



# REPRODUCIBLE TRAINING LIBRARY

Customizable Soft-Skills Courseware

## Dealing with Difficult Conversations



Instructor Guide

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# Instructional Design and Learning Philosophy

We are committed to providing the best core skills content possible for Instructor-Led Training (ILT). The following principles are applied in the development of programs:

## Sound Instructional Design

All course content is developed using a variety of research techniques. These include:

- Brainstorming sessions with target audience
- Library research
- Online research
- Customer research (focus groups, surveys, etc.)
- Subject Matter Experts (SME)
- Interviews with trainers

Expert instructional designers create imaginative and innovative solutions for your training needs through the development of powerful instructional elements. These include:

- Learning objectives — effective tools for managing, monitoring and evaluating training
- Meaningfulness — connects the topic to the students' past, present and future
- Appropriate organization of essential ideas — helps students focus on what they need to know in order to learn
- Modeling techniques — demonstrate to students how to act and solve problems
- Active application — the cornerstone to learning — helps students immediately apply what they have learned to a real-life situation
- Consistency — creates consistent instructions and design to help students learn and retain new information
- Accelerated learning techniques — create interactive, hands-on involvement to accommodate different learning styles

## Application of Adult Learning Styles

Adults learn best by incorporating their personal experiences with training and by applying what they learn to real-life situations. Our experienced instructional designers incorporate a variety of accelerated learning techniques, role plays, simulations, discussions and lectures within each course. This ensures that the learning will appeal to all learning styles and will be retained.

Please note: Only the pages highlighted in yellow below are those featured in this preview.

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# Course objectives

Successful completion of this course will increase your knowledge and ability to:

- ◇ Recognize problems before they become a crisis
- ◇ Handle sensitive issues to avoid escalation
- ◇ Diffuse difficult situations through appropriate communication
- ◇ Express urgency without panic
- ◇ Deliver bad news
- ◇ Create an environment that encourages problems to be surfaced instead of swept under the rug
- ◇ Express emotions appropriately and help others express their feelings appropriately
- ◇ Discuss negative feedback constructively
- ◇ Create an action plan for dealing with difficult conversations

## Course objectives

Successful completion of this program will enable you to:

- Recognize problems before they become a crisis.
- Handle sensitive issues to avoid escalation.
- Diffuse difficult situations through appropriate communication.
- Express urgency without panic.
- Deliver bad news.

## Course objectives (cont.)

- Create an environment that encourages problems to be surfaced instead of swept under the rug.
- Express emotions appropriately and help others express their feelings appropriately.
- Discuss negative feedback constructively.
- Create an action plan for dealing with difficult conversations.

Review the course objectives with participants.

Note: The content of this program is geared toward difficult conversations, but not dangerous ones. Let participants know that if they ever feel unsafe, if they worry that they are dealing with a potentially violent person or situation, they should involve HR and/or any process that their organization has in place for handling threatening situations.

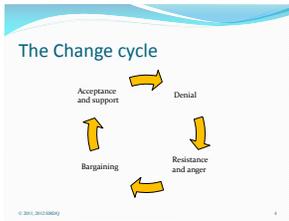
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## Chapter One



### ***DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS — WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?***

Briefly discuss the cycle to show that in difficult conversations, people may be in different stages of the change cycle, which will affect how the conversation will go.



**Denial:** People are often shocked or surprised when change occurs, even if they had a suspicion it was coming.

**Resistance and anger:** There is a natural resistance to change. The familiar is more comfortable. It's easier. It's what people know.

