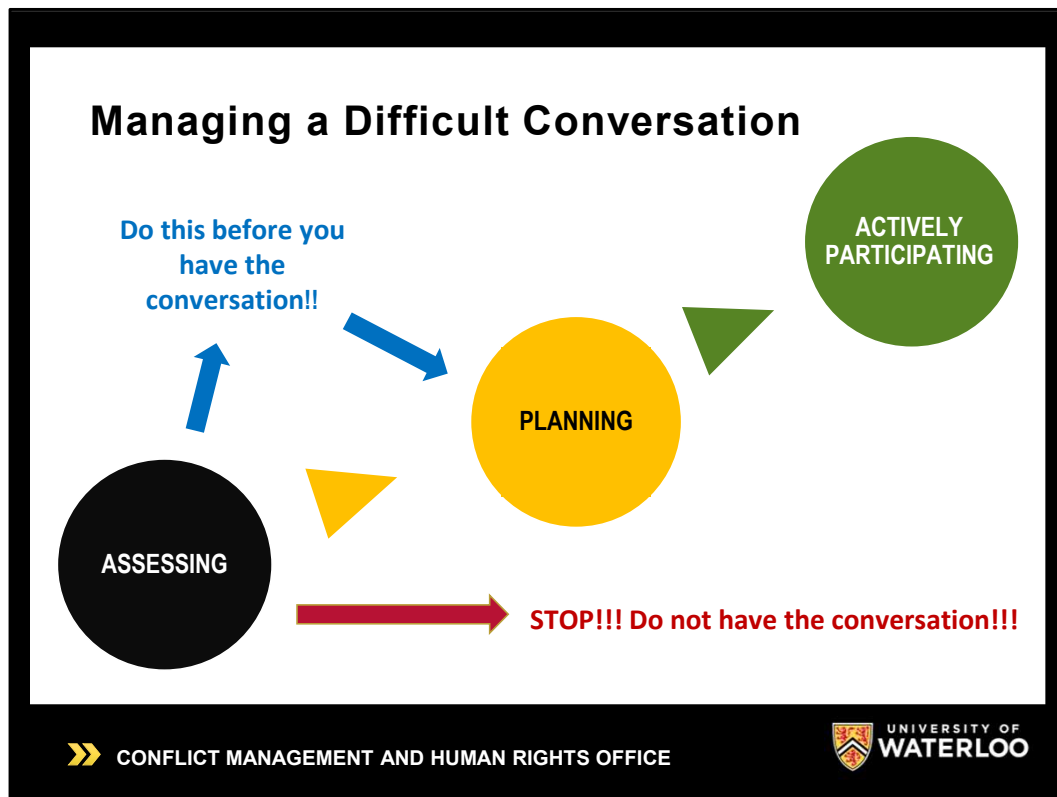


Welcome to Maintaining Effective Relations with your Supervisor for Graduate Students, Part 6 – Blue Zone Tools (Application). This is the sixth module in a series of short recordings designed to provide you with tools and resources to help you respond effectively when tension arises in work or academic relationships.

If you have not yet viewed Part 5, 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.



Remember 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 continue to explore the assessment process by providing you with opportunities to apply what you learned in part 5.

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

In the last module we discussed all three components of the assessment step. We assessed whether a conversation was the appropriate tool for a specific situation, assessed what exactly it was that would make the conversation difficult, and then began the process of assessing how to best invite the other person into a conversation, or “set context”.

ASSESS

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This module will focus on setting context and will guide you through the process of preparing a context statement

