Geospatial Professional Network

GIS Leadership: Candid Conversations

Summary

Difficult conversations are an unavoidable part of leadership. Whether discussing competing priorities, resource limitations, stakeholder expectations, or organizational change, leaders must be able to communicate honestly while preserving trust and relationships. This fact sheet summarizes the difference between workplace conversations and those had in a candid way, tips to distinguish between the two, and implementation strategies. These tips come from a May 2026 webinar. It is important to identify the need for conversations, techniques to make each conversation effective, and prepare and plan your approach.

Key Message

Effective communication is critical for working with other people. Plan and use strategies to succeed.

Core Leadership Concepts

Should this conversation happen?

- What happens if I address the issue? What happens if I avoid it?
- What outcomes am I seeking?
- What personal, interpersonal, and organizational risks are involved?

Candid Conversations are useful when:

- Stakes are high
- Opinions differ
- Emotions may be involved
- Actions or decisions are required

Know your audience

- Consider alignment or differences in roles and priorities
- Consider communication styles, personality types, and generational differences
- Be aware of power dynamics, both those where you are more at risk and where you have more power
- What actions or decisions are required?

Work towards psychological safety

- Build trust through transparency
- Listen actively
- Share empathy
- Encourage participation, questions, and differing opinions
- Challenge assumptions respectfully

Action Checklist for GIS Leaders: Communication

☐ Use clear communication. Avoid acronyms and jargon of any type
☐ Plan, prepare, and practice verbal and non-verbal communication
☐ Tailor communication to the audience
☐ Listen first
☐ Be ready to pivot
☐ Lead with honesty, empathy, and professionalism.

Action Checklist for GIS Leaders: Candid Conversations

☐ Clarity – Communicate simply and directly
☐ Empathy – Understand the perspectives of others
☐ Courage – Address difficult issues rather than avoiding them
☐ Transparency – Be honest about realities and constraints
☐ Trust – Build strong relationships before difficult conversations are needed

Memorable Insight

The most effective leaders are not those who avoid difficult conversations, they are the ones who approach them with clarity, empathy, transparency, and respect. By building trust and communicating openly, geospatial professionals can strengthen relationships, improve collaboration, and achieve better organizational outcomes.

Resources

Crucial Conversations

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High.* McGraw-Hill. Grenny, J., Patterson, K., McMillan, R., Switzler, A., & Gregory, E. (2022). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill. ISBN 978-1260474213.

Critical Conversations

Stevenson, L. (2017). "The Power Behind Mastering Critical Conversations." *American Management Association.* American Management Association. *Mastering the Art of Critical Conversations* (Seminar #02146). amanet.org.

Vulnerability & Courageous Leadership

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead.* Gotham Books. ISBN 978-1592408412.
Brown, B. (2015). *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* Spiegel & Grau. ISBN 978-0812985801.
Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* Random House. ISBN 978-0399592522.

Radical Candor: Revised Edition (International Edition)

Scott, Kim (2019), St. Martin's Press

Focus Areas: Communication • Leadership • Psychological Safety • Emotional Intelligence
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