



# Dialogue in Difficult Interactions

I wrote the short responses below for a discussion board in Dialogic Decision-Making with Randy Iden, Ph.D. The prompt for these responses was to reflect on a difficult interaction of my choosing, identify the emotions I experienced at the time, and articulate the strategies I used (or could have used) to defuse the situation once those emotions surfaced. Formulating these responses provided me with an opportunity to imagine using dialogue as a leadership strategy in organizational settings, especially when addressing conflicts caused by hierarchy, diversity/difference, and information overload.

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In a previous position as Unspecified Title, a member of the development/fundraising team one day expressed frustration that I wasn't doing enough to publicly recognize some of our donors. My memory is a little fuzzy, but I think they actually brought this frustration to our boss before they even talked to me about it. It was a textbook "surprise criticism" situation: I was still fairly new to the organization, and they'd never before mentioned specific donors who were requesting or expecting public recognition, so it never really popped up on my radar.

I remember feeling several intense emotions when I first learned of their criticism:

- Surprised and confused that this was the first I was hearing about a need that had apparently gone unmet for several months
- Bitter and resentful that they had taken their concerns to our boss instead of bringing them to me first
- Betrayed by someone with whom I thought I had a good relationship
- Humiliated and fearful that my boss would think I wasn't doing my job well
- Embarrassed that I hadn't met the need
- Angry that they expected me to see and meet an unvoiced need

Looking back on this situation, I can see that we actually had two problems that needed solving. The solution for problem #1 (tactical) was quite simple in theory, but got muddied because I didn't know how to approach problem #2 (relational).

1. We needed to come up with a way for them to communicate particular requests around public recognition of donors – and for me to meet them.
2. I needed them to proactively communicate their needs to me moving forward.

The interaction would have fared better if I had made use of a few different strategies:

- Address emotions: I should have identified and accepted the feelings I was experiencing instead of trying not to be hurt/upset. That would have opened a door for me to express the feelings as messily as I needed to outside of work so I could move forward in a more intentional, sober-minded way at work.
- Focus on situational facts, not personal dynamics: I was intent on getting them to admit how wrong it was to expect me to see and meet an unvoiced need. I wanted them to sit in their wrongness and be wrong until they could apologize. Needless to say, I should not have based my behavior on some hoped-for apology. That was unrealistic. I should have focused on the facts of the situation we were in and not gotten caught up in our personal dynamics.
- Deliver your message plainly and directly/Don't try to "win" the conflict: I should have clearly stated my request for our future interactions (addressing problem #2) instead of trying to get them to apologize for the (then) past interaction. Had I done so, I think we could have reached a more expedient solution for problem #1.
- Collect the data, listen, and learn: I should have asked more questions to understand why they didn't voice their needs to me along the way or before they felt it necessary to involve our boss. Perhaps I was unintentionally

communicating that I didn't care about their donors, that I didn't value their work, or something along those lines. But I think that by seeking to understand how they were feeling in that situation, I might have gained some useful information to inform my actions moving forward.