

NIHTC Featured Course of the Quarter

Managing Difficult Conversations and Conflict at NIH: Fundamentals of Negotiation (Course # NIHTC4203)

Keisha Berkley, NIH Training Center Program Manager, chats with Carl Cohen, primary facilitator for the Center's "Managing Difficult Conversations and Conflict at NIH: Fundamentals of Negotiation" workshop.

Keisha: Why are negotiation skills so important?

Carl: Pretty much every interaction we have with other people involves a negotiation of some sort - whether it's deciding what to make for dinner or what the priorities of a new program initiative should be. What you learn as a negotiator is that the outcome of such discussions frequently depends not so much on what points you make in favor of your objective, but rather on how you make them.

Keisha: What does a successful negotiation look like?

Carl: The hallmark of a successful negotiation is when the interests of both parties get equal weight. Some think that they need to push as hard as they can for their position in order to succeed. What you learn as a negotiator is that when all you're doing is pushing for your position, that's what the other person will do also and the result will be a stalemate. In a successful negotiation, the interests of both sides get attention. Showing the other person that you care as much about what they get out of the negotiation as what you get is the breakthrough strategy to a fair solution.

Keisha: I understand you have a background in science. What expertise do you bring to this topic and to the NIH scientific community, in particular?

Carl: The fact that I'm a scientist, was funded by the NIH of over 25 years, and held management and leadership positions in academia and in biotech companies gives me credibility with a scientific and technical audience. Both in my book *Lab Dynamics* and in my workshops, I present case studies that are based on my own experience in managing science-based enterprises. I think people appreciate that I use as examples my own missteps as a manager and leader and discuss difficult issues I've struggled with during my career. Doing that almost always encourages workshop participants to be open about the challenges that they are facing and that leads to great peer learning experiences.

Keisha: Is conflict in the workplace more prevalent now than in years past? If so, why?

Carl: My sense is that it is not. One lesson I try to impart in my workshops is that conflict itself is neither good or bad - what matters is how you manage it. Conflict for example, a strong difference in viewpoints when a decision needs to be made, is an inevitable consequence of human interaction. When managed by a skillful leader or negotiator, conflict can be productive if it leads to the airing of

different viewpoints. When conflict is avoided, as when a contentious discussion is curtailed by a leader who feels uncomfortable with or threatened by it, the group can end up making a poor decision because different viewpoints don't get sufficient discussion. The key to successful leadership in such situations is to skillfully manage the conflict, keeping the participants focused on the problem and ensuring that frustrations with the problem don't get translated into frustrations with other people.

Keisha: What are consequences of not managing conflict/difficult people properly?

Carl: The most common problems I encounter in my consulting practice arise from leaders who fail to address conflicts within their groups or organizations. Some are so averse to conflict that they fail to even notice it, others notice it but, lacking the skills to intervene, do nothing and hope it will go away on its own. This can be a very demoralizing situation for team or department members who may end up feeling that they need to take responsibility for managing a conflict that actually is the leader's responsibility. The result can be resentment, escalation of an unresolved conflict and poor team performance.

Keisha: Are professionals who are willing to confront opposition generally more successful?

Carl: My experience tells me that people who recognize and address conflictual situations in a collaborative manner and make use of the tools of negotiation are more effective at their jobs than those who do not. Similarly, leaders and managers who do so create teams that function at a higher level than those who do not.

Keisha: What can NIHers expect by attending the NIHTC workshop?

Carl: They can expect an experience that will transform how they approach difficult conversations of all types. During the workshop, participants will learn and practice simple, easy to remember tools that will enable them to change what might have been a contentious discussion into an exercise in collaboration. We also cover how to interact and negotiate effectively with people who may be critical, aggressive and demanding.

Managing Difficult Conversations and Conflict at NIH: Fundamentals of Negotiation

August 16 or September 14

Tuition: \$289

For details, visit: <https://trainingcenter.nih.gov/courses/NIHTC4203>