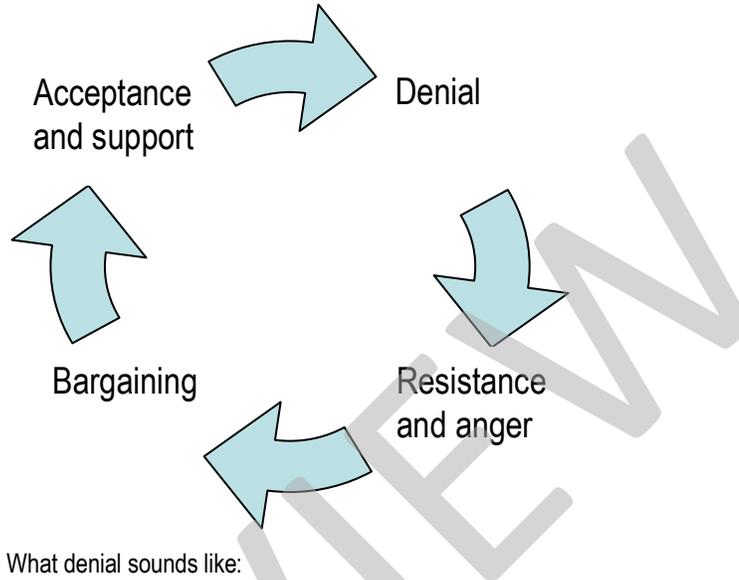
**Bargaining:** When it becomes apparent that the change isn't going away, people find a way to cope with it to some degree.

**Acceptance and support:** Once the change is successfully in place, support begins, even if it's very subtle.

**Activity:** Have participants fill in phrases or statements that reflect each part of the change cycle. Refer to the PPT slides for suggestions, if needed.



# The change cycle



What denial sounds like:

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What resistance and anger sound like:

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What bargaining sounds like:

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What acceptance and support sound like:

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Denial: "Oh no! This can't be happening."

Resistance: "I'm not going to. You can't make me."

Bargaining: "Well, I'll go along if you ..."

Acceptance and support: "It's working. How can I help?"

Point: Knowing where people are in the change cycle can help you relate to them better.

Have participants work in pairs or small groups to complete the activities on this page. Debrief by sharing ideas with the entire group.

**Activity:** Replace each blaming statement with a more effective response.  
Possible answers:

- “Were you aware that ...?”
- “Can I have a moment to explain?”
- “I’m not sure I understand. Are you saying ...?”

**Activity:** Replace each absolute statement with a more effective response.  
Possible answers:

- “It seems like ...”
- “I’ve noticed several occasions when ...”
- “Let’s see if this time we can ...”

Reframing shifts focus away from name-calling and toward collaborative activities. For example, a typical response to “I can’t trust you” is “Yes, you can.” Better: “I want to be trustworthy. Help me understand what I need to do for you to trust me.”

Typical response to “You always want things your way” is “No, I don’t.” Better: “I value your ideas. What am I doing that leads you to feel that way?”

## Confrontational language

Nothing turns an ordinary conversation into a difficult one faster than using confrontational language. Confrontational language attempts to prove the other person wrong, focuses on the past, uses words and phrases that provoke the other person, includes direct or implied commands and demonstrates a sense of mistrust and lack of respect. It almost always leads to defensiveness and provocation.

Specific examples include:

### Blaming statements

“If you had told me sooner ...” \_\_\_\_\_

“You’re not listening to me.” \_\_\_\_\_

“You’re not making any sense.” \_\_\_\_\_

### Absolutes

“You always ...” \_\_\_\_\_

“You never ...” \_\_\_\_\_

“This is a total waste of time.” \_\_\_\_\_

### *To counteract others’ blaming statements or absolutes: reframe*

“I can’t trust you.” \_\_\_\_\_

“You always want things your way.” \_\_\_\_\_

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# The escalation process

## Psychological changes

- ◇ Trust is broken and is difficult to re-establish
- ◇ Using selective perception: Looking for evidence to reinforce your judgments about the other person, and ignoring evidence to the contrary
- ◇ Moving from self-concern to getting even
- ◇ Moving from one issue to many or from a specific issue to general complaints
- ◇ Attempting to draw others into the conflict

## Visible signs of escalation

- ◇ Change in vocabulary and/or tone of voice
- ◇ Abrupt mood shift
- ◇ Tightness in facial or neck muscles, facial flush and/or teeth clenching
- ◇ Physically or verbally acting out

## Subtle signs of anger

- ◇ Chronic lateness or delays
- ◇ Gossip
- ◇ Sarcasm and back-handed compliments

## How to de-escalate

- ◇ Respect the angry person's perceptions as real to him or her.
- ◇ Move the angry person to a neutral environment.
- ◇ Create a cooling-off period.
- ◇ Stay out of the angry person's physical space.
- ◇ Use a nonthreatening tone of voice and body language.