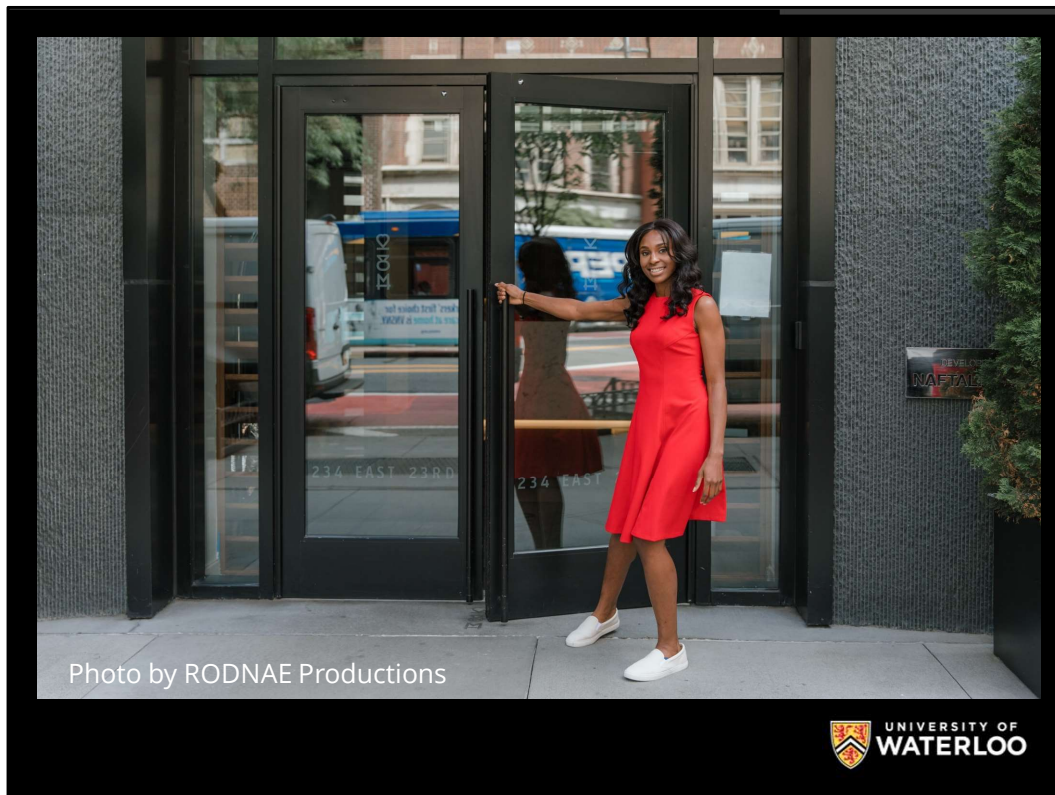


Photo by RODNAE Productions: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/smiling-woman-opening-door-to-office-building-10376013/>

Remember, 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. The context statement is a tool that can help you begin this process.

AN INVITATION TO HAVE A CONVERSATION

The Context Statement:

- Clarify motives
- Prevent distractions
- Seek understanding
- Relationship repair

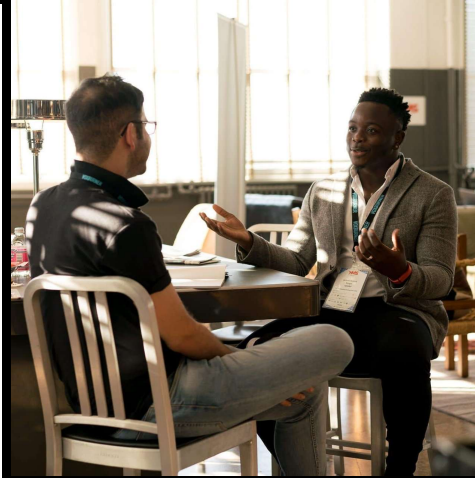


Photo by nappy



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

A context statement can help you clarify, up front, your motives for having the conversation.

Often when you try to begin a conversation, the other person is so distracted wondering about your motives that they can't actually hear what you have to say. By clarifying that your goal is to seek to better understand not only the situation itself but their perspective, and also to repair your relationship with them, you free up their mind to actually hear what you have to say.

A context statement can help you generate a common understanding of why the conversation is important to both you and the other person – how the conversation may help you both work toward achieving common goals and preventing further relationship deterioration.

A context statement can provide an opportunity for both of you to collaboratively determine the best time and place for the conversation. As we will discuss in the next module, the setting of the conversation can be especially important when there is a

power imbalance between you and the other person.

