

MAKING THE MOST OF MENTOR CONVERSATIONS

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Assistant Principal Susan Vissenjoux from Noble Park Primary School explores practical tips for graduates and their mentors

Challenging conversations with colleagues and parents

Much of the focus for Term 2 will be on assessing and reporting. It is a busy time with pressure and deadlines to meet and requires constant interactions with others. The process of assessment will certainly require conversations with colleagues and the process of reporting will require conversations with parents. There may also be a conversation with a leader in your school to justify the results of your students. Or even a conversation with your technology department because you're having trouble accessing the reporting system or you've just lost all reports! (And while we are on that point, please save all your report comments in more than one place!) All of these conversations have the potential to be challenging.

A challenging conversation is one where one or both parties have difficulty giving or receiving information and therefore, there is often emotion involved. As a graduate teacher there is always a danger of your ideas being dismissed or not being taken seriously by parents and other teachers. But there is also a reality that you are inexperienced and have lots to learn and some new teachers find that difficult. So, you need to have confidence but not arrogance, a belief that you bring valuable knowledge and ideas but also an understanding that you can learn so much more. And the assessing and reporting term is a big learning curve for all new teachers. Adding report writing to your workload in a term that feels long and continues to become darker and colder is difficult. A challenging conversation when you are feeling tired and pressured is when emotion is likely to come to the surface.

Being prepared and organised

What will always help is being prepared with evidence to support your thinking, actions or results. If you are organised, then you will be able to find what you need for any conversation and will be able to justify your actions. This is the same regardless of whether you or someone else initiates the challenging conversation.

Tips for a challenging conversation

Seek Assistance

If you need to initiate a conversation that is potentially challenging, check with your mentor first for advice.

Write a Script

Then write out a script for what you need to say. This will help to stick to the facts and limit the emotion and give you time to ensure that you are reacting appropriately.

When and where

Choose the time and place for the conversation carefully so that there will be privacy and almost no chance of interruption. The end of the day is often the best time for a conversation with colleagues but always call a parent to arrange the most convenient time for a meeting. And if you feel a parent may become emotional, have colleague nearby for support.

If they approach you first

If a colleague or parent initiates the conversation with you, listen carefully to what is being said. Clarify to ensure that you understand the message correctly. There are obviously different levels of challenging conversations but if someone is potentially questioning your behaviour, then it is easy to let emotion cloud your reaction. Often, it is just clarity that is being sought, and much of the challenge can be removed if you can justify yourself calmly.

Your mentor or leader will be able to support with any situations. Keeping them in the loop and asking their advice will certainly support your decision making. Ultimately, acting with integrity and staying organised will put you in a great place for taking responsibility for your actions.

Questions to ask your mentor

- Have you had a difficult conversation before with a parent and/or colleague?
- What went well or what could you have improved on?
- I had a difficult conversation with ____ and this is how it went. What could I have done to improve the discussion and outcome?
- What are your tips or advice for me if a difficult conversation arises?