You have a problem with your program, your adviser, or your advisee. Maybe you feel that another student is being favored at your expense. Perhaps you need to tell an advisee that progress to date is unacceptable. What do you do? Should you schedule a face-to-face conversation? If so, how do you prepare? How do you conduct this potentially awkward discussion?

**INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Do you want to do something about it? If the situation is temporary, a wise alternative may be to cope with the problem rather than confront it. If the problem is serious and difficult to resolve, perhaps a dialogue with the person will help to improve matters.

If you want to do something about it, consider whether a direct conversation is the best approach. Consult with someone who understands the academic culture. The Student Conflict Resolution Center (academic issues), Office for Conflict Resolution (employment issues), University Counseling and Consulting Services (confidential counseling), or a trusted mentor are all good resources. Consider:

- How does a direct conversation contribute to the achievement of your short- and long-term goals? If your goal is to vent, don’t have the conversation.
- If you value the relationship, will a direct conversation enhance the relationship or risk damaging it? If you feel unsafe or threatened in the relationship, don’t have a face-to-face conversation.
- What are the alternatives to a face-to-face conversation? Are there intermediaries who can help?

**SETTING UP THE MEETING**

If you decide a direct conversation is best, don’t do it by email or phone. Meeting face-to-face will provide you the opportunity to judge the reaction of the other person and adjust your approach, if needed.

- Make an appointment, planning for adequate time. The place should be private, such as a professor’s office.
- Practice the conversation with a trusted mentor or friend. Anticipate the range of reactions and practice your response.
Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

**THE CONVERSATION**

- Use diplomatic, not inflammatory, language to present the issue in the meeting.
  - Give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Don’t assume the worst about their intentions. Try to put yourself in his or her shoes and understand the needs and stressors that person is experiencing.
  - Frame the conversation so that you are acknowledging his or her needs and helping to make clear your own needs and concerns.
  - Avoid judgmental language. For example, instead of saying, “You could have told me two months ago, but you didn’t,” try something like, “This assignment comes at a time in the semester when I have no real options to change my schedule.”
- Understand and acknowledge your role in the conflict. Maybe you missed a deadline, failed to communicate about obstacles, or have been inaccessible or non-responsive at times. Acknowledge these shortcomings.
- Be an attentive listener.
- Try to have an open and positive attitude.
- Come prepared to share some ideas for resolutions and to listen to others. Be open-minded about possible solutions. If the other person asks, “What do you want me to do about it?” respond by generating several acceptable outcomes rather than limiting yourself to only one.
- Be brief, organized, and to the point.

**ENDING THE CONVERSATION**

- Have an exit strategy in case the conversation goes badly. If the conversation begins to escalate unpleasantly, bring it to an end. For example, “Rather than talking more now, let’s adjourn and talk more tomorrow after we’ve had a chance to reflect on this.”
- Have realistic expectations. It may be a great achievement for the conversation to go “not badly.” Don’t expect it to provide the ideal resolution or to resolve all of the relationship issues.
- Identify next steps before concluding the conversation. When you will hear back regarding the response? What will you do to further problem solving? Acknowledge that you may feel awkward in the days ahead but you want to get over the awkwardness and have a good working relationship.

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**Supportive and Confidential Resources**

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<th>Student Conflict Resolution Center</th>
<th>Office for Conflict Resolution</th>
<th>University Counseling and Consulting Services</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jan Morse, Director</td>
<td>Julie Showers, Director</td>
<td>Matt Hanson, Senior Psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>254 Appleby Hall</td>
<td>662 Heller Hall</td>
<td>340 Appleby Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: 612-624-7272</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-1030</td>
<td>Phone: 612-624-3323</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:morse005@umn.edu">morse005@umn.edu</a></td>
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