When confrontation language is not reigned in, communication breakdown is likely to occur, leading to escalation. At this point, both parties need to de-escalate before productive problem-solving can occur.



Selective perception examples: If you think the other person is a liar, you'll try to catch her in a lie. You'll never notice anything good that she does; if you see her talking to someone, you'll think she's gossiping about you.

Specific to general example: "You didn't complete the report by 3:00 as you promised" becomes "We can't work together."

# Be assertive

One key to success when dealing with difficult conversations is to make certain your approach is assertive, not aggressive or passive.

*Webster's New World Dictionary:* "To state positively; declare; affirm. To maintain or defend (rights or claims)"

## Our working definition:

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## Principles of assertive behavior

- ◇ Ask others for what you need.
- ◇ Show concern for everyone's feelings (including your own).
- ◇ Be self-accountable and expect others to be too.
- ◇ Use appropriate body language: Confident stance, body language congruent with words.
- ◇ Use appropriate vocal traits: Even tone of voice, appropriate words, "I" language, direct questions and answers.

Assertive behavior means saying what you need to say when you need to say it. When people behave assertively, they state what they want, but do so in a way that takes into account others' needs. Assertiveness values the needs of all people; it involves holding yourself and others accountable for what is said and unsaid.



Working definition: To stand up for yourself without violating the rights of others. Assertiveness means acting in your own interest, to maintain your own rights without violating the rights of any other person.

Ask participants to develop a list of characteristics of an assertive person. Typical answers include: Direct, be comfortable, calm, confront situations without exploding, etc.

We usually know what we want to say, but we don't always have the skills to say it appropriately.

**Activity:** Show each situation on the PPT slides and ask participants which response they would typically use, and which is the assertive one.

**Assess your assertiveness**

**Situation 1:**  
At the end of a very busy day, a coworker touches you with more affection than you're comfortable with.

- "I want you to stop now."
- You say nothing and walk away.
- "If you touch me again, your body will be in pieces."

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1. "I want you to stop now."

**Assess your assertiveness**

**Situation 2:**  
You come in to work in a fine mood and say to John, "Good morning, how are you?" He snaps in response, "Just leave me alone."

- "And a very good morning to you, too... jerk."
- "I'm very sorry I bothered you."
- "I think being rude isn't necessary."

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2. "I think being rude isn't necessary."

**Assess your assertiveness**

**Situation 3:**  
After you've made a presentation in a large meeting, your boss says, "You expect me to believe you worked hard on that? You're nuts if you expect me to accept this."

- "Actually, I did work hard. Where do we differ?"
- "I'll be glad to go back and rework the numbers."
- "If you talk to me that way again, you can do your own report."

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3. "Actually, I believe I did work hard. Where do we differ?"

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# Develop your “goodwill bank”

*Key: Don't wait to communicate until there's a problem*

## Establish credibility and trust

These characteristics demonstrate credibility and trust:

- ◇ Tact: The ability to present an unpopular position that creates little or no hostility, while preserving the other person's sense of dignity.
- ◇ Integrity: Truthfulness, fairness, using objective information to back up your message
- ◇ Sincerity: Meaning what you say
- ◇ Reliability: Positive intent: Having and showing mutual concern and assuming that the other person does too
  - Think of what you would say to your best friend
  - Be solution-oriented
  - Exhibit self-confidence and open-mindedness
  - Take responsibility for your communication and its consequences

### **Keep in mind:**

- ◇ A confrontation doesn't have to be ugly. Conflict prevention doesn't mean not saying anything when you disagree. It does mean not saying anything you'll regret or that will put the other person on the defensive.
- ◇ Beware of confrontation that escalates merely because of the way we are handling it, especially our communications — words, tone, gestures, behaviors, etc.

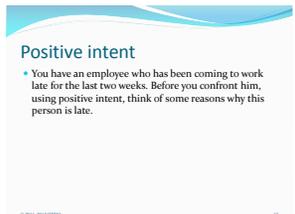
The time to establish credibility and trust is *before* you're in a situation in which you need to confront another person.

Respect the other person's position and time, and remain in control of your emotions.

Sincerity: Mean what you say.

Be honest; use objective information to back up your message, and base decisions on sound reasoning.

