Effective Difficult Conversations: A Step-by-Step Guide


The difference between a minimally successful manager and a truly successful one is the capacity for having effective difficult conversations,” according to Catherine Soehner and Ann Darling (7). In Effective Difficult Conversations, these authors succinctly define difficult conversations, outline key preparation steps, detail how to manage the conversation, explain the need for documentation, and emphasize how to maintain the professional relationship.

In this well-organized guide, three preparation steps are outlined: 1) getting clear, 2) gathering resources, and 3) clarifying the message. Getting clear focuses on the four key questions that a manager should explore prior to having a difficult conversation: Do you need to have this conversation at all? Why do you need to have this conversation? Why do you need to have this conversation now? How do you schedule this conversation? The next chapter emphasizes the need to seek out background information, gather resources, and consult with others. The final step in preparation is to clarify the message in order to achieve a positive outcome.

In chapter 5, the authors do an excellent job of outlining how to manage the conversation, explaining how to approach the conversation in six steps: state the facts, ask, listen, engage to understand, pay attention, and explore options. This approach is a reasonable and appropriate game plan that is valuable to new managers learning how to develop the managerial skill set as well as to experienced managers seeking to enhance their skills. The next segment illustrates why and how to document such conversations and how to remain supportive of the employee. The authors outline this step-by-step process in a clear and objective manner and elucidate the process using realistic examples and detailed, sound human resources advice.

In addition, the authors have included chapters on having difficult conversations with co-workers, conducting such conversations in relation to change management initiatives and reorganizations, and having difficult conversations with one’s boss.

In ten succinct chapters, Soehner and Darling have produced a well-written, accessible, and valuable guide for library managers at all levels in all types of libraries. They show that the ability to conduct difficult conversations effectively and productively is a skill that contributes to managers’ integrity and compassion. This book will be useful to library human resources professionals seeking to advise and counsel managers, and it could also serve as a tool for training and developing library supervisors and managers.—Pat Hawthorne, Associate Dean for Research and Education, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada


Many instruction librarians face the challenge of teaching information literacy skills successfully and engagingly during one-shot library instruction sessions. In their new edition of The One-Shot Library Instruction Survival Guide, Heidi Buchanan and Beth A. McDonough offer guidance on incorporating ACRL’s Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (adopted in 2016) into one-shot library instruction sessions.

When ACRL released the Framework, many professionals debated how the six frames would work with one-shot instruction sessions. Buchanan and McDonough argue that the Framework’s focus on big ideas and flexibility will help librarians plan successful one-shot sessions. They encourage librarians to incorporate activities that require students to investigate and think critically about information. The book covers practical ideas on using the six frames, inspired solutions for difficult assignments, vignettes from actual librarians in the field, assessment techniques, and suggestions for how to make information literacy relevant to students.

On many campuses, writing skills and research skills are supported in separate instructional silos. When it comes to college composition assignments, however, writing and research are interdependent, and this close relationship is evident in the many common elements shared by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing and the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education. How the core concepts in these frameworks interconnect and how librarians and writing instructors can work together to implement them in the classroom is the focus of Rewired.

Librarians and writing instructors frequently work separately, despite their shared values. The first section of Rewired examines this dynamic and presents ways to transform the relationship and develop mutually beneficial partnerships. The four essays in this portion analyze and interpret the frameworks, looking for ways to break down the campus/library division and give composition instructors and librarians a common language to use when designing assignments and providing students with research support.

The majority of the book is devoted to case studies demonstrating these partnerships in action. Contributors include both librarians and writing instructors, and the campuses represented range in size from small private colleges to large public universities. As a result, the case studies offer a variety of approaches and assignment types to serve as models, and the essays in this section frequently include assignment details, rubrics, and student learning objectives. In addition to these practical examples, this section also shows how librarians have approached and worked with faculty to redesign assignments.

Three chapters on assessment close the book. Whether the term used is “frames” or “habits of mind,” the ACRL and WPA frameworks both focus on behaviors. This makes assessment a challenge, and the essays in this section reflect that struggle. These chapters provide some potential best practices but no simple solutions.

Composition instructors, writing center directors, and academic librarians will find Rewired a source of ideas for designing assignments and instruction in their own institutions. It will also help librarians and writing instructors understand each other’s viewpoints and priorities. A final interesting side note: nine of the book’s fourteen essays have Creative Commons licenses, making them freely available for reuse by readers. Sharing these chapters on campus could be the first step in a new interdisciplinary partnership.—Magen Bednar, Undergraduate Services Librarian, Bizzell Memorial Library, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma


Most forward-thinking and worthwhile academic library practices originate at large, well-staffed institutions. Unfortunately, translating such practices from a large-scale research library to a small institution or one-librarian operation can be difficult, if not utterly impossible. The Small and Rural Academic Library: Leveraging Resources and Overcoming Limitations bridges this gap by speaking to librarians who feel handicapped by their lack of resources.

The book is divided into five sections: Library and Outreach Services, Human Resources and Professional Development, Planning, Instruction, and Technology. Each section features multiple chapters with various authors, and several sections also include a librarian interview entitled “Big Ideas, Small Libraries,” which addresses the section topic via a Q-and-A-style article.

In many of the chapters, the “literature review” is almost comically predictable, with the admission that much of the research found on the topic came from large libraries, with more staff in the library than some rural colleges have on their entire campus. Discussion of implementation often reminds readers that, due to lack of staff and resources, timelines are stretched to accommodate incremental work, rather than instant, focused project management. For much of this discussion, small and rural librarians will be nodding their heads in agreement, but will also feel that the authors are “preaching to the choir.” This discussion is necessary, however, for those who may be new to the small or rural library, or may be interested in how practices are implemented on a smaller scale.

Because these chapters are written by those at small institutions, much of the information is presented in case study format, with a few quantitative, data-driven pieces sprinkled throughout. Many rural institutions are not equipped to dig deep into institutional research, and patron use of the library may be low enough to preclude any statistically significant findings. Still, the case studies are useful. For instance, chapter 7, “Mission Possible: Strategic Planning for Small Academic Libraries,” is a detailed look at how a small library took on the herculean task of creating a multi-year strategic plan. This is the kind of activity that can seem insurmountable when staff members spend the majority of their time...