



# Cunningham's Stub Your Toe Model for Difficult Conversations

Use this model when working with colleagues and teams where disruptions negatively affect team dynamics and performance, specifically the first time someone does something inconsistent with policies, standards, values, etc. of an organization or team.

Example:

A team member snickers when another team member says something.

## Process and Exemplar Language:

1

I value you as a colleague/teammate.



2

I saw you do/hear you say (something) that's inconsistent with our standards/values/policies.



3

I wanted you to know this because I value you and your contribution to the team.



Tips For Success:

- Stay on message.
- Keep it short.
- Do not downplay or fix.
- Focus on the behavior, not the person or the root cause.

Options for Possible documentation: In calendar/email.

For more details about each model, please refer to the CFE Feedback and Difficult Conversations One-Pagers Series.

Reference: Cunningham, L. 2015. Taking conversations from difficult to doable. Pensacola, FL: Studer Group.

<https://cfe.smhs.gwu.edu> | [cfe@gwu.edu](mailto:cfe@gwu.edu) | (202) 994-1025 | 2300 Eye Street, NW Washington, DC 20037



# Cunningham's Low Performer Model for Difficult Conversations

Use this model when working with colleagues and teams when persistent behavior continues to negatively impact team performance and/or quality, safety, etc. The Stub Your Toe and Impact Message models were likely used in prior interactions. Documentation of interactions is critical.

Example:

A team member is consistently absent without any communication.



Describe the behavior you have observed

Evaluate how you feel about this behavior

Show the proper way to do things/  
Assign a mentor who can

Make the consequences known

*We need to have a serious conversation. You know that you need to do/not do (x). This is in your job description/a policy/expected of all..., etc.*

1

*I am disappointed in your behavior. We've had this conversation before and your performance/behavior has not changed.*

2

*Starting tomorrow, I am going to have you work with.... To ensure you know how to do (x) successfully. (The assigned person) will give me a report on your progress daily. [Or propose some other Action Plan.]*

3

*I will review your work and meet with you weekly. I expect your performance to change immediately. If there are continuing problems, we will have to move to another conversation. Do you have any questions?*

4

Tips For Success: Have the follow-up meeting on time.

Recommended documentation: Document each meeting. Be consistent with any disciplinary action policy including verbal warnings, written warnings, and final warnings.

For more details about each model, please refer to the CFE Feedback and Difficult Conversations One-Pagers Series.

Reference: Cunningham, L. 2015. Taking conversations from difficult to doable. Pensacola, FL: Studer Group.

<https://cfe.smhs.gwu.edu> | [cfe@gwu.edu](mailto:cfe@gwu.edu) | (202) 994-1025 | 2300 Eye Street, NW Washington, DC 20037



# Cunningham's Impact Message Model for Difficult Conversations

Use this model when working with colleagues and teams when persistent behavior is disruptive to team performance. Likely, the Stub Your Toe model was used in prior interactions. Documentation strongly recommended.

Example:

A team member consistently arrives late to meetings for no viable reason.

## STEPS



1

Describe the Behavior

*When you...*



2

Describe the Impact

*The result is...*



3

Indicate the Desired Change

*I need/I want...*



4

Get a Commitment

*Do I have your agreement?*

Tips For Success: Let the person respond after #3. If they cannot do what you need, see what they can agree to. Only if you cannot find a solution, escalate.

Options for Documentation:

- In your planner/phone calendar
- With an email: *Thank you for speaking with me today...I appreciate your understanding of the need to.....and your agreement to abide by our policy/procedures in the future.*

For more details about each model, please refer to the CFE Feedback and Difficult Conversations One-Pagers Series.

Reference: Cunningham, L. 2015. Taking conversations from difficult to doable. Pensacola, FL: Studer Group.

<https://cfe.smhs.gwu.edu> | [cfe@gwu.edu](mailto:cfe@gwu.edu) | (202) 994-1025 | 2300 Eye Street, NW Washington, DC 20037