

Tackling Tough Topics Workshop
Northwest Yearly Meeting, 2023

Tough topics may be one-time issues that come up or ongoing problems that push your church to its limits of being able to handle. This workshop is about communication skills and practices that help our churches handle the topics that we rather not face.

Actions:

Clearly define the topic and make sure it is clearly understood so that everyone in the discussion is talking about the same thing.

In a church setting take the time to write out the agreed upon description of what is being dealt with.

Make a list of questions to answer and things that you need to know or clarify before you can make a good decision.

Communicate Clearly: People need to know what is going on

- a) People feel respected when they are given a chance to think and pray ahead of time.
- b) Newer people feel like they are wanted – it is a simple, yet clear way of saying that they belong.

Be clear on who needs to be involved in the conversation, what the process will be and who is to make the final decision. The goal here is not to make things complicated. It is to make them clear.

- Pastor
- Specific committee or group
- Monthly Meeting

Alan's million-dollar question. This question has saved my bacon many times and helped me build trusting relationships that has gotten my churches through some tough issues. "Who do I not want to surprise?"

Three Essential Supportive Practices:

Practice One: Effective Conversation – assertiveness and active listening

Assertive: "I" statements, where I take responsibility for what I have to say and do not lace my comments with innuendos, hints or blame or shaming others

Wrong, "This conversation about worship time change is stupid."

Correct, "It is no secret that I am not at all sure about the need for a worship time change. My concerns can be summed up in two questions. My questions are. . ."

Active Listening: Repeating back what you understand the other person was saying.

Practice Two: Stay on Topic –

There is a range of reasons for why people change the topic during a discussion.

Sometimes they don't realize that they are changing the subject. They just thought they were adding a comment.

Sometimes they think a new subject is relevant to the current topic.

It is a common tactic for diverting from uncomfortable subjects or trying to sabotage the topic at hand. Often that comes in the form of a question.

My lifelong experience as a Friend is that we tend to sidestep anything that potentially feels like conflict or confrontation. "Peace at any cost."

Peace at any cost is not a healthy way of functioning.

~ The cost is that problems don't get solved, hurdles are not overcome, and we fail to move forward in ministry as congregations.

~ The cost is that motivated people become discouraged and may even quit.

We need to assume that in almost any meeting or discussion that at some point, for whatever reason, someone will change the subject. What's a leader supposed to do?

~ We do need to be attentive to motive, to demeanor and tone of voice; don't presume read negative motives.

~ When it is an obvious change of subject simply say, "that is a good comment, but for now we are staying on the subject".

~ When it is a confrontation or a challenge, which happens, we need to empower the clerk to restate the topic that is on the floor and announce that the group is staying on topic. This is scary territory. But it is what it takes to tackle tough topics.

Practice Three: Recognize signs of Conflict – and respond accordingly

Low level – there is a problem to solve.

Mid-level – the problem is still obvious but relational and/or other topics are attaching to the problem.

Not just the problem, but "you know, she always brings up something else", or "that family".

High-level – the problem is falling away, and other dynamics are taking over.

A key to recognizing that conflict is escalating is to pay attention to the words people are using:

- Low level – words are about fixing the problem, reflect trust and working together; we and us.

Strategy – stay on task and fix the problem.

- Mid-level – words shift more to us and them and take on a bit of accusatory and demeaning tones.

Strategy - Name what is going on and call people back to issue; if trust is waning it may require asking a 3rd party to step in and lead the conversation.

- High-level – words are about winning instead of solving the original problem. There is an assumption that opposing sides know what the others are thinking without asking or clarifying. "Always", "never" and "Your side" abound.

Strategy - Get help. The path to resolution may require the Yearly Meeting guidance of the conversation and creating space for resolution. The original problem is no longer the problem.