

Leap

Everyone deserves a little couch-time.



Monthly Wellness Seminar

**The Art of Difficult Conversations:
Staying Calm, Clear & Respectful Under Stress**

Presented by
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ABOUT THE PRESENTER

Douglas E. Noll, JD, MA

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What We'll Cover Today

1

The Problem

Why difficult conversations derail — and what's really happening

2

Typical Scenarios

The five conversations leaders dread most

3

Why They Go Wrong

The neuroscience of conflict and dysregulation

4

The Dysregulated State

Reading yourself and others in real time

5

Tools & Skills

Affect labeling, the A.R.A. Framework, and more

6

Preparation

Substantive and emotional readiness

7

Practice

Putting it together in your agency context

SECTION 1

The Problem With Difficult Conversations

Why do smart, well-intentioned leaders keep getting this wrong?

The Cost of Avoiding Hard Conversations

85%

of employees experience conflict at work

\$359B

lost annually to workplace conflict (US)

2.8 hrs

per week managers spend managing conflict

30%+

of leadership time consumed by unresolved tension

What Makes a Conversation 'Difficult'?

A conversation becomes difficult when the stakes feel high enough to trigger threat perception

IDENTITY THREAT

My sense of self, competence, or integrity is at stake

RELATIONSHIP RISK

I could damage a connection I value or depend on

POWER DYNAMICS

Authority, hierarchy, or political capital are involved

EMOTIONAL CHARGE

Past history, values, or fears are activated

UNCERTAINTY

I don't know how it will go or what the other person will do

Poll #1

When a conversation starts to feel tense or uncomfortable, what do you notice yourself doing first?

1. Avoid or try to delay the conversation
2. Start explain or defending myself
3. Shut down or say very little
4. Stay calm and try to work through avoid

SECTION 2

The Conversations Leaders Dread Most

Recognizing the patterns before they recognize you

The Five Conversations Leaders Dread Most

01

Performance & Accountability

"Your work isn't meeting expectations and I need this to change."

02

Behavior & Conduct Issues

"Your attitude in team meetings is affecting morale."

03

Role Conflict & Boundaries

"You're stepping into decisions that aren't yours to make."

04

Termination / Involuntary Exit

"We're ending your employment, effective today."

05

Systemic Grievances & Complaints

"I need to address what you reported about your supervisor."

The Government Context: What Makes It Harder

These dynamics amplify difficulty in public-sector settings:

Union & Civil Service Rules

Every word may have procedural or legal implications

Mission Culture

People feel personally called to public service — criticism cuts deeper

Transparency & Documentation

"Off the record" rarely exists; everything can become a record

Siloed Hierarchies

Matrix authority and unclear chains complicate accountability conversations

Political Exposure

Conversations can escalate to elected officials or news cycles

Resource Scarcity

Performance issues exist in context of underfunding and overwork

SECTION 3

Why They Go Wrong: The Neuroscience

Understanding the biology beneath the breakdown

Your Brain Under Threat: The Hijack Sequence

In milliseconds, perceived threat triggers:

1 Amygdala activation

Danger signal fires before conscious thought

2 HPA axis floods cortisol & adrenaline

Body prepares for fight, flight, or freeze

3 Prefrontal cortex goes offline

Deliberative thinking, empathy, and language degrade

4 You enter survival mode

You're no longer the leader you trained to be

The Critical Insight

When either person in a difficult conversation is dysregulated, BOTH people are effectively dysregulated.

You cannot out-logic an activated amygdala.

Skill, not willpower, is the solution.

How Leaders Make It Worse (Without Knowing It)

X LEADING WITH FACTS

Data doesn't penetrate a dysregulated brain — emotions must be addressed first

X PROBLEM-SOLVING TOO SOON

Solutions before feelings creates resistance, not resolution

X TONE MISMATCH

Calm words + tense body language = distrust. The body always wins.

X GETTING DEFENSIVE

Your defensiveness signals threat, which escalates the other person's activation

X SILENCE OR AVOIDANCE

Unaddressed issues fester; the conversation you avoid today costs 10x tomorrow

X "I" STATEMENTS ONLY

"I feel..." keeps focus on you. The person in crisis needs YOU focused on THEM.

Poll #2

What do you find most challenging in difficult conversation at work?

1. Managing my emotions in the moment
2. Finding the right words to say
3. Worrying about how the other person will react
4. Knowing how the conversation will impact the relationship

SECTION 4

Reading the Dysregulated State

Recognizing dysregulation in yourself and others — in real time

Recognizing Dysregulation: The Signals

IN OTHERS — Watch For:

- Voice rises or goes flat/monotone
- Repetitive statements (broken record)
- Loss of nuance — black/white thinking
- Body tenses, arms cross, eye contact breaks
- Tangential or illogical responses
- Tears, flushing, shaking
- Withdrawal or shutdown
- Explosive anger or sarcasm

IN YOURSELF — Notice:

- Heart rate increases noticeably
- Urge to dominate, flee, or go silent
- Righteous certainty — "I'm absolutely right"
- Chest tightness, shallow breathing
- Mind narrows to one fixed point
- Rehearsing your rebuttal while they talk
- Contempt, disgust, or dismissiveness
- Feeling suddenly exhausted or numb

The 90-Second Rule: What the Research Tells Us

90 seconds

An emotional activation in the nervous system lasts approximately 90 seconds — if you don't add fuel to it.

After 90 seconds, the biochemical storm has passed. What remains is a choice.

Field observation from 25+ years of mediation practice; supported by Lieberman et al. affect labeling research, UCLA

What Extends the Activation:

Rumination

Replaying the threat narrative in your head keeps cortisol flowing

Counterattack

The other person's defensive response re-triggers your threat system

Story-making

"This always happens... they never... they don't respect me..."

SECTION 5

The Tools & Skills: The Science of De-Escalation

Affect labeling, the A.R.A. Framework, and nervous system leadership

Affect Labeling: The Neuroscience of Naming Emotions

The Mechanism

Lieberman et al. (UCLA) demonstrated that labeling an emotional state activates the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, which in turn inhibits amygdala activity.

In plain terms: naming the emotion dampens it.

This is not soft skills. This is neuroscience.

Precision note: Lieberman's study measured subjects labeling their own emotions. The interpersonal application — labeling ANOTHER person's emotions — is a well-supported extrapolation used extensively in clinical and conflict practice.

THE CRITICAL RULE

Always label the **OTHER** person's emotions.

✓ "You feel frustrated."

✗ "It sounds like you're frustrated."

✗ "I understand you're upset."

The directness IS the mechanism. Full attention on their

Affect Labeling in Practice: What It Sounds Like

Use "You feel..." or "You're..." followed by the emotion word. Stack labels when needed.

SITUATION: Employee is tearful after being passed over for promotion

"You feel devastated. You worked hard for this and it didn't go your way. You feel like your contributions aren't being seen."

SITUATION: Team member pushes back hard on a new policy

"You're angry. You feel like this wasn't done fairly. You feel dismissed."

SITUATION: Colleague goes quiet and withdrawn after feedback

"You feel embarrassed. You feel like what I said was unfair. And maybe you feel a little scared about what this means."

SITUATION: Employee accuses you of favoritism

"You feel furious. You feel like the system is rigged against you. You feel like no one is paying attention to what you're going through."

Key: You may not get the emotion exactly right. That's okay — they will correct you. The effort itself signals safety.

The A.R.A. Framework: A 60-Second De-Escalation Protocol

Developed through 10 years of Prison of Peace — proven in the highest-stress environments imaginable

A

ACKNOWLEDGE

Name what you observe about their emotional state. Use affect labeling. Stay focused on them — do not share your own feelings yet.

"You feel blindsided by this. You feel this is unfair."

R

REFLECT

Mirror the content of what they said — not to agree, but to demonstrate you actually heard them. Paraphrase, don't parrot.

"You feel your work wasn't evaluated fairly and that the process wasn't transparent."

A

ASK

Once calm is established, ask an open question that invites them to share more or begins the problem-solving conversation.

"What would it take for you to feel this was handled fairly?"

Nervous System Leadership: The Foundational Principle

Your nervous system is the most powerful leadership tool you have — and the most neglected.

Co-regulation is real

Nervous systems entrain. Your calm physiologically calms others. Your activation activates them. You are always broadcasting.

Regulation precedes reasoning

No meaningful problem-solving happens in a dysregulated state. Your first job is always nervous system management — theirs and yours.

Presence is a skill

Full attention on the other person — not on your next line — is experienced as profoundly respectful and inherently calming.

Leadership empathy is not softness

It is the strategic capacity to read, regulate, and respond to the emotional states of others to achieve outcomes. It is your highest-leverage skill.

Regulating Your Own Nervous System: In-the-Moment Tools

You cannot manage another person's nervous system until you manage your own:

Physiological Sigh

Double inhale through nose, long slow exhale through mouth. Deflates the diaphragm. Fastest known method to lower heart rate.

Name It to Tame It

Silently label your own emotion: "I'm feeling threatened right now."
Activates PFC, inhibits amygdala — works on yourself too.

Slowing Down Speech

Consciously speak 20% slower. This signals safety to both your own nervous system and theirs. Avoid rapid-fire responses.

Deliberate Posture Shift

Unclench jaw, drop shoulders, open chest. Posture directly feeds back to nervous system state — change the body, change the brain.

Pause Before Responding

A 3-5 second pause is perceived as thoughtfulness. Internally: use it to run the A.R.A. check before speaking.

Permission to Feel

Acknowledge internally that your reaction is normal. Suppression amplifies. Acceptance and labeling diminish.

Poll #3

Which skill would most improve your difficult conversations right now?

1. Staying calm when emotions rise
2. Being clear and direct without sounding harsh
3. Handling pushback or defensiveness
4. Feeling more confident going into the conversation

SECTION 6

Preparation: Substantive & Emotional Readiness

The conversation starts long before you enter the room

Substantive Preparation: What You Need to Know

Before a difficult conversation, be able to answer:



What specifically happened?

Facts, dates, observed behaviors — not interpretations. "On Tuesday, the report was submitted 3 days late." Not: "You never meet deadlines."



What is the actual impact?

On the team, on the mission, on the agency, on relationships. Be concrete.



What outcome do I want?

Behavior change? A plan? Termination? Understanding? Be clear on your goal before you enter.



What does the other person need?

What are their likely concerns, fears, or interests? What matters to them? What would a good outcome look like from their perspective?



What are the constraints?

Legal, union, HR, policy, procedural limits. Know your lane before you speak.



What's my BATNA if this fails?

Best Alternative to Negotiated Agreement. What do you do if the conversation doesn't produce resolution?

Emotional Preparation: Getting Your Own Nervous System Ready

BEFORE YOU WALK IN

- Do the physiological sigh. Lower your baseline.
- Write down your primary emotion about this conversation.
- Ask: "What do I need to let go of to stay present?"
- Identify your trigger points: what might the person say that could activate you?
- Rehearse affect labeling phrases. Have 5 ready.
- Set an intention: "My job today is to make this person feel heard."
- Physically settle — posture, jaw, shoulders, breath.

THE MINDSET SHIFT

✗ I need to win this

✓ I need to understand this

✗ They are the problem

✓ There is a problem between us

✗ I must stay in control

✓ I must stay present

✗ They need to change

✓ I need to create conditions for change

✗ I know what's right

✓ I know one perspective

Structuring the Conversation: A Proven Architecture

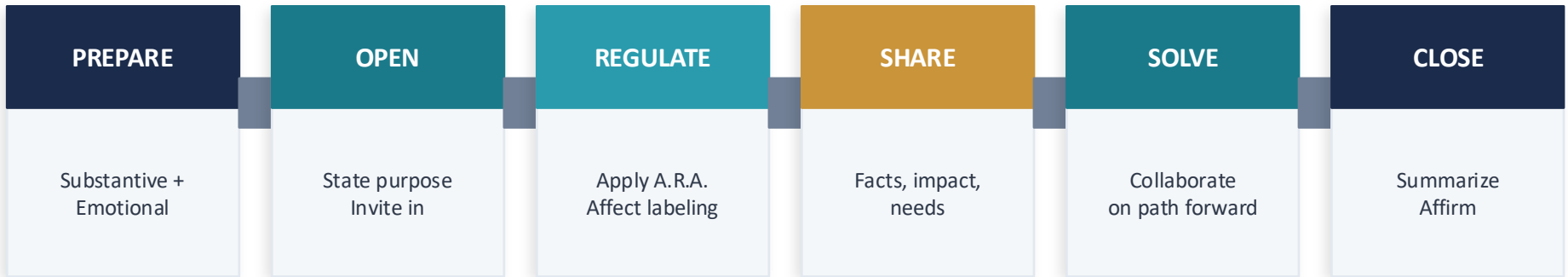
OPEN 2–3 min	State the purpose directly and calmly. Name that the conversation may be uncomfortable. Invite them in.	<i>"I need to talk with you about something important. This is a difficult conversation and I want us to get through it well."</i>
LISTEN 5–10 min	Let them speak first if appropriate. Apply affect labeling and A.R.A. Do not defend, justify, or solve. Just receive.	<i>Deploy: affect labeling → reflection → more labeling → silence → more labeling</i>
SHARE 3–5 min	Once regulated, present your perspective using specific, factual, impact-focused language. Avoid blame framing.	<i>"What I observed was X. The impact on the team was Y. What I need going forward is Z."</i>
PROBLEM-SOLVE 5–10 min	Invite collaboration on the path forward. Use open questions. Look for interests, not positions.	<i>"What ideas do you have? What would you need to make this work?"</i>
CLOSE 2–3 min	Summarize agreements, next steps, and timeline. Document if required. Close with affirmation of the relationship.	<i>"I want to thank you for this conversation. I know it wasn't easy."</i>

SECTION 7

Practice: Putting It All Together

From concept to capability — learning in your context

The Integrated Model: NSL in Difficult Conversations



At any moment of escalation: STOP → Return to A.R.A. → Affect label → Regulate → Continue

Non-Negotiables:

- You are always the model of the nervous system state you want to create
- Emotions must be acknowledged before solutions can land
- Affect labeling is always "You feel..." — never "I feel" or "It sounds like"
- The goal is not agreement — it is understanding, dignity, and forward movement

Practice Scenario: Apply What You've Learned

THE SCENARIO

Maria is a 15-year agency veteran who was passed over for a team lead role. The position went to a newer hire you believe has stronger skills. Maria has become visibly disengaged and made a comment to a colleague that the process was "rigged." You've scheduled a one-on-one and she enters your office with arms crossed, jaw tight, and answers your greeting with a flat "Fine."

Q1 Regulate yourself

What do you notice in your own body right now? Name your emotion silently. Apply the physiological sigh. What's your intention for this conversation?

Q2 Open with affect labeling

Write 3 affect labeling statements you could offer Maria in the first 60 seconds.
Remember: "You feel..."

Q3 Apply A.R.A.

Walk through the Acknowledge → Reflect → Ask sequence for this specific situation.
What would each step sound like?

Objections Leaders Raise — And What's True

"This feels manipulative"

Affect labeling isn't a technique to get what you want — it's an act of genuine attention. People know the difference. Authenticity is required.

"What if I get the emotion wrong?"

They'll correct you. That correction is the beginning of engagement. You don't need to be perfect — you need to be trying.

"I don't have time for all this"

Unresolved difficult conversations take exponentially more time. A skilled 20-minute conversation prevents months of dysfunction.

"I'm not a therapist"

You're not doing therapy. You're doing leadership. The goal is performance and relationships, not healing. These skills serve both.

"What if they don't calm down?"

Stay in A.R.A. Stack more affect labels. Give them more time. If safety is an issue, name it and pause. But most people calm with sustained presence.

"My agency culture won't accept this"

Cultures change leader by leader. When your outcomes improve — lower grievances, higher performance — the evidence changes the culture.

Your 30-Day Practice Plan: Building the Skill

Skills decay without repetition. Difficult conversations are a practice, not an event.

WEEK 1

1. Daily: Name 5 emotions you observe in others (silently). Build your vocabulary.
2. Practice affect labeling in low-stakes conversations — not just difficult ones.
3. After any tense exchange, write a brief debrief: What activated me? What helped?

WEEK 2

1. Identify your top 3 trigger situations. Prepare specific affect labeling phrases for each.
2. Run A.R.A. in a real (moderate difficulty) conversation. Debrief afterwards.
3. Practice the physiological sigh before every meeting for a week.

WEEK 3-4

1. Identify the one difficult conversation you've been avoiding. Prepare using this framework.
2. Have it. Debrief using the 5 questions: What activated me? What worked? What didn't? What would I do differently?
3. Share one skill from this session with a peer or direct report.

Key Takeaways: What to Carry Forward

1 Difficult conversations fail at the nervous system level, not the content level. Regulate first.

2 Affect labeling — "You feel..." — is the single most powerful de-escalation move available to you.

3 The A.R.A. Framework (Acknowledge, Reflect, Ask) gives you a reliable 60-second protocol for any situation.

4 Your calm is contagious. Your activation is also contagious. You are always broadcasting.

5 Preparation is both substantive AND emotional. Know what happened AND what you're bringing into the room.

6 The goal is never to win the conversation. It is to move through it with dignity, clarity, and relationship intact.

The most courageous thing a leader can do

*is walk into an uncomfortable conversation
with skill, presence, and genuine care.*

That is leadership empathy in action.

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Resources & Continuing Development

BOOKS BY DOUGLAS NOLL

De-Escalate

Atria/Beyond Words/Simon & Schuster, 2017 — 45,000+ copies, 5 languages. The foundation of everything covered today.

Leadership Empathy

Beyond Words/Simon & Schuster, September 2026 — The full Nervous System Leadership framework.

Elusive Peace

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CONNECT & CONTINUE

Website: doughnoll.com

Podcast: 350+ episodes on mediation, de-escalation, and leadership

Substack: Nervous System Leadership series — new essays biweekly

LinkedIn: Doug Noll — follow for ongoing NSL content

Pepperdine University: Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution

Prison of Peace: prisonofpeace.org — the program that proved all of this

Leadership Empathy (Simon & Schuster, September 2026) — Pre-order available soon. Ask Doug about keynotes and workshops.

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THE ART OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS:

STAYING CALM, CLEAR & RESPECTFUL UNDER STRESS

PERFORMANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

BEHAVIOR & CONDUCT ISSUES

ROLE CONFLICT & BOUNDARIES

TERMINATION & INVOLUNTARY EXIT

SYSTEMIC GRIEVANCES/COMPLAINTS

WHY WE REACT...

- Addressing gaps between expectations and results can trigger defensiveness, especially when someone feels their effort is being questioned.
- Conversations about inappropriate or unprofessional behavior often feel personal, making strong emotional reactions more likely.
- Clarifying roles or setting limits can create tension when expectations are unclear or individuals feel their autonomy is being restricted.
- Letting someone go is inherently high-stakes, often bringing shock, anger, or grief into the conversation.
- Discussing broader organizational issues can surface frustration and mistrust, particularly if people feel unheard or unsupported.

AND REMEMBER...

There are easy, science backed de-escalation tools and skills to help assure you're able to neutralize difficult conversations with ease.

Model the nervous system you want to create and remember, if you want people to be open to your ideas, you must be open to theirs. - **Douglas E. Noll, JD, MA**

- **Affect Labeling:** Putting emotions into words ("It sounds like you're feeling frustrated") helps reduce intensity, allowing the brain to shift from reaction to reasoning and making the conversation more manageable.
- **A.R.A. Framework (Acknowledge, Reflect, Ask):** This simple structure keeps conversations grounded. ACKNOWLEDGE the concern, REFLECT back what you're hearing to show understanding, and ASK thoughtful questions to move toward clarity and solutions.
- **Nervous System Leadership:** Leading with awareness of your own regulation state helps set the tone; staying calm, steady, and present signals safety to others, which can naturally de-escalate tension and keep the interaction productive.

