

Through the Crux – Mastering Difficult Conversations  
The Mountaineers Leadership Conference 2019  
Vik Sahney







Vikram Sahney 2008

# In this session...

- Review some of the common causes of conflict (5 minutes)
- Briefly review a framework and some tips for improving difficult conversations (10 minutes)
- Practice having difficult conversation in small groups (multiple rounds) (30 minutes)
- Group debrief / discussion (5 minutes)



Why do we end up like this? What are some of the common causes?

# A model for difficult conversations – VOMP

(This is what you are trying to do... not necessarily how you do it)

- **Ventilate** – allow each party to express their issue.
  - Ask open ended questions. Seek to get the other person speaking first.
  - Use active listening including paraphrasing to ensure you understand their viewpoint. This does not mean agreement, just understanding.
- **Ownership** – take ownership of the impact on the other person.
  - There is always something you could have done better to avoid a conflict. ‘I see how that when I did ‘x’ it could have contributed to situation Y and you feeling Z’ – we are not always our best selves!
- **eMpathize** – understand all points of view and feelings
- **Plan** – agree on a way to do things differently to solve the conflict
  - Must be clear and actionable with timelines

# Tips and Traps...

- Assume good intent – sometimes this can be hard to do, especially when emotional.
- You can't move on to solving a problem until you have really identified the core issue! Take your time.
- Finding common ground can help ease into a conversation and/or solutions.
- Be aware of and manage your emotions. You can share them/inquire! 'How do you feel like today is running?' 'When X happened, it made me feel Y' You can't argue with how someone else feels.
- You can usually pick the venue, time, etc. for the conversation to minimize risk; You cannot engage the logical brain / higher thinking when the reptilian brain is in control!
- Engage early – missing interventions early can signify acceptance or approval
- Consider using these powerful questions:
  - “What do you think?” (general interpretation)
  - “What leads you to think what you think?” (facts and reasoning)
  - “What would you like to accomplish?” (goal)
  - “What is the most important thing to you?” (concern)
  - “What do you suggest we do?” (proposal for concrete actions)

# How can you help de-escalate a disagreement?

- Be empathetic
- Respect personal space
- Use non-threatening body language
- Be professional, Stay Calm
- Focus on feelings not just facts
- Set limits: if they are belligerent or aggressive, set clear limits and consequences
- Choose wisely:
  - Accommodate if possible / appropriate
  - If impacting others, ask them to change their behavior
- Allow for time and silence. Count to ten in your head.

# Our role play scenarios

In groups of 3:

- One person observes and provides feedback (no role card needed)
  - Use of VOMP – do they uncover the real problem?
  - Communication skills: voice and body language
  - What might they try differently next time?
- One initiates ('Leader Card')
- One reacts ('Participant Card')

*Get into your character! Make it real!*

*Notes:*

- *Participants ask the leader how challenging a scenario they would like*
- *You may not have time to get to a resolution!*

## **Timeline (~10 minutes per scenario)**

- Read your scenario card (1 minute)
- Simulate the conversation (5 minutes)
- Observer provide feedback (2 minutes)
- Other feedback (1 minute)

Rotate roles / repeat



# Group Debrief

- What did you observe that worked?
- Where did you struggle?
- Any tips to share for others?

Feedback? Additional scenarios?

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