picture?

Plan an exit strategy

- If the conversation is not going well, what can you practice saying to yourself beforehand if you need to end the meeting?
- For example: "I am going to end the meeting so that we can reconvene at a time when we are both in a better place to talk."

After the conversation:

- Seek help when needed; Do you have a neutral support network outside of the workplace, a friend, coach or mentor that you can go to?

- Document your activities: where, what happened, what were the outcomes, dates and times, what did both parties commit to in the future, and what was the tone of the meeting from your perspective? Consider emailing yourself all documentation of your interactions with this person if it is potentially contentious. Emailing yourself provides a date and time stamp.

Consider post-reflection:

- How do you feel the conversation went?
- What did you learn?
- How can you grow from this conflict?
- What did not work?
- If it resulted in a positive outcome, how so?
- If it did not result in a positive outcome, what is next?
- Can you move forward?
- Will you meet again?
- Do you need to escalate the situation?

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