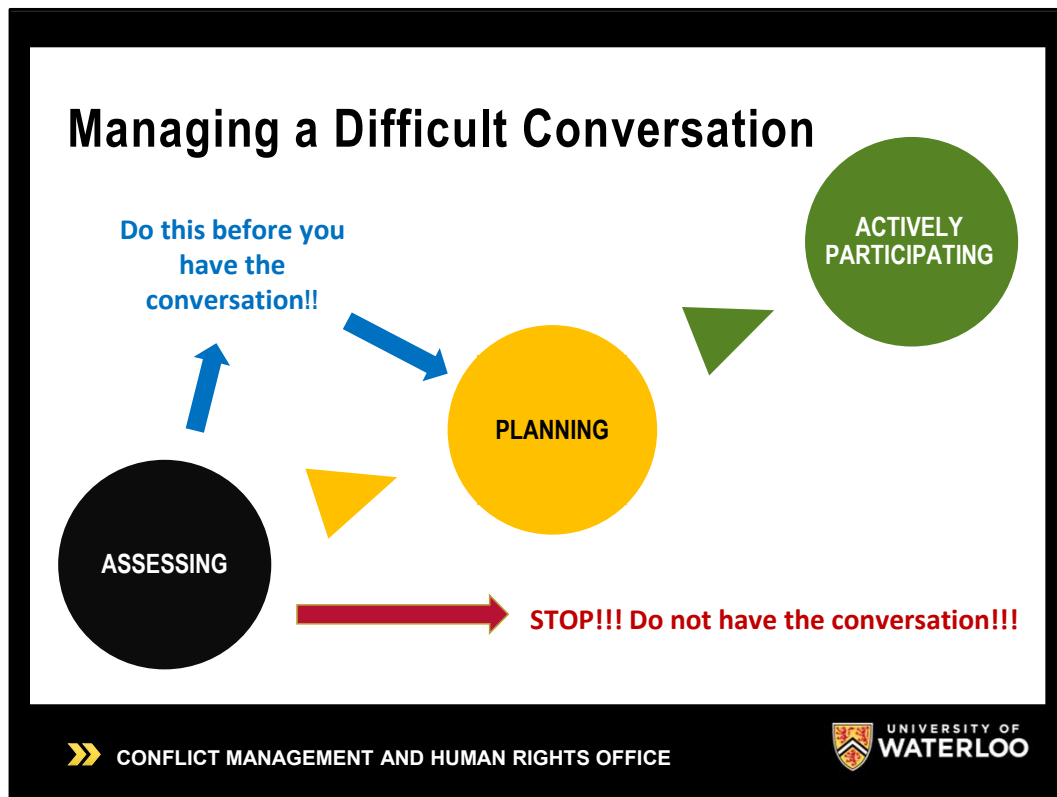


Welcome to Maintaining Effective Relations with your Supervisor for Graduate Students, Part 5 – Blue Zone Tools (Theory). This is the fifth module in a series of short recordings designed to provide you with tools and resources to help you respond effectively when tension arises in work or academic relationships.

If you have not yet viewed Parts 1 through 4, please take the time to do so as the content of this module builds on what was learned in the earlier modules.

Before we begin, pause the video and take time to download the worksheet associated with this module so that you can jot down your thoughts as we go along.



Planning a difficult conversation ... one intended to overcome relationship barriers Involves three steps assessing, planning, and then actively participating in the difficult conversation.

This module will focus on the assessment step because it may tell you not to have the conversation at all, or it may tell you what you need to do before you have the conversation.

ASSESS

- 1. Is a conversation appropriate?
- 2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?
- 3. Set context

PLAN

- 4. Clarify the issues
- 5. Be aware of communication barriers.
- 6. Communicate impact using “I” statements
- 7. Consider the setting
- 8. Prepare for follow-up questions
- 9. Plan the conversation

PARTICIPATE

- 10. Participate actively in the conversation

The assessment process three components, assessing whether a conversation is the appropriate tool for a specific situation, assessing what exactly it is that will make the conversation difficult, and then assessing and how to best invite the other person into a conversation. We call this “setting context”. If the other party is not willing to engage, there will be no conversation so a carefully throughout invitation is essential.

ASSESS

- 1. Is a conversation appropriate?**
2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?
3. Set context