Rather than leaving someone feeling ambushed by an unexpected difficult conversation, an effective context statement can demonstrate care and respect and can open a door that might have otherwise been closed.

Scenario – Li

- Li is a graduate student working for Dr. Frederick Keller.
- Overall, she has enjoyed working for Dr. Keller.
- He has a pleasant manner and is usually quite approachable.
- Li is concerned that she has only been given marking
- She understood that she would also have the opportunity to teach
- It is very important to her that she have the chance to develop her teaching skills
- When she mentioned her concern, Dr. Keller responded abruptly.
- Now, after 6 months, she is reluctant to bring it up again
- She is feeling misled and very frustrated but its not sure what to do.



Let's consider a scenario ... this scenario is also in your handout ...

Li is a graduate student in chemistry, working for Dr. Frederick Keller. Overall, she has enjoyed working for Dr. Keller. He has a pleasant manner and is usually quite approachable. Li is a bit concerned though. When she agreed to take on the one-year position, Li understood from the description provided that she would be doing **some** marking but would also have the opportunity to teach occasionally. It is very important to her that she have the chance to develop her teaching skills. After the first three months, finding that she was **only** being assigned marking, Li asked Dr. Keller if she would also have an opportunity to teach. He responded abruptly that he was swamped with marking and really needed her to focus on that. This abrupt manner was out of character and left Li feeling unsettled. She was reluctant to bring the subject up again. After six months she is still only doing marking and is becoming more and more upset as time goes on. She feels like Dr. Keller misled her and doesn't care about her goals for the year. Recently, Li has noticed that her frustration is affecting her work. She can tell it is impacting her motivation and productivity and Dr. Keller has commented, asking her if something is wrong. She knows she needs to do something to resolve the situation but is not sure what to do.

Reflect – Li

Consider the Timing:

Obviously, Li cannot go back in time, but if she could, when would have been the ideal time to have a conversation with Dr. Keller? Why?

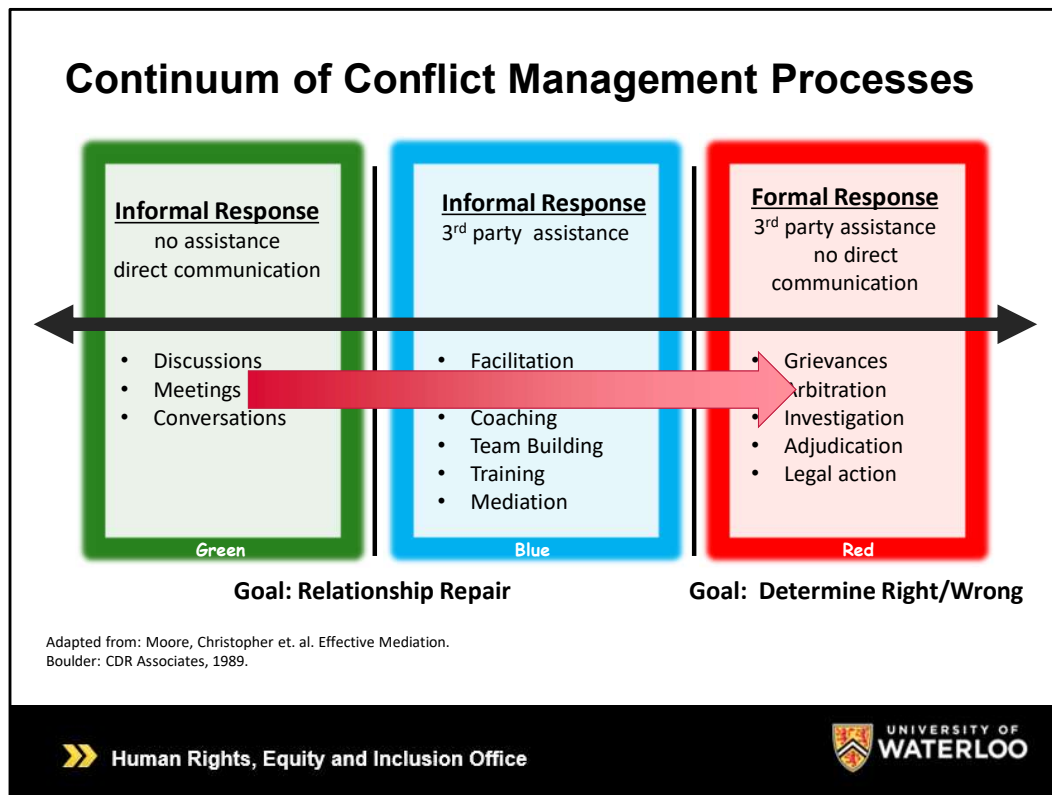
Consider the Barriers:

