

Tough Talks With Compassion

August 11, 2026

Welcome

A little about me

- Program Director, AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent Program (8 years)
- Head Start Site Director (5 years)
- Assistant Director and Director, Easter Seals ARC Childcare Center and Young Adult Programs (9 years)
- Head Start Teacher (5 years)
- Owner and Operator of a Child Care Facility (8 years)

My leadership philosophy

"Throughout my career, I have been committed to serving others and creating opportunities for those who need support, guidance, and a pathway to success. I believe in leading with compassion, integrity, and inclusivity, ensuring that every individual is valued and empowered regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, beliefs, ethnicity, or life experiences."

Our Objectives

- We will understand why these difficult conversations matter
- We will learn approaches that are compassionate, professional and respectful.
- We will discuss some real-life conversations, together
- We will gain confidence and be prepared for these conversations

Why?

Hygiene

Religion

Disrespects leadership

Behavior change

Rules not followed

Disruptive in work setting

Attendance

Complaint

Counter-productive attitude **Conflict with peers**

Performance Issues

Resistance to change

Boundaries

Politics

Safety Concerns

What It Costs Us When We Stay Silent

Poor program reputation

Decreased volunteer retention

Decreased volunteering
impact

Poor morale

Lower productivity

Increased legal risks

"If she can do it, then so can I."

Preparing for the conversation

Am I clear on
the facts?

Define the
issue. The 3
C's
Character
Competency
Chemistry

Am I wanting
a solution or
simply
addressing
the problem

Preparing for the conversation

What was the impact?

How might they react?

Did the organization play a role in creating the issue?

Having difficult conversations require preparation

Before

- Paper for note taking
- Handbook to refer to policies and procedures
- Choose a private and comfortable location
- Allow sufficient time so there is no rushing

Having difficult conversations require preparation

During

- Do not apologize for the conversation
- Refer to the mission and expectations
- Do not judge
- Listen with eye contact
- Include another person at the meeting as a witness
- Both agree on an outcome with actions and dates
- Confirm they hear and understand your position

Having difficult conversations requires preparation

After

- Check-in regularly
- Keep dialog open
- Learn and improve current policies
- Create a code of conduct

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Avoiding the issue

Talking down to the person

Blaming their age

Being overly direct

Waiting until frustration builds

Discussing concerns publicly

Apologizing for having the conversation

Diminishing the person who complained

Handling it by phone or email

Instead: listen and let the person share their perspective.

Communicate with C.P.R.

C

Compassion



P

Professionalism



R

Respect

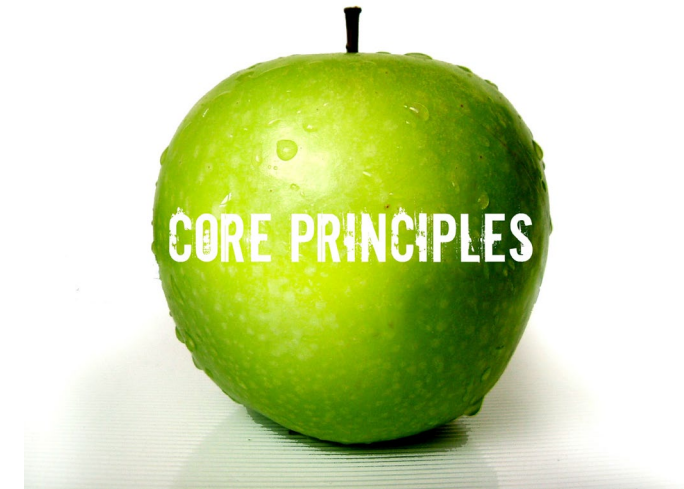


Treat everyone as valued adults

Seek to understand first

Be honest and clear

Work together toward solutions



CARE

CONNECT

“Thank you for meeting with me today.”

“ I appreciate you taking the time today to meet with me.”

CARE

ADDRESS *the issue*

“When X happened, Y was the impact.”

CARE

RESOLVE *collaboratively*

“Can you tell me your perspective?”

“Help me understand what happened.”

“What challenges are you experiencing?”

“What support do you need from me?”

CARE

ENCOURAGE *and follow up*

Prepare a strategy (SMARTER Goals)

Provide training or a mentor

Remind them of the things they do well

Let them know they can reach out to you

Check in with them

Document your discussion and put a follow-up date on your calendar

Conflict prevention

- Implement thorough screenings (Background checks)
- Have a handbook that clearly outlines policies, requirements, and processes.
- Are there any ambiguities in your current processes?
- Do you represent your program realistically during recruitment, interviews and orientation?
- Are you providing enough training?
- Are you using a position-match survey?
- Do you set clear expectations?
- Have you provided thorough role descriptions?
- Reference checks (at least 2)
- Complete 90-day and annual evaluations for all volunteers



The Frequently Absent Volunteer

Pat has been a reliable volunteer for years but has missed four shifts in the past month without notifying staff.

Connect-Opening line and then state the issue directly

Address-Use positive language, state the facts, ask open-ended questions, listen

Resolve-Develop a collaborative solution (SMART)

Encourage-Reach out if a problem arises, support them and set a check-in date, keep notes

Don't forget CPR

Resistance to new procedures

The organization implemented a new check-in process. Bob refuses to follow it.

Connect-Opening line and then state the issue directly

Address-Use positive language, state the facts, ask open-ended questions, listen

Resolve-Develop a collaborative solution (SMART)

Encourage-Reach out if a problem arises, support them and set a check-in date, keep notes

Don't forget CPR

There has been a complaint regarding body odor

Ed does not appear to notice his body odor, but his peers have brought their concerns to the supervisor

Connect-Opening line and then state the issue directly

Address-Use positive language, state the facts, ask open-ended questions, listen

Resolve-Develop a collaborative solution

Encourage-Reach out if a problem arises, support them and set a check-in date, keep notes

Don't forget CPR

Overstepping boundaries of their role

Lisa has been with the program for 15 years. Lately, she has become bossy and instructing her peers how they should do their jobs. One has even voiced they cannot work with her.

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Address-Use positive language, state the facts, ask open-ended questions, listen

Resolve-Develop a collaborative solution

Encourage-Reach out if a problem arises, support them and set a check-in date, keep notes

Don't forget CPR

Tough talks take courage, but compassionate leaders make them count.





Thank you for your time today

I never lose. I either win or I learn.

~Nelson Mandela

Resources

Burger, Eric. (2026, August) Difficult Volunteers: Managing Challenging Behavior Professionally. Volunteer Hub A Better Good Product. <https://volunteerhub.com/resources/case-studies>.

(2026, August). 5 Healthy Ways to Handle a Difficult Volunteer. Carey Nieuwhof. <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-healthy-ways-to-handle-a-difficult-volunteer/>.

(August, 2026) Difficult Conversations with Staff or Volunteers. Volunteerplaintalk. <https://volunteerplaintalk.com/>.