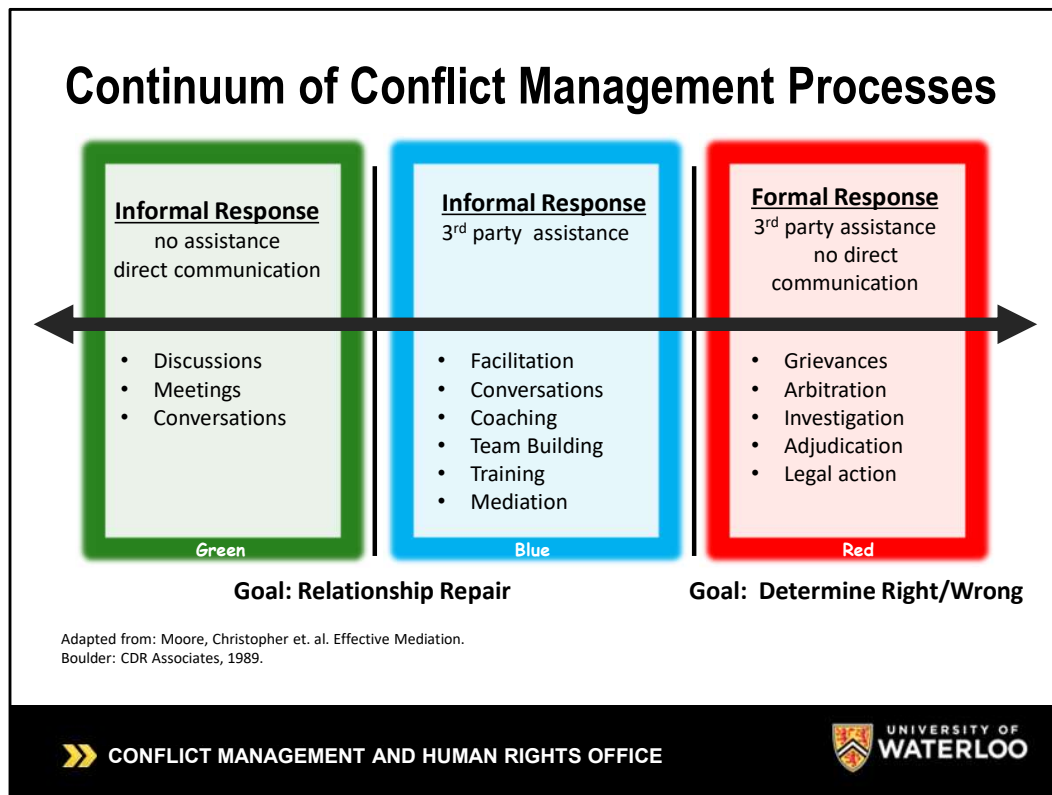
PLAN

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Determining whether a conversation is appropriate involves assessing impact, a process that was explained in Part 1 of this series. Feel free to go back and review that content if you need to.



A conversation can be an appropriate response situations that fall in either the Green or Blue Zone, but it is not an appropriate tool for situations that fall within the Red Zone. If the situation is in the Blue Zone, consider how a third party might help you prepare for or manage the difficult conversation. Would it be helpful to have guidance in the planning process? Could they be present during the conversation to help manage high emotions? Would it be helpful to have them facilitate the conversation?

These are all roles that can be taken on by staff in the Conflict Management and Human Rights Office. Feel free to reach out if you would like more information or if you need assistance with assessing impact.

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Once we have determined that a conversation is appropriate, it is time to assess why the conversation may be difficult. Although this may seem obvious at first, it may be worthwhile to take a more in depth look at the situation to gain a full understanding.



Image by jamesoladujoye



Image by jamesoladujoye from Pixabay

In order to properly assess why a conversation will be difficult, we need to start by looking at what constitutes a good conversation. Good conversations are conversations we have all the time with our coworkers, our friends, our family members - conversations that center around good content like enjoyable weekend activities, happy family events or our favourite hobbies.

The difficulty comes when the information to be shared is not good... when the substance of the conversation has the potential to have a negative emotional impact - that is when we begin to view the conversation as a 'difficult' one because of the negative message.

Consider:

Have you ever had a conversation where the content was positive and yet the conversation took a bad turn?

What factors contributed to that?



Still, if we take time to reflect on difficult conversations that we have had in the past, we will likely realize that substance is not the only factor that can make a conversation difficult.

Think about it ... have you ever had a conversation where the content was positive and yet the conversation took a bad turn? If so, consider what factors contributed to that? Jot your thoughts down on your worksheet.

Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		I M P A C T
		GOOD	POOR	
S U B S T A N C E	POS	Positive Substance	Positive Substance	
	NEG	Negative Substance	Negative Substance	



The Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix can be a helpful tool in considering what factors might contribute to making a conversation difficult. Down the left side we have the content or substance of a conversation. We may be sharing positive information that has the potential to create a positive, or at worst, a neutral emotional response or we may be sharing negative information that may result in a neutral or even a negative emotional response. Substance is the criteria that people tend to consider most when determining whether a conversation may be difficult.

Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		
		GOOD	POOR	
SUBSTANCE	POSITIVE	Positive Substance Good Process	Positive Substance Poor Process	IMPACT
	NEGATIVE	Negative Substance Good Process	Negative Substance Poor Process	



There is another important factor to consider and that is process. PROCESS is the practice of applying effective communication skills.

What kinds of communication issues can take a good conversation and turn it into a bad one? Issues like failing to listening, interrupting, making assumptions, negative body language, and tone of voice can result in a poor process and make a conversation more difficult, whereas good communications skills like effective listening, questioning, reframing and paraphrasing to check for understanding can contribute to good process. A conversation will be more difficult when one or both parties lack good communication skills.

It is also important to remember that even if both parties are very skilled and knowledgeable about good process, negative content can distract them from communicating effectively. If you are planning a conversation, keep this in mind and plan ahead to make sure you are practicing good process.

Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		IMPACT
		GOOD	POOR	
SUBSTANCE	POSITIVE	Positive Substance Good Process	Positive Substance Poor Process	
	NEGATIVE	Negative Substance Good Process	Negative Substance Poor Process	



Let's take a look at our matrix now that we have added in process. Here are some possible scenarios. We may find ourselves in a conversation with positive substance and good process. This will likely not be a difficult conversation, so we are very likely to see a positive outcome unless we have misjudged and find ourselves in another quadrant.

Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		
		GOOD	POOR	
SUBSTANCE	POSITIVE	Positive Substance Good Process	Positive Substance Poor Process	IMPACT
	NEGATIVE	Negative Substance Good Process	Negative Substance Poor Process	



We may find ourselves in a conversation with negative substance and good process. In this scenario, effective communication around difficult content can help improve the likelihood of a successful outcome to the conversation.

Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		
		GOOD	POOR	
SUBSTANCE	POSITIVE	Positive Substance Good Process	Positive Substance Poor Process	IMPACT
	NEGATIVE	Negative Substance Good Process	Negative Substance Poor Process	



If we find ourselves in a situation with positive substance but poor process, we may find that although we have good information to share, poor communication leads to confusion about the message and can make the conversation difficult.

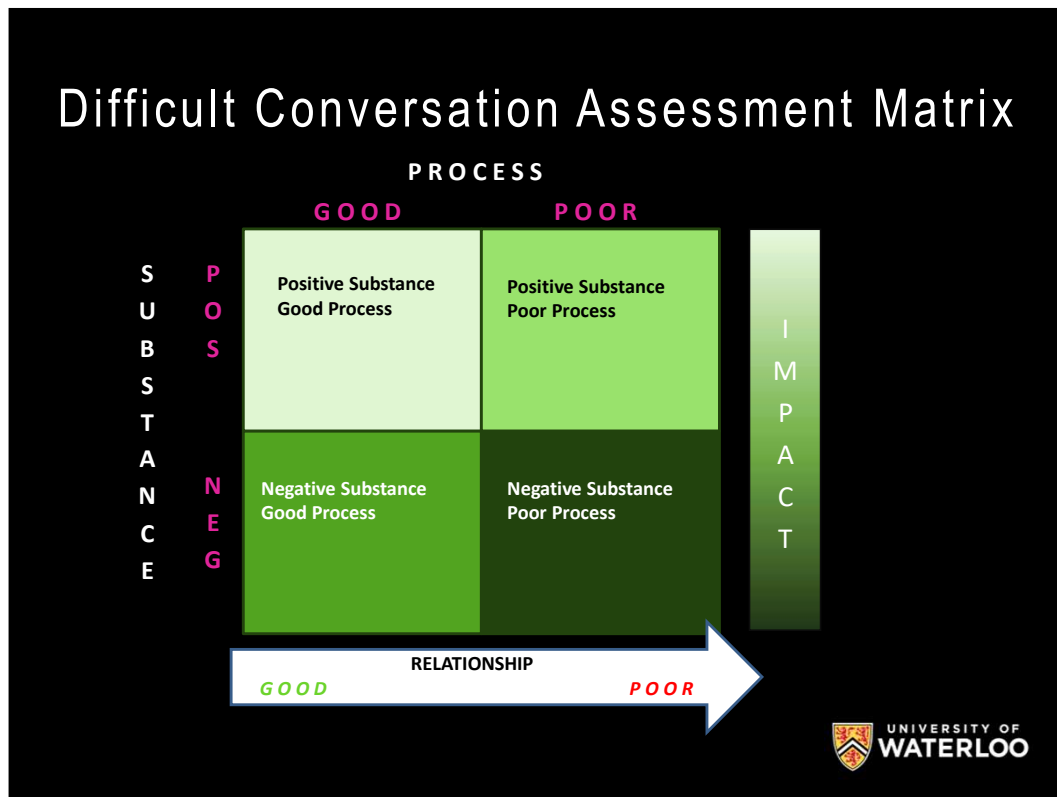
Difficult Conversation Assessment Matrix

		PROCESS		IMPACT
		GOOD	POOR	
SUBSTANCE	POSITIVE	Positive Substance Good Process	Positive Substance Poor Process	
	NEGATIVE	Negative Substance Good Process	Negative Substance Poor Process	



The final possibility is that we will find ourselves in a conversations where there is both negative substance and poor process. Here, emotions are stirred by the negative message and there is ineffective communication. Participants will find themselves failing to listen to each other and instead trying to convince each other that they are right, and the other is wrong.

Consider whether a difficult conversation that you have been in recently might fit it into one of these quadrants. Jot down your thoughts on your worksheet.



Substance and process are two important factors. Before we move on, let's consider a third extremely important factor that contributes to whether a conversation may be difficult and that is Relationship. Relationship refers to whether you are currently experiencing good or poor relations with the other party.

Consider:

How do we know when our relationship with someone else is poor, damaged or deteriorating?