Why do you think this conversation did not happen? What barriers prevented it from happening?



Consider the following two questions. Feel free to pause the video and jot down your answers on the handout.

1. Obviously Li cannot go back in time, but if she could, when would have been the ideal time to have a conversation with Dr. Keller? Why?
2. Why do you think this earlier conversation did not happen? What barriers prevented it from happening?



When considering the best time to have a conversation, we can look back at our Continuum of Conflict Management processes.

A well managed conversation can be an effective tool in preventing a situation from moving further down the continuum from the green zone to the blue zone and even into the red zone. Generally, an early response is the best response.

There are a number of times when this could have happened:

- Li could have been proactive and initiated a conversation with Dr. Keller before she agreed to take on the role in order to let him know how important the teaching component was to her. At that time, she could have asked him to clarify what he expected this component of the role to look like.
- Li could have had a conversation soon after accepting the position to ensure that both she and Dr. Keller has similar expectations for the year.
- After Dr. Keller's unusual abrupt response, Li could have invited him to have a conversation. A conversation at this time could have helped her better understand what was going on and they might have been able to find a solution that would have met both their needs.

By checking in early and opening up lines of communication, conversations like these might have prevented Li's current frustration.

Barriers to Effective Communication

- Low confidence
- Lack of support ... feeling alone
- Fear and uncertainty
- Assumptions
- Perceived lack of caring

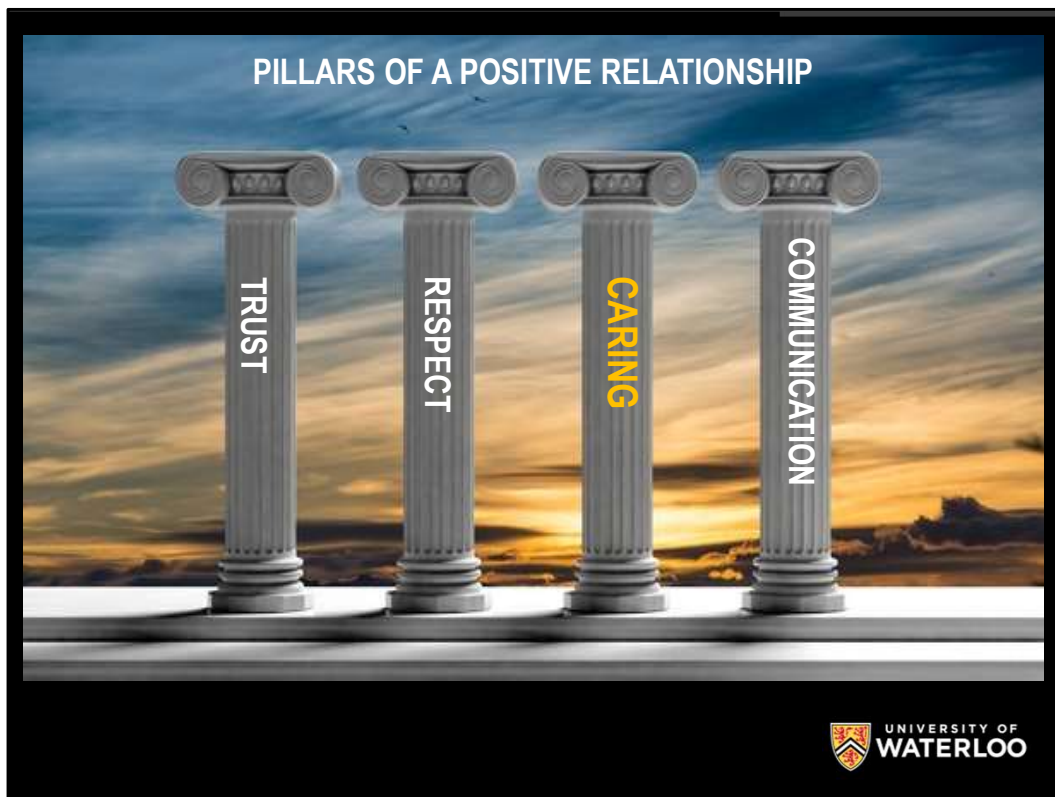


We don't know enough about Li and Dr. Keller's situation to confidently identify every barrier at play, but certainly the power imbalance between them has played a role. Other barriers that can commonly prevent affective communication include:

- low confidence in one's ability to communicate effectively,
- a sense of isolation – having nowhere to go for help and advice,
- fear and uncertainty about how the other person will respond and what to do if the conversation takes a bad turn,
- assumptions about the other person's motives and intentions
- And the perception that the other person does not care

Many of the services offered by the CMAHRO are designed to help address these barriers. If a lack of confidence or a sense of isolation were concerns, Li could set up an appointment where staff could help her prepare for the conversation, during this time she could also plan how she might respond if the conversation takes a bad turn, and the staff member could work with her to help identify and address assumptions she may be making. If needed, she could ask to have someone facilitate the conversation.

I'd like to take some time to consider the last barrier mentioned – the perception that that other person does not care.



Here we have what are referred to as the “4 Pillars of a Relationship: Trust, Respect, Caring and Communication. I would suggest that the most important one or the “cornerstone” of the relationship is a sense that the other person cares ... about the person or at least about the relationship.

Li is feeling misled assuming that Dr. Keller doesn’t care about her goals for the year when, in fact, he may not even be aware of her goals. Once we begin to tell ourselves that the other person does not care, whether that is true or not, trust and respect are diminished and our ability to communicate effectively suffers as well. In order to move forward, we may need to be the one to demonstrate care.

Consider:

When dealing with a **PERSON** how can you
begin to move to a caring mindset?



A question that often comes up is how to effectively demonstrate care when you are dealing with someone whose behavior has impacted you negatively. First of all, it is important to acknowledge that you do not know everything about the situation, you may be making assumptions – that’s why you need to have a conversation.

Try to view the other party as a person... a human being ... not as a problem. Consider ... what has happened to them or what are they experiencing that may have led to their current behavior? If the person is a supervisor, you may not have really thought of them in this way before.

Try to identify assumptions and negative filters that may be impacting how you view the other person and set them aside so that you can begin to move to a caring mindset.

Scenario A – Li

3. Use the following questions to help Li prepare to “set context” and extend and invitation to Dr. Keller to have a conversation now.
 - a. Why does Li need to have this conversation?
 - b. How will this conversation benefit the Li and Dr. Keller? Will it improve their working relationship, resolve a problem, clear up a misunderstanding, or prevent further issues?
 - c. What consequences might there be if they don’t have the conversation?
 - d. Why do they need to have this conversation now? Will delaying it make the situation worse?
 - e. What has kept them from having this conversation earlier?



Let's return to Li's context statement. As she prepares to set context, she can use the following questions as a guide.:

Context Statement: Summary

Let them know that:

- you care
- you want to understand

Consider ...

- ... communicating shared goals
- ... pointing out the potential costs



Once Li has answered these questions, she has the information that she needs to begin drafting her context statement. While doing this, she should keep in mind that the goal is to let the Dr. Keller know that she cares about repairing their working relationship that she wants to better understand his perspective.

If she is concerned that Dr. Keller might be reluctant to engage in the conversation, she can consider also communicating shared goals and pointing out the potential costs of not resolving this conflict.