Positive intent: Comes from a place of mutual concern for yourself and for the other person. Even if you suspect the other person is not working from a place of mutual concern, you act as if he/she is.



Slide reflection activity – possible answers: sick child, partner or parent, Marathon training, chemo treatment, extensive dental work, delivering “meals-on-wheels etc.”

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# Commit to a solution

## Verbalize your vision

- ◇ Verbalize your plans for the future — the benefits of reaching a solution. Lay out an agenda, and commit yourself to keeping it.
  - Lets the other person know what you expect
  - Reinforces to yourself your desire to find a solution
- ◇ Focus on the end result while realizing the process to get there may be messy/awkward/complicated/difficult.
- ◇ Share your doubts, but don't let them stop you from working hard to reach a solution.

## Dig deep

- ◇ Examine the situation thoroughly to uncover root causes.
- ◇ Keep asking why, why, why.

## Pay attention to the pattern

- ◇ When dealing with a difficult situation, be aware of the direction your interaction is taking. If you go off track, refocus your efforts by taking a break for a few minutes, thinking it through, and then getting back on track toward a solution.

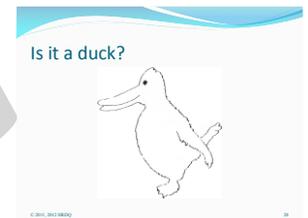
## Be flexible

- ◇ If what you're doing isn't working, try something different. Flexibility is a sign of health and the essence of effectiveness. It involves getting feedback and having more than one choice in a given situation.

A commitment is a choice. Choose to follow through on your commitment to find a solution.

Dig deep: When a workplace problem surfaces, conduct a deep-down analysis to uncover root causes.

Show PPT to illustrate:



Point: Things are not always what they seem, and the obvious solution may not be the best one.

If you find yourself face-to-face with a problem, resist the urge to jump to an easy solution. Get busy with your colleagues and start peeling back the layers to understand why the situation is occurring. Keep peeling: ask why, why, why? Only when you know the underlying cause can you have an intelligent conversation on how to respond.

## Communicate feelings appropriately

One way to gain emotional control is to figure out what triggers intense emotions. Awareness of these triggers can help you maintain a detached engagement: the ability to separate issues and personalities in a conflict.

Ask yourself ...	Ask others ...
When do I get frustrated or complain, or become obsessed or mentally exhausted?	When have you seen me upset?
When have I avoided dealing with a person or situation?	What situations seem to upset me the most?
When have I talked about people behind their backs?	What behaviors tell you that I am mad, sad, glad or afraid?
What is guaranteed to put me in a bad mood?	When am I difficult to get along with?

### Use language to express feelings

- ◇ Express, don't dramatize. Remain tactful.
- ◇ Four basic feelings: mad, sad, glad, afraid

Emotion	Less effective	More effective
Mad	Screaming, swearing, throwing things	
Sad	Crying	
Glad	Not expressing any emotion	
Afraid	Denial, looking scared	

Review the information about communicating feelings. Emphasize that awareness is the first step to controlling and communicating feelings. Without awareness, you have no chance of being proactive in managing your emotions.



**Activity:** Expressing emotions. Working in small groups, have participants complete the chart. Many answers will work as long as they are candid about the emotion felt. A helpful tool is to remind participants that if they can substitute "I think" or "I feel as though" or "I feel that," then they haven't really expressed an emotion. For example, "I feel you hurt my integrity" can be substituted with "I think you hurt my integrity" or "I feel as though you hurt my integrity." A true feeling statement is "I am hurt because what you said damaged my integrity."

Have you ever said, "Well, I was just being honest." It's important to say what you mean directly, and be tactful. One way to accomplish this is to be authentic, sincere, honest, transparent, and up front, while also checking in on the most diplomatic and productive approach.

**Activity:** Have participants work in small groups and fill in the polished version for each statement. Possible answers (Note: There are many possible answers):

Unrefined: "That's never going to work."

Refined: "Can you tell me more about what you're proposing? I'm having a difficult time seeing how it will improve the situation."

Unrefined: "You're having difficulty understanding the needs of your direct reports."

Refined: "I'm sensing that you and your direct reports are not seeing eye to eye. Can you tell me a little more about that?"

