



JANUARY 27, 2026

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: A GUIDE FOR NEW AND EXPERIENCED LEADERS

AGENDA



WHY WE MUST
HAVE DIFFICULT
CONVERSATIONS



MINDSET



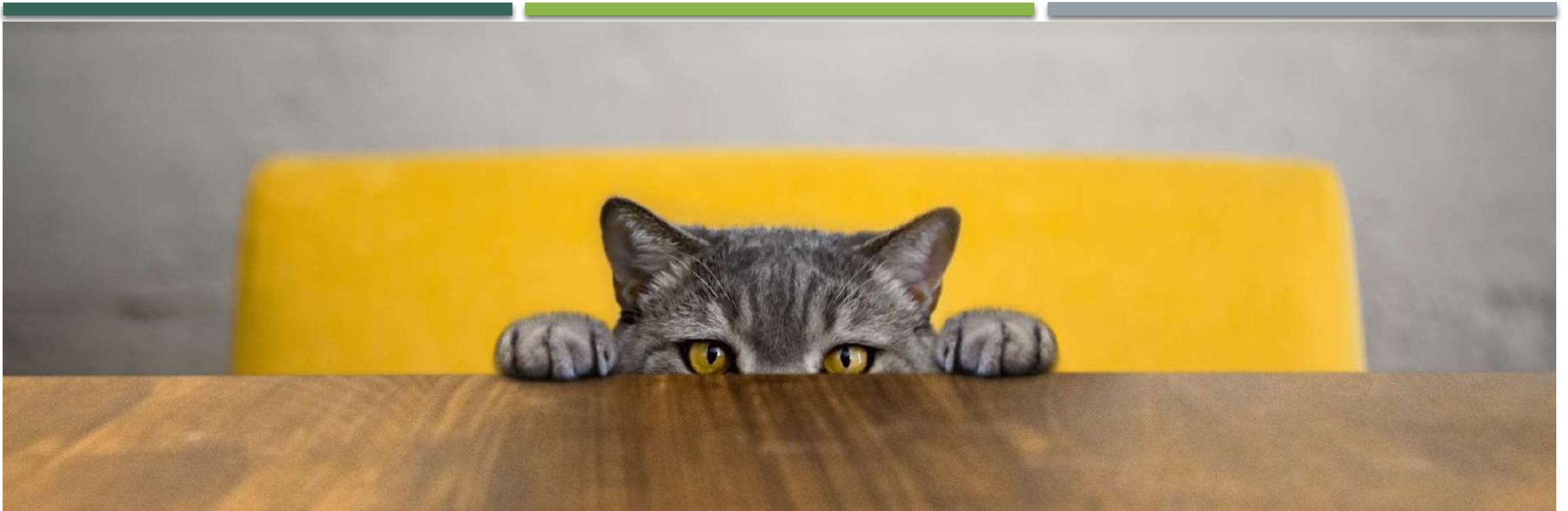
SETTING THE
STAGE



HAVING THE
CONVERSATION



FOLLOW-UP



DID I MISS ANYTHING?

POST QUESTIONS IN THE Q & A



STORY TIME

WHY WE MUST HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



WE CARE ABOUT THE
EMPLOYEE



EMPLOYEE GROWTH



WE CARE ABOUT THE
TEAM



WE CARE ABOUT
THE EMPLOYEE



EMPLOYEE GROWTH



WE CARE ABOUT
THE TEAM

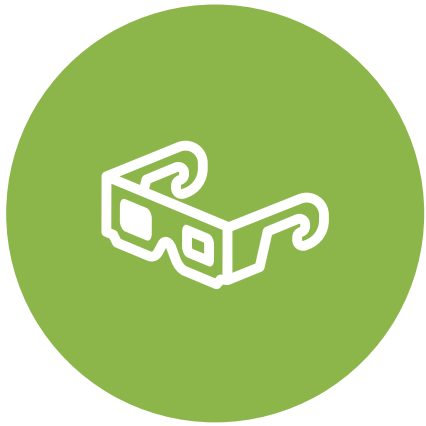
QUESTIONS?



The background of the slide features several white paper cutouts of human head silhouettes. Some silhouettes contain a large black question mark, while one in the center contains a blue line drawing of a lit lightbulb. The silhouettes are layered, creating a sense of depth. A solid dark green rectangle is positioned on the left side of the slide.

MINDSET

MINDSET



REMOVE FILTERS



GET CURIOUS



BE SUPPORTIVE

REMOVE FILTERS

- What labels?
- What assumptions?
- What story?

- What don't you know?


GET CURIOUS

-
- What's really going on?
 - What am I not seeing?
 - What don't I know?
 - How could such a smart person do something so dumb?

BE SUPPORTIVE

- How can I help this employee be successful?
- What supports can I provide?
- What accommodations can I give?





NONE OF US ARE
SUCCESSFUL
UNLESS WE ALL
SUCCESSFUL

IT'S NOT ABOUT
“WINNING!”

QUESTIONS?



SETTING THE STAGE



SETTING THE STAGE

- Where
- When



WHERE

- Private
- Comfortable
- A safe space
- Online?



WHEN

- As soon as possible
- Are you ready?
- Beware danger times



QUESTIONS?





HAVING THE CONVERSATION

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Set expectations

“When ... I ... Can ...”

Make it safe

Deescalate

Priming

Move to action

SET EXPECTATIONS

- Prepare the employee
 - “You’re probably not going to like what I have to say.”
 - Let them process



USE “WHEN ... I ... CAN ...” STATEMENTS

When ... I ...

- “**When** you come late to the meeting, **I** feel like you are not taking the work seriously.
- “**When** your work is incomplete, **I** feel like that slows the team down.”

Can you help me?

- Can you help me see what’s going on?
- Can you help me understand what’s happening on your end?

MAKE IT SAFE

- Look for common purpose or common values
 - “I know we both care about [common value].”
 - “I just want to find a way that we can both get [common goal]”
 - “Let’s see if we can both get what we want.”

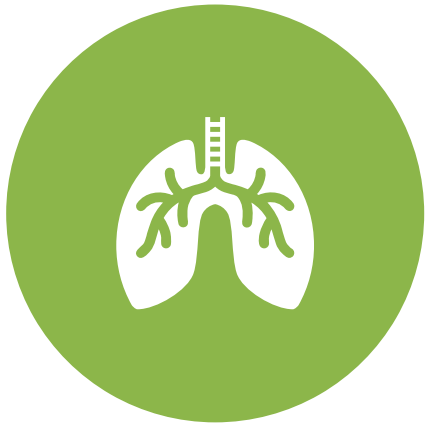


A close-up photograph of a person's hand, palm facing up, reaching towards the text on the left. The hand is light-skinned and appears to be reaching out from the right side of the frame. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey. On the left, there is a dark green rectangular overlay containing white text.

GET CURIOUS

- Active listening
 - Express interest in their views
 - Ask questions
 - Acknowledge their emotions
 - Restate what you've heard

CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS



BREATHE



**REFRAME WHAT IS
HAPPENING**



**ACCEPT
RESPONSIBILITY**

THE TWO CHALLENGES

When things get heated

- **Deescalate**
- Return to common goals, common purpose, common values
- Maintain composure

When things get quiet

- **Use priming**
- Make a good-faith guess about what the other person is thinking
 - “Are you thinking ...”
 - “You must be thinking ...”

MOVE TO ACTION

- What are the next steps?
- Who, what where, when, how?
- Get commitment



QUESTIONS?





FOLLOW-UP

FOLLOW-UP



DOCUMENT



CHECK-IN



PRAISE

DOCUMENT

- Meeting notes
- Follow-up email
- Commitments, actions, deadlines
- Clarity



CHECK-IN

- How is the employee doing?
- Don't make assumptions
- Show you care



PRAISE

- Celebrate victories, no matter how small
- What gets praised gets repeated



QUESTIONS?





REVIEW

Why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee growth • We care about the employee • We care about the team
Mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove filters • Get curious • Be supportive
Setting the stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where • When
Having the conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set expectations • “When ... I ... Can” • Make it safe • Deescalate • Priming • Move to action
Follow-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document • Check-in • Praise

REVIEW

RESOURCES: RECORDING SLIDES BOOKLET



OPEN TABLE



PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONNECT

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MIKHAEL BORNSTEIN, MA

Having worked in the arts, health, social service, and education sectors, Mikhael Bornstein has more than twenty years of experience as a nonprofit leader. Mikhael is an AFP Master Trainer and a frequent speaker at conferences across North America. He teaches at George Brown College, Fleming College Toronto, and Toronto Metropolitan University. Mikhael has a Master in Arts in Leadership from Royal Roads University.