

Ombuds Insights

Quarterly resources to communicate clearly, disagree productively, and connect authentically.



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ARTS Model for Difficult Conversations

Sometimes at work we experience an event or pattern that needs to be addressed, whether it's a hurtful conversation, an unexpected change in assignment, or a performance concern. Difficult conversations can be between peers, with a direct report, or with a supervisor. What makes a conversation "difficult" is often the fear of retaliation, concerns about the other person's resistance or denial, or lack of practice. It's important to note that the goal of having a productive and effective difficult conversation is clarity, correction, understanding, repair and/or to be seen.

Building an interpersonal foundation in advance can increase the chances that a difficult conversation will be effective. While some assert that "I don't need to be friends with my co-workers; I just need to come in, do my job, and leave," the research shows that work improves when colleagues have a trusting relationship. [1] A helpful metaphor is the building of a bridge between colleagues so that when there are difficulties, there's a way to walk across it to handle the challenge. In another metaphor offered by Brene Brown, a relationship is like a jar of marbles: every positive interaction puts a marble into the jar, and every challenge takes a marble out of the jar. By investing in filling the jar, there is resilience for when marbles may be removed. [2]

Many people find approaching a difficult conversation challenging. The structured framework, **ARTS**, is an effective communication and problem-solving strategy that balances both people's needs to be heard. [3] Developed by the Academy of Communication in Healthcare (ACH), this approach is shared by Dr. Calvin Chou, a UCSF Internal Medicine physician and faculty member of ACH. The acronym ARTS stands for:

Ask

Reflect

Tell

Seek Solutions

Ask

While the impulse is often to begin a difficult conversation by telling the other person where you believe they went wrong, in ARTS the conversation begins with asking the other person their perspective or experience of a situation. The goal is to open up the dialogue. Open ended questions and invitations are important here:

- *What else have you noticed that has happened on our team?*
- *What other concerns would you like to share?*
- *I didn't realize you felt that way. Can you share more?*
- *Can you talk me through how my actions impacted you?*

Since you already know what you think, starting with **asking** demonstrates interest, curiosity, and willingness to learn about the other person's perspective.

Respond (or Reflect)

Before adding your own information, the next step in a difficult conversation, the one most often neglected, is responding without judgement, reflecting what you heard without adding your own explanation, apology, experience, or correction. Letting someone know that you have actively heard their perspective is the strongest way to demonstrate respect, part of the PRIDE principles. Additionally, when you reflect what you heard – both the words and the meaning – you increase the likelihood that the other person will listen to you. Finally, by responding with what you heard, you allow the other person to clarify or correct where you may have missed their main point, decreasing the likelihood of misunderstanding.

Tell

Here, in the third step, you tell your perspective: how the experience landed for you, what the impact has been, what you hoped or expected would have been done differently. Using language that owns your experience as yours rather than “the truth” can help you be heard without creating a fight/flight/freeze/fawn response. (Note that being heard is not the same as being agreed with, which is often our goal.)

Seek Solutions

The final step is to transition from “what happened” to “what solutions can we develop collaboratively?” Before confirming a plan, both people need to brainstorm together potential solutions, exploring the pros and cons of each. These options should build on shared interests and be both actionable and measurable. Potential language includes:

- *I wonder if you'd be open to something I thought of.*
- *I wonder if you have something in mind.*

Dr. Chou admits that a looming challenge of using ARTS is that you must be open to the possibility that *you might not get your own way*. Yet, openness to solutions other than your own regularly results in an outcome that is better than something either party can think of alone. The conversation is likely to be more respectful and relationship-preserving to allow for a better working relationship and clearer understanding between you.

To explore having an ARTS conversation, including role-playing in a confidential setting, feel free to reach out to the Office of the Ombuds to make an appointment.

References:

- [1] Mastroianni K Storberg Walker J Do work relationships matter? Characteristics of workplace interactions that enhance or detract from employee perceptions of well-being and health behaviors. Health Psychol Behav Med. 2014 Jan 1;2(1):798-819. doi: 10.1080/21642850.2014.933343. Epub 2014 Aug 11. PMID: 25750820; PMCID: PMC4346030.
- [2] Brown, B. (2012). Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead. Gotham Books.
- [3] Chou, C. L., & Cooley, L. (Eds.). (2018). Communication Rx: Transforming healthcare through relationship-centered communication. McGraw-Hill Education.



Image: Red orange light fixtures hang in Genentech Hall.

Meet the Team

The Office of the Ombuds recently welcomed a new Associate Ombuds, Gabriel Herrera (he/him). Gabriel joins UCSF from the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution in Washington, DC, where he served as Programs Director, leading initiatives that foster collaboration, trust, and inclusive decision-making across sectors. He also directed Convergence's Learning Lab, a training and capacity-building hub that equips leaders and organizations with the skills and tools to bridge divides and address complex challenges through collaborative problem-solving.

Read Gabriel's [full bio on our website](#).



New UCSF Resources Webpage

Learn what UCSF resources are available to you at the Office of the Ombuds' new [Resources within UCSF](#) webpage.

The ombuds can help you understand what resources are available to you and how best to access them. We can also make referrals when appropriate. [Schedule an Appointment](#) to learn more.

Was this newsletter's topic relevant to your context?



Clicking either response will open a screen where you can suggest your own topic for our next newsletter. Your feedback is important.

How to Schedule an Appointment

To protect confidentiality, the Office of the Ombuds prefers to schedule appointments by phone or email, and to conduct appointments on Zoom or in person, as electronic communications are not always private.

For appointments, call: (415) 502-9600. If we are unable to take your call, we will return it within one business day.

Office hours: 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

The Office of the Ombuds welcomes everyone, including individuals with disabilities. Please let us know if you would like an accommodation for your meeting. If calling to schedule presents an accessibility barrier, please email our office to schedule: ombuds@ucsf.edu.



UCSF Office of the Ombuds

Office Number: (415) 502-9600



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