

Experiences in Navigating Tough Conversations in Statistical Collaboration

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Introductions



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What makes a conversation “tough” or difficult?

- Expectations of the two parties are misaligned
- Tone of either party can lead the conversation down an unintended path
- Particular topics, and even words, can raise the profile of a conversation from congenial to tough
- What are some other thoughts?

Why should we have difficult conversations in statistical collaborations?

In other words, why can't we move on without having these conversations and without a mutual understanding?

Jeff Hancher, from *The Champion Forum*, states that the 5 why's for having tough conversations are:

1. Build mutual trust and respect
2. Communication of value
3. Clarify the future
4. Reveal blind spots
5. Allow us to grow



Hancher, J. (2019). Navigating Tough Conversations, *The Champion Forum*, Episode 025, <https://www.thechampionforum.com/shownotes/tcf025>, 21 August.

Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: Daring Greatly and Rising Strong at Work*, Penguin Random House LLC: New York, NY.

- What are some particular scenarios (e.g., topic, setting, collaborators) that you have in mind that can lead to tough conversations?
- What do you do to prepare for a conversation that you expect will be difficult?

Preparing for and Approaching Difficult Conversations



- Identifying goals
- Importance of knowing where you stand (e.g., Is email not a good way to pass along information? Is there a better way to send information?)
- Mapping out the conversation
- Practicing the conversation
- Playing to your strengths
- Seeking support from colleagues or professional organization (ASA)

Preparing for and Approaching Difficult Conversations

- Conflict resolution
- Mindset
- Anticipating detours/roadblocks
- Know that the conversation may not go in the direction you anticipated
- Know that there will be obstacles (try to figure some of them out ahead of time --- if the obstacle is not there, you can't cross it)
- Balance between knowing what you want to get and proclaiming it in the conversation



How can we play to our strengths to navigate tough conversations?



- Identify and use your communication strengths and weaknesses.

• Active listening	• Friendliness	• Confidence
• Giving and receiving feedback	• Empathy	• Respect
• Understanding nonverbal cues	• Responsiveness	

- Avoid common barriers to effective communication

• Being judgemental	• Not paying attention
• Giving unwanted advice	• Avoiding concerns of others
• Using overly technical language	• Responsiveness

Taylor, J. (2015). *9 Effective Communication Skills*. [www] Available from:
<https://www.habitsforwellbeing.com/9-effective-communication-skills/> [Accessed 01/20/2021]

- What are your strengths and how do you use them?



De-escalating Difficult Conversations

- Check your own assumptions about why the other person is reacting the way they are.
- Consider taking a break if needed.
- Remain calm and professional.
- Stop talking and start listening. Really listen-- don't spend the time the other person is talking preparing to defend yourself.

“Uncomfortable and difficult situations are frequently only the result of misperception. You can make an effort to view them differently.”

(M Mori and R Fu, *Competencies Needed for Statistics Leadership from an International Perspective*, Leadership and Women in Statistics, pp 203-204)

Tough Conversation: Advocating for Data Visualization

- Watch the [video](#)
- Things to watch for in the video:
 - Disappointment and response
 - Confusion and response
- How do you think the statistician handled the researcher's disappointment with the time spent on EDA?
- How did the statistician do in the conversation about outliers?



Tough Conversation: Advocating for Data Visualization

- How do you explain things carefully and clearly without coming across as patronizing?
 - e.g., portion of script where statistician says that the visualizations may be overwhelming because he used colors, shapes and panels and discuss other approaches
- Discuss the potential challenges that arise from the perception that statistics “provides the answers” in research.
- What are other ways of handling timeline requirements and misalignments?

Final Thoughts

- Style and tone are unique but impactful
- Play to your strengths
- Take the time you need to process information
- Create an environment of mutual respect

Thank you!