

