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## In Review: Effective Difficult Conversations: A Step-by-Step Guide

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## In Review: *Effective Difficult Conversations: A Step-by-Step Guide*

Soehner, C. B., & Darling, A. (2017). *Effective difficult conversations: A step-by-step guide*. Chicago: ALA Editions. 128 pp. ISBN 978-0-8389-1495-3. \$38.

Having difficult conversations is, well ... difficult, but Catherine B. Soehner and Ann Darling make it a bit easier in their book, *Effective Difficult Conversations: A Step-by-Step Guide*. This text by ALA Editions does not claim to be a self-help book; rather it aims to “bring something new to the discussion while focusing on having ‘difficult’ conversations in your professional life” (p. xii). The authors give examples of difficult conversations: those dealing with hiring and promotion, performance, tasks that need to be done, and tasks or behaviors that may need to stop. They define which types of difficult conversations you may need to have and which may not be your responsibility. The authors describe not just the types of conversations you might need to have, but what might go wrong when you do have those conversations: an unwanted emotional response, rejection, or making a bad situation worse. At a little over 100 pages, Soehner and Darling deal primarily with issues in an academic library setting, although their recommendations can easily be adapted to other professional settings.

The book does not advocate difficult conversations; rather it provides the tools necessary to have one. Before any conversation occurs, the authors advise “getting clear:” their idea of self-reflection and stating one’s objectives. They discuss the timing of those conversations, recommending the beginning or middle of the week rather than the end. And they give concrete tips on how to get ready in advance, such as preparing a 3x5 card with no more than three bullet points on it to use as a reference. Prior to the meeting, they advise, you should re-read the card to ensure that any reference points not reflect resentments or judgments against the person with whom you will be speaking.

Soehner and Darling use their conversation with an employee named Joy as an example, an example from one of the authors’ real-life experiences. Joy was an early-career librarian who had gone from being highly productive and reliable to missing reference desk shifts and class instruction. Joy’s colleagues had been complaining, and, since she was in the middle of a tenure review period, her supervisor decided to initiate a difficult conversation with her. When Joy realized that her supervisor wanted to speak with her (and knowing that her co-workers had lodged complaints), she was angry. But after her supervisor opened with her concern, Joy admitted to having personal stressors that were affecting her professional life. By just listening and encouraging Joy’s positively emotional response (i.e., she broke-down and was upset, but not angry and resentful), the supervisor was able to work with Joy and provide her with more direction and scheduling tips. However, difficult conversations do not always have similar happy endings. The authors describe situations in which employees become incensed. In

those cases, the authors state that it is important that the supervisor resist feelings of resentment. Instead, write down key words during the conversation and “take a breath before responding.”

Chapters are broken out in clear, easy-to-reference topics with examples of typical workplace issues and personality types in clear and concise text. Conversation bubble graphics make it easy to focus on an important point and each of chapters #1 through #5 provides activities at the end. While most of the book’s viewpoint is from a supervisory position, it is also helpful for dealing with co-workers and bosses with concrete examples that are very actionable.

Soehner and Darling do not pretend that having difficult conversations is easy, but they do provide useful tools to make the process more seamless and less stressful, regardless of who is involved in the conversation or what problem the conversation needs to address.

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