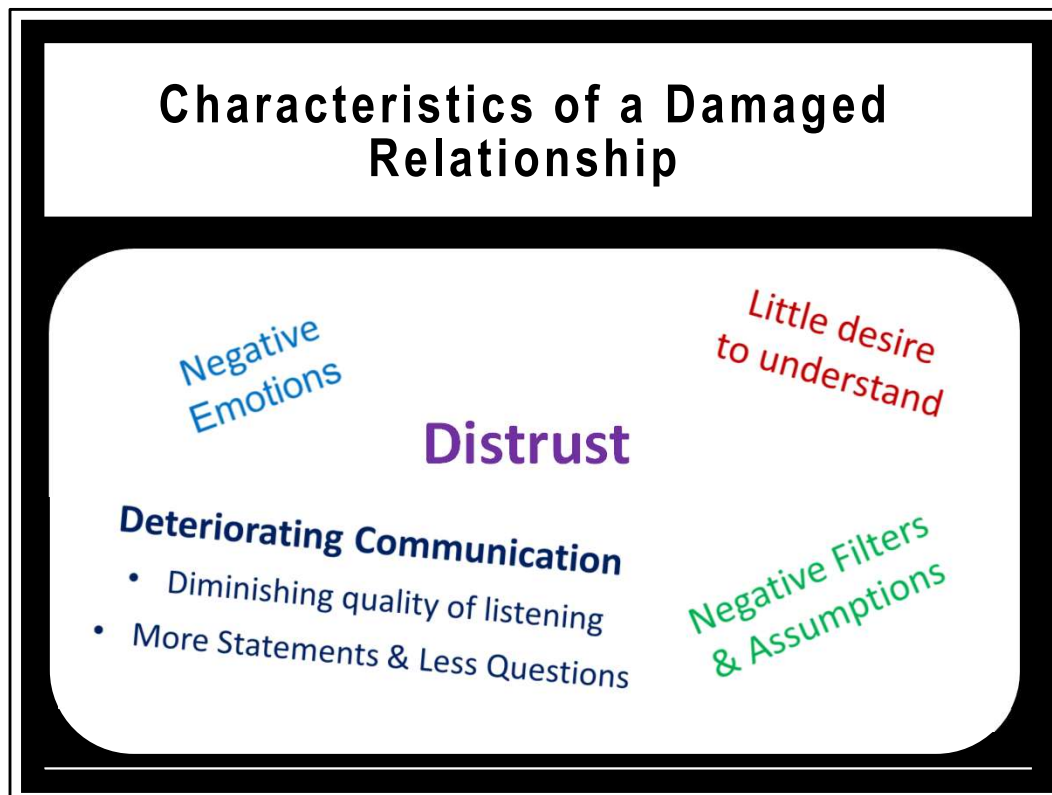
What symptoms might we see?



Consider a time when you have experienced poor relations.

What did that look like? How do we know when our relationship with someone else is poor, damaged or deteriorating? What symptoms might we see?

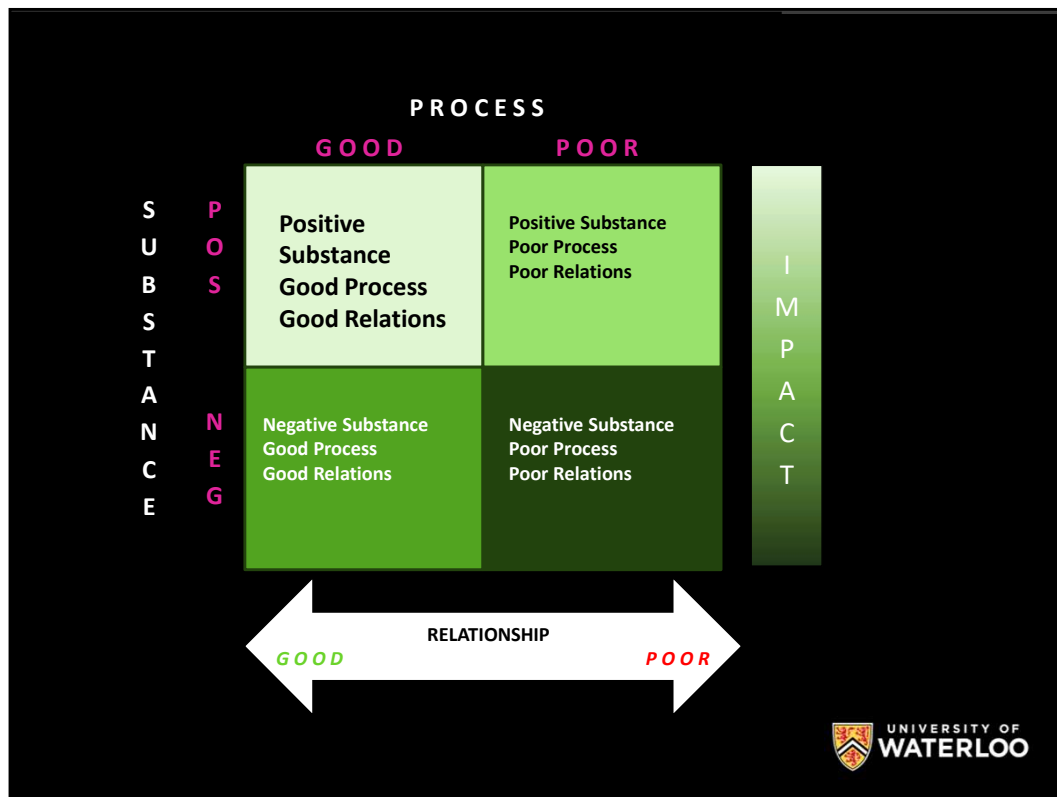
Jot your thoughts down on your worksheet.



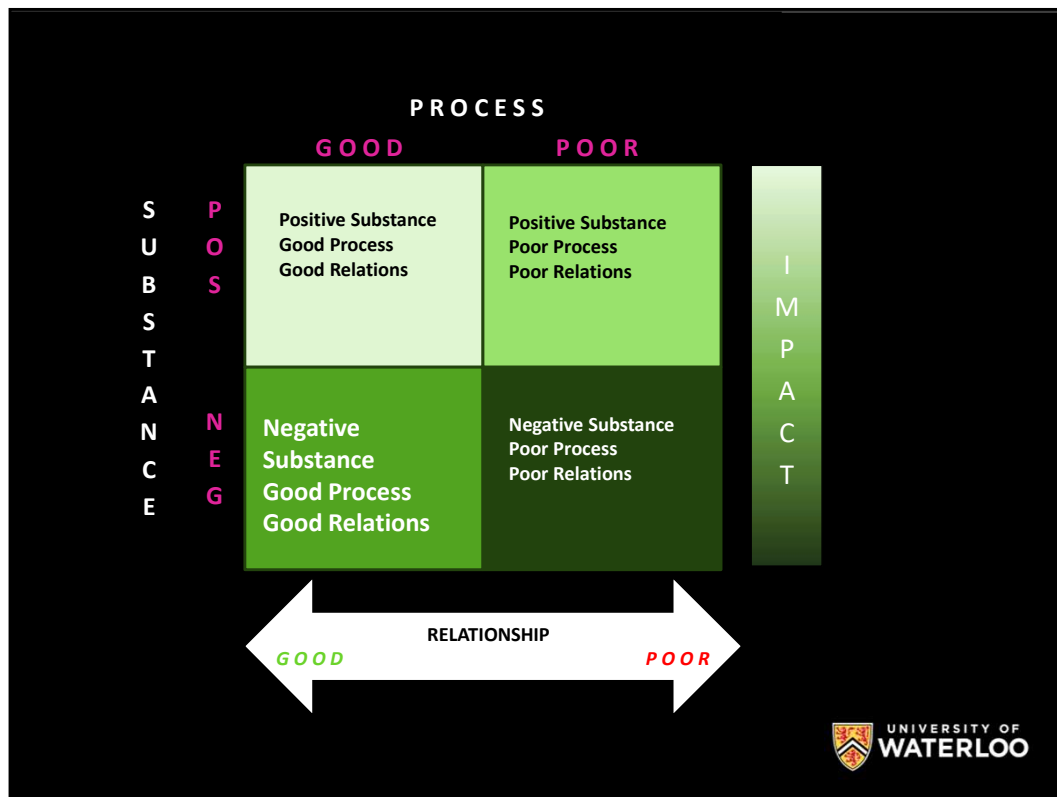
Where there is a damaged relationship

- distrust is high
- negative emotions may have developed
- active negative filters may lead us to misunderstand and pre-judge the other person's motives
- communication is deteriorating so ...
 - the desire to understand the other person's perspective is low
 - and ... the quality of listening diminishes. Questions that promote understanding are replaced by statements meant to convince the other person of how wrong they are or in extreme cases to bully or intimidate.

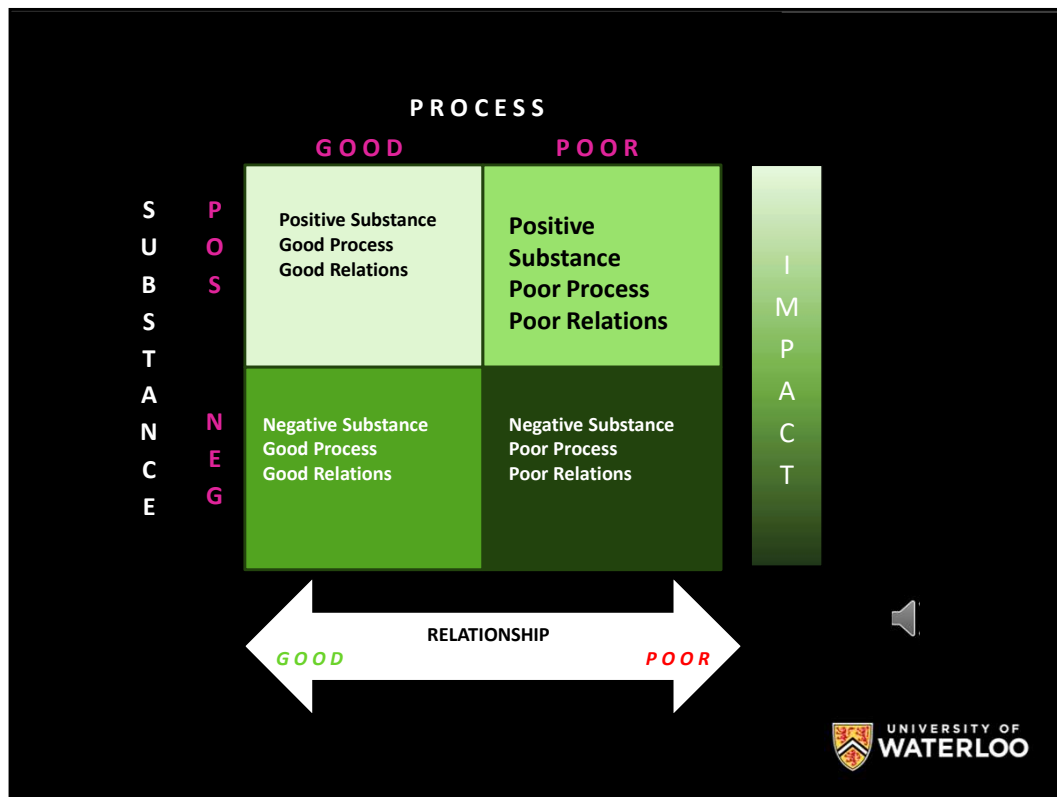
If these characteristics are part of a relationship, it is difficult to have a good conversation.



So, let's take a look at the role that relationship plays in our matrix ...: In the top left we have ... positive substance, good process and good relations. This is where you want to be when preparing to have a conversation.

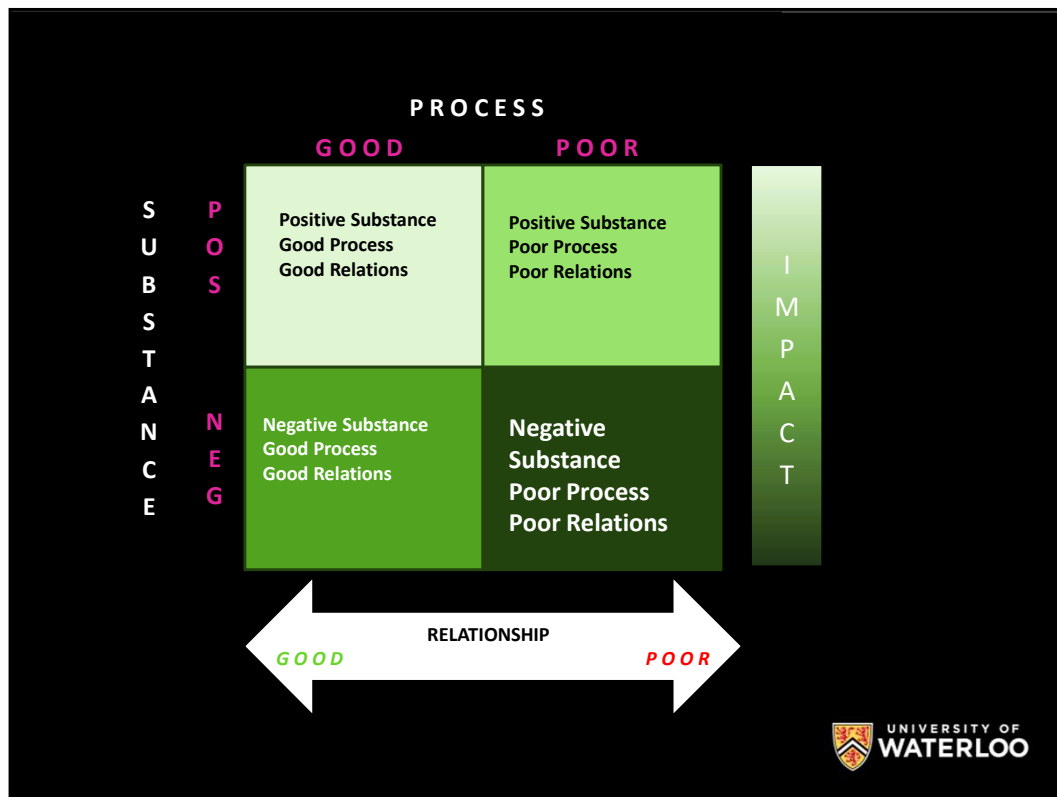


Below that we have negative substance, good process & good relations. This is realistic. There will always be times when a conversation regarding a negative issue is required. When this conversation is based on good process & good relations it produces trust and respect. Without those, you move to the right very quickly. Those that pay attention to good relations from the outset position themselves well when it becomes necessary to deal with problems.



On the right top, we have positive substance, poor process & poor relations. In this case, distrust and disrespect resulting from poor relations heighten the impact of poor process. Although the message may be positive, it is being filtered by the symptoms of poor relations and so, despite the positive message, a difficult conversation may result.

Consider a scenario where a supervisor tells their employee that they can have Friday afternoons off in the summer. If relations are good, the employee will likely consider this to be a reward, if relations are poor, they might assume that their boss is going to be interviewing their replacement on those days.



Finally, In the bottom right corner, we find negative substance, poor process and poor relations. If you are looking at having a conversation that fits into this quadrant, it is important to consider getting HELP.

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PARTICIPATE

10. Participate actively in the conversation

So, you've determined that a conversation is appropriate. You've have taken time to determine what exactly will make the conversation difficult. Now the question is - will the other party engage in a conversation?

Depending on your relationship with them and the past experiences you have had interacting with each other, they may not feel that they want or need to engage. How you choose to invite them to do so can be crucial. It is important to consider how to best set context.

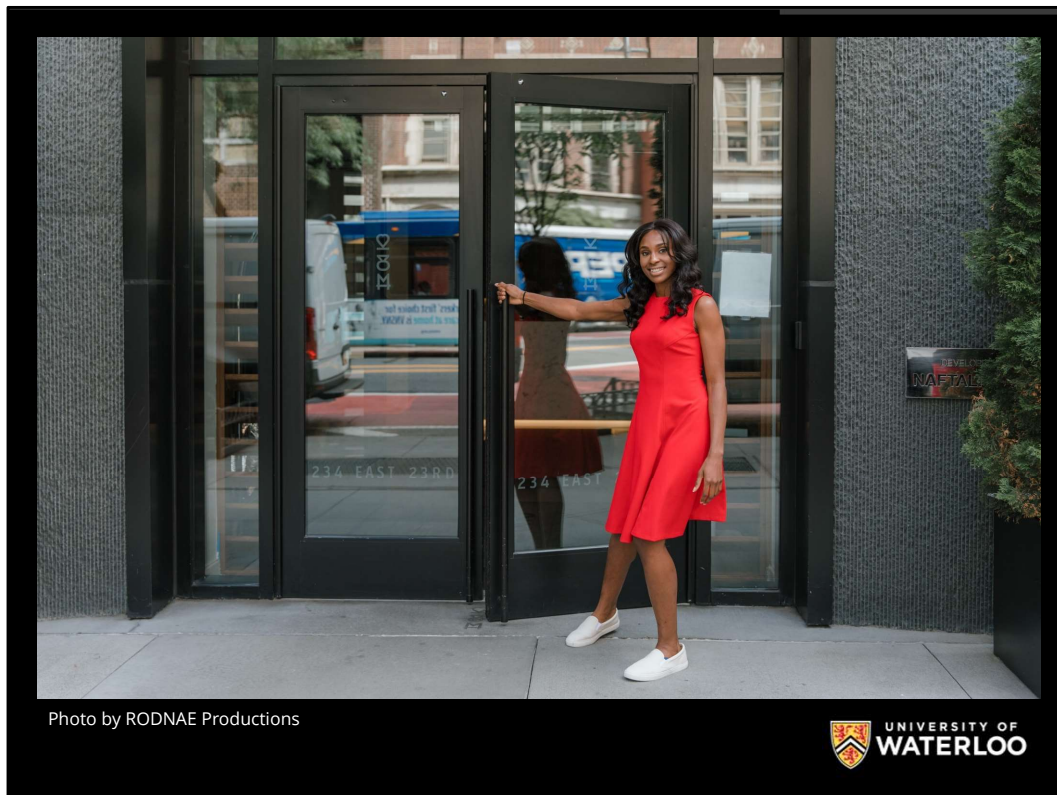


Photo by RODNAE Productions: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/smiling-woman-opening-door-to-office-building-10376013/>

When you set context, you are opening a door and inviting the other person to join you in a conversation that will promote understanding on both sides.

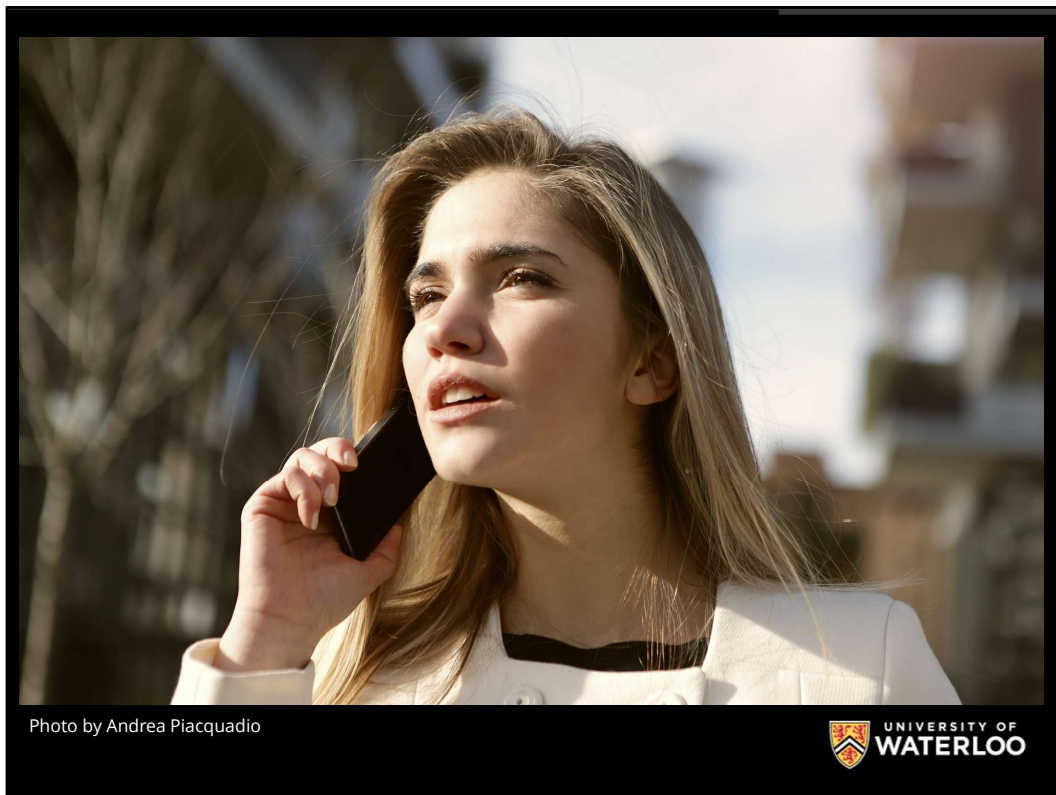


Photo by Andrea Piacquadio: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/selective-focus-photography-of-woman-standing-wearing-white-coat-holding-smartphone-879143/>

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have planned a conversation over and over in your mind so often that when you finally approach the person to have the conversation, you just jump right in - leaving out important introductory details because you forget that they have not been part of your earlier thought process? It is very easy to leave the other party feeling ambushed and scrambling to catch up on exactly what you are talking about.

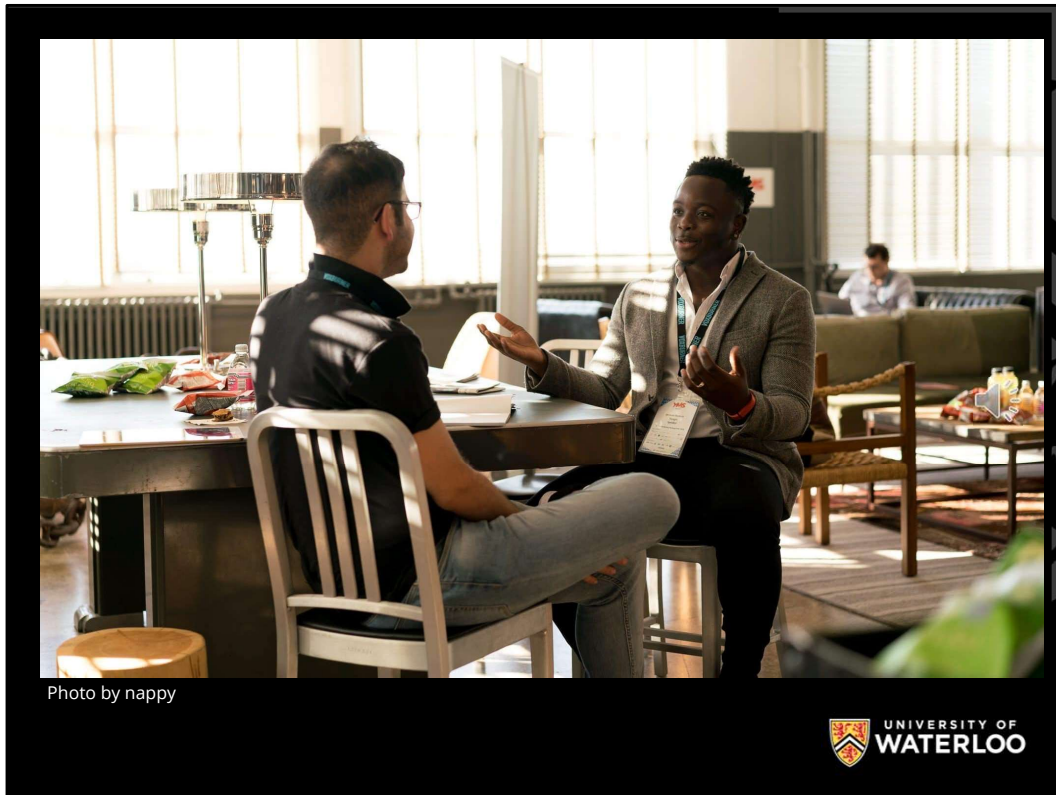


Photo by nappy: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-men-having-conversation-935949/>

- Setting context allows the other person to mentally prepare to have the conversation if they need to.
- Setting context allows you the opportunity to explain why a conversation is needed without the pressure of actually having the conversation right there on the spot so you are less likely to leave out important introductory details.

Because this process of setting context can be crucial to the success of your efforts to manage a difficult conversation, the next module will take you step-by-step through the process of preparing what we will refer to as a context statement.

Reflect:

If you are considering having a difficult conversation, consider the following questions:

- a. Why do you need to have this conversation?
- b. How will this conversation benefit you and the other person? Will it improve your working relationship, resolve a problem, clear up a misunderstanding, or prevent further issues?
- c. What consequences might there be if you don't have the conversation?
- d. Why do you need to have this conversation now? Will delaying it make the situation worse?
- e. Has something kept you from having this conversation earlier? What is that?

In preparation for the next module, I will, as usual leave you with some questions to consider. Take some time to reflect on these questions. Feel free to pause the video so you can record your answers on the worksheet.

If you are considering having a difficult conversation, ask yourself the following:

- a. Why do you need to have this conversation?
- b. How will this conversation benefit you and the other person? Will it improve your working relationship, resolve a problem, clear up a misunderstanding, or prevent further issues?
- c. What consequences might there be if you don't have the conversation?
- d. Why do you need to have this conversation now? Will delaying it make the situation worse?
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