Li: Context Statement

Dr. Keller, I have been glad to have the opportunity to work with you this year. I find the research that you are doing to be fascinating, and I am excited to be playing a part in your work. I believe that we both started year feeling excited about the work we would be able to do together, but over the past couple of months, something has changed. I am not sure exactly what happened, but I would like to better understand. I believe there may have been some miscommunications or misunderstandings and I am wondering if we could take some time to clear those up so that we can both make the most of our next six months together.

When would be a good time to meet?



Here is an example of how Li's context statement might look and sound

Dr. Keller, I have been glad to have the opportunity to work with you this year. I find the research that you are doing to be fascinating, and I am excited to play a part in your work. I believe that we both started year feeling excited about the work that we would be able to do together, but over the past couple of months, something has changed. I am not sure exactly what happened, but I would like to better understand. I believe there may have been some miscommunications or misunderstandings and I am wondering if we could take some time to clear those up so that we can both make the most of our next six months together. When would be a good time to meet?

Take a look at this context statement: Can you hear, "I care"? Can you hear, "I want to understand"? These are the key messages that you want to convey.

You may think that this Context Statement feels a little formal, but that is okay. A context statement that sounds a little more formal may send the message that you have invested time in preparing what you want to say because you are taking this working relationship seriously and are earnest you are in your efforts to resolve the concerns. In addition, taking a more formal tone can be a way to demonstrate respect. Remember though that you can also tailor the context statement to your own situation and your own conversational style.

Do you think this context statement could effectively open the door to a conversation that will promote understanding on both sides? I think it could. A context statement does not have to be perfect if it conveys care and a desire to understand.

**SHOULD WE NAME THE PROBLEM IN THE
CONTEXT STATEMENT?**

**IT
DEPENDS!**



I am often asked if it is okay to name the problem in the Context Statement. The answer is ... It depends.

Remember, you do not have a full understanding of the other person's perspective and may have made assumptions about their motives and intentions. You also may not be fully aware of how you've contributed to the problem. As a result, naming the problem can create barriers and the goal here is to overcome barriers, not create more. If you do name the problem, think it through carefully so that you can present it as neutrally as possible. Present it as a problem that you are both likely to agree on. It is important to avoid laying blame.

Take a look at how Li framed the problem by saying "over the past couple of months, something has changed" and "I believe there may have been some miscommunications or misunderstandings". They can likely both agree that this is, or could be, the case and she has avoided laying any blame. In doing so she is acknowledging that she does not yet have all the information and needs to hear Dr. Keller's perspective.

The Question of Responsibility

When I was working with my partners at the GSA to prepare this module, a question was raised about why, in this module, the initiative for relationship repair seems all fall to Li and Dr. Keller seems to carry no responsibility. For this reason, I wanted to take time to clarify that Li is certainly not solely responsible for maintaining effective relations. Dr. Keller should also be taking proactive steps to establish lines of communication and clarify expectations. That is why our office also offers a workshop for graduate supervisors that discusses the topic of maintaining effective relations. The reality is that these steps will not always be taken. For various reasons, a supervisor may not be proactive in this way, or they may believe they have taken these steps, but miscommunications or relationship breakdown has still occurred. This module then focuses on what a graduate student can do when they find themselves in this kind of situation so that they do not feel that they are stuck. The goal is to provide strategies that they can apply to repair relations and point out resources available if they need to seek help.

In your handout:

Scenario B: Paul and Dr. Susan Chung

- When the ideal time for a conversation might have been. Were their missed opportunities?
- What barriers might have prevented a conversation from occurring?
- What could a conversation look like now? Who could initiate the conversation? What might their context statement look like?

In the handout, there is another scenario for you to consider. Scenario B involves Paul and Dr. Susan Chung.

Consider when the ideal time for a conversation might have been. Were their missed opportunities?

- What barriers might have prevented a conversation from occurring?
- What could a conversation look like now? Who could initiate the conversation? What might their context statement look like?
- Could that context statement open the door to a conversation that will promote understanding on both sides?

ASSESS

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CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE



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The next module will take you through each of the ten steps outlined as you assess, plan and prepare to actively participate in your own difficult conversation..