Unrefined: "You'll never make the client happy with that approach."

Refined: "In this project, your goal was to have a satisfied client. How would the changes that you are proposing help you accomplish that?"

Unrefined: "I think you're mistaken and you should try a different way."

Refined: "I hear what you are saying, but can you tell me some other ways that you have seen this carried out?"

Unrefined: "Let's get started, this may take a while."

Refined: "We have a lot of information to cover in this report. Can I get you anything before we get started?"

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## Be direct without being insensitive

Effective feedback is direct and clear while also being diplomatic and tactful. These tips will help you accomplish that goal.

◇ Get more information before making a statement

– Unrefined: "That's never going to work."

– Refined: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

◇ Check out any assumptions you might be making

– Unrefined: "You're having difficulty understanding the needs of your direct reports"

– Refined: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

◇ Keep focused on the goal and intention

– Unrefined: "You'll never make the client happy with that approach."

– Refined: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

◇ Know the difference between persuasion and inquiry

– Unrefined: "I think you're mistaken and you should try a different way."

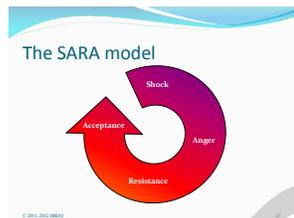
– Refined: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

◇ Set the stage

– Unrefined: "Let's get started, this may take a while."

– Refined: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

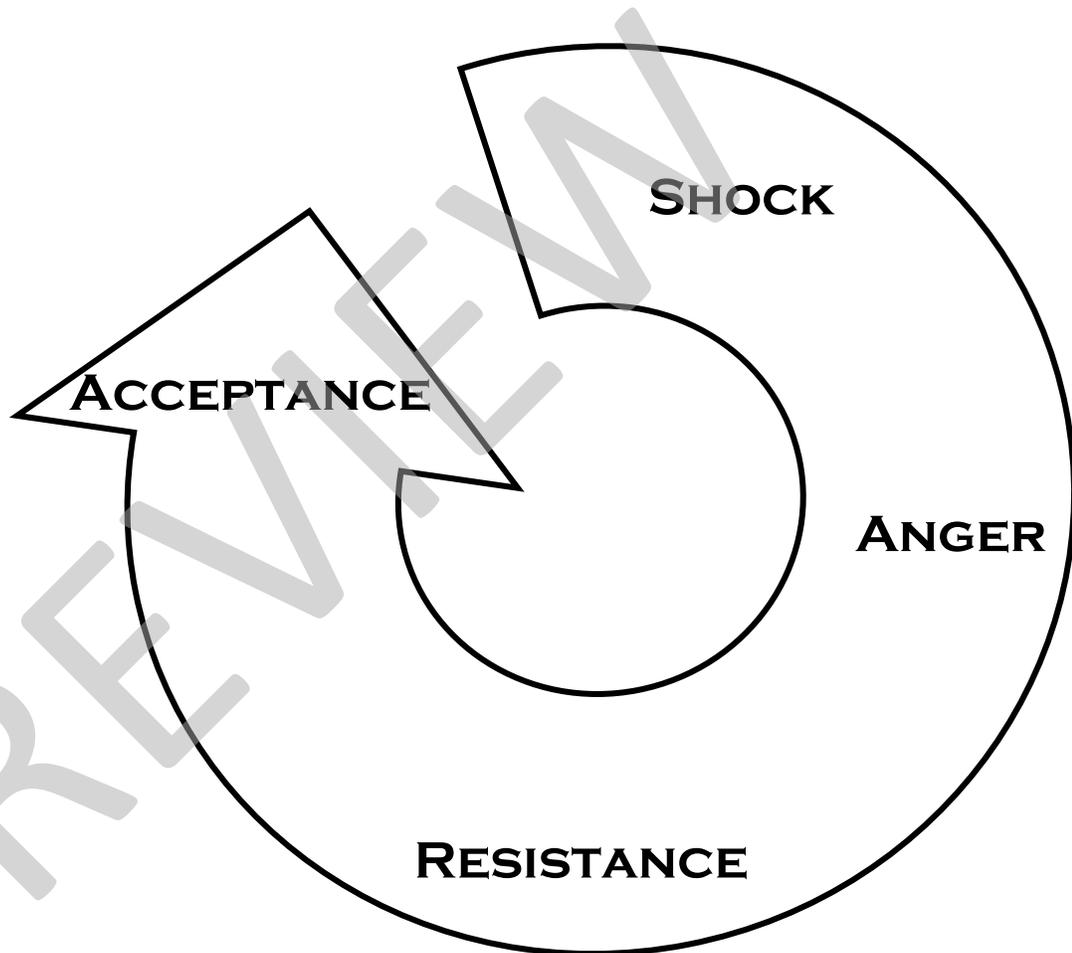
Feedback is essential to growth and improvement for all associates. It provides them with honest and specific information about the status of their work and organizational expectations. The individual who can see feedback as a positive and ongoing communication tool will find many opportunities for growth and be able to build stronger relationships with co-workers. But what do you do when an individual is in denial, argues every point, or starts to complain during a feedback session? It's natural for them to feel defensive while receiving feedback. It's also natural for managers to be unnerved by such reactions. Understanding that both you and the employee may feel uncomfortable or even unsafe is the first step to managing emotional reactions to feedback.



When emotions overwhelm a feedback session, defensive behaviors can cause you or the recipient to back down, lose control or disrupt focus. In this section you will learn techniques that will help manage a highly charged feedback session and allow the recipient to move forward.

## Actions and reactions

### The SARA model



### Typical categories for feedback recipients

- 25% are “go-getters”
- 50% are “on the fence”
- 25% say, “no way”

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# Coaching through resistance

Be conscientious about separating *who* someone is from *what* the person is hearing about in their feedback. In giving or receiving feedback it is essential that people not feel attacked personally, but that they are being given the chance to correct something that is not working and build on strengths that have led to success.

## Seven keys to overcoming resistance

1. Clarify the purpose of the coaching feedback session
2. Address the “What’s in it for me” concern
3. Use “I” messages to help move them to acceptance
4. Build trust by asking questions, being honest, and practicing positive intent
5. Communicate openly
6. Address individual concerns and questions
7. Create open and on-going dialogue

## Tips for handling an angry person

- ◇ Deal with it as soon as possible. Don’t let it fester.
- ◇ Respond to emotions first
  - Acknowledge feelings, and then paraphrase to make sure you understood the issue.
  - “I know you have strong opinions about this feedback. I want to understand your view.”

Point out to participants that they may not be at their best as a communicator when faced with a resistant or angry person. They need to pay particular attention to these details. Ask a participant to share an example of a time when they were involved in a situation where the language they used appeared to escalate the other person. Using their example, show how they could have used “I” messages and positive intent to stop the situation from escalating.

Possible examples of “I” messages: “I think that I could help you understand this better.” “I understand that this may seem inconsistent with your line of thinking, but I would like to help you work through these conflicting thoughts.”

Tips to handling an angry person: We’re not talking about unbalanced, dangerous people here. We’re talking about hotheads who have developed a habit of blowing up because it’s gotten results.

Find a way to let the angry person save face. The best way to do that is to validate their feelings, and deal with the issue as soon as possible.

### Coaching through resistance

- Deal with it as soon as possible
- Respond to emotions first
- Let them vent
- Find agreement about something
- Allow time for reflection and silence



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## Course review

1. List the four steps of the change cycle.

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2. Replace the following blaming statement with a more effective response: "You shouldn't have left early without telling me."

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3. Which question/statement is a better way of framing your message?

- a. "Jim, I think we disagree on the strategy for the Forbes project. Do you have a few minutes to talk about it?"
- b. "Jim, please meet me in my office in five minutes."

4. List three ways to be more listener-centered.

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5. Which of the following is NOT a symptom of hidden agendas?

- a. Rumors
- b. Quick decisions
- c. Information is difficult to obtain
- d. Issues expand

1. Denial, resistance and anger, bargaining, acceptance, and support.

2. Note: There are many possible responses. "I was caught off guard when you left without telling me, and I had to miss an important meeting."

3. a

4. Use inquiry, paraphrasing and acknowledgement.

5. b — usually, delayed decisions are a symptom of hidden agendas.

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