Five-Step Process for Difficult Conversations
Adapted from Melissa Brodrick, Harvard Medical School Ombuds and David Michael, NIH Ombuds

Step 1: Invitation and finding a time to talk
- Emotional readiness: address your emotions
- If the timing is right, invite the other to join you in a dialogue. Seek agreement to meet.
- Offer a date/time that is mutually convenient and sufficient
- Find a place that is neutral, quiet and confidential

Step 2: Cognitive preparation & conflict analysis
- What is this conflict about? Who is involved?
  - Clarify values, beliefs, interests and concerns
  - Underlying issues (e.g., respect, recognition, trust, style)?
- Consider what will happen if we fail to manage this conflict?
  - Impact on parties involved
  - Impact on others
- Think through possible successful solutions

Step 3: Defining and discussing the problem
- The opening
  - Express appreciation and optimism
  - Establish privacy or confidentiality if appropriate
  - Briefly state your understanding of the issue
  - Invite the other to tell you how they see the situation
- The dialogue
  - Take turns stating issues and feelings
  - When speaking
    - Use “I-messages” and collaborative language
  - When listening:
    - Don’t interrupt the speaker
    - Use active listening skills: reflections, open questions
  - Throughout:
    - Pay attention to non-verbal communication
  - Depersonalize the conflict through reframing: shift from “me versus you” to “us against the problem”
  - Recognize intention versus impact
  - Focus on behavior or issue and not the person
  - Identify interests versus positions
  - Identify common ground, interests and goals
  - Summarize new understandings/progress

Step 4: Finding solutions (I)
- Brainstorm together with creativity and without judgment
- Problem-solve with a focus on common goals, issues at hand
- Agree on a mutually satisfactory solution or on individual-specific solutions, ensuring that the solution is specific and balanced
- Perform a reality-check: Will the proposed solution work for the present and the future?

Step 4: Finding solutions (II)
- What if you reach impasse?
  - Try for small gains; break it down
  - Acknowledge commitment and progress made in understanding
  - Consider whether to re-engage in the process

Step 5: Follow-up
- If agreement has been reached, meet to review and refine if necessary
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1 Confrontational Language suggests you are: Collaborative language suggests that you are:
- Unwilling to consider the other person’s position
- Absolutely certain you are right
- Primed to argue and blame
- Not allowing the other person to save face
- Willing to consider the other person’s position
- Recognizing you could be wrong
- Seeking to address the problem together
- Helping the other person save face

2 Active Listening
- Validating – to acknowledge the worth of the person: “I see this is an important issue for you…”
- Reflecting – to show you understand how the other person feels: “You seem to feel strongly…”
- Encouraging – to convey interest and encourage the person to talk: “Can you tell me more?”
- Clarifying – to help clarify what was said and to get more information: “Let me see if I understand the situation, you are saying…”
- Restating – to show that you are listening and understanding: “So you want the behavior to stop immediately, is that right?”
- Summarizing: to pull together key points and facts to establish where to go next: “These seem to be the main things you’ve said….” “And this is what you want done…”

Key Skills
- Increase self-awareness about conflict styles
- Engage early – don’t avoid, especially if that’s your style
- Set up the conversation to succeed: goal is to get on the same side of the table
- Practice active listening
- Use collaborative language
- Depersonalize the conflict through reframing
- Shift from blaming to problem-solving
- Shift from position (the what) to interests (the why)
- Affirm the partnership in finding a solution
- Commit to reviewing the outcome