

# TOOLS FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

In a difficult conversation, five tools help you share your views and create dialogue that leads to understanding and action. Remember them with the acronym **STATE**\*. **S**hare, **T**ell and **A**sk describe what to do; **T**alk and **E**ncourage describe how to do it.

## **SHARE THE FACTS**

**Example:** Share the data you have (or need to know) about the situation or issue. Explain how it affects patients and staff, the quality and cost of doing the work, the value to patients or how to improve the work life of your co-workers. Tell why this is important (improves patient care, makes teamwork easier, saves money, etc.). Share what the unions, management or physicians already are doing to address the issue.

## **TELL YOUR STORY**

**Example:** State a tentative conclusion or observation based on the facts: *“Here’s the way I see (the issue).”* If the issue is about actions or behavior, be careful not to attack or assume facts not in evidence: *“It seems as though you might have a problem with (your tentative conclusion)?”* Watch for defensiveness and use a contrasting statement to help the other person feel safe: *“You seem to enjoy/have a flair for (a positive). We’re trying to figure out (what the specific problem might be).”*

## **ASK FOR THE OTHER’S VIEW**

**Example:** *“Is there something I’m missing?” “Can you tell me your feelings about this?” “I’m hoping you can help me understand what’s going on.”* The goal here is to learn rather than be right; to get information to make a good decision, not to get your way. As you learn more information, be willing to change your story (but don’t let the other person off the hook for her/his behavior).

## **TALK TENTATIVELY**

**Example:** *“In my opinion,” “I’m beginning to wonder,” “I’ve talked to some of our co-workers.”* Express confidence in your observations while leaving the door open to having your conclusions challenged. The facts might have alternative explanations; your story is only an educated guess. The goal of your conversation is to create shared meaning, learn more information and build trust, not win an argument.

## **ENCOURAGE TESTING**

**Example:** *“I know this might be a touchy subject; do you have a different explanation?” or “Maybe I’m wrong about this, is it something else all together?”* You want the other person to talk about the problem, and you need to make her/him feel safe about expressing their opinion or story; otherwise, you won’t be able to find a solution. Invite opposing views or play the devil’s advocate to show you want to learn more, but don’t back down on the underlying goal.

\***Crucial Conversations:** Tools for talking when stakes are high, 2002, McGraw-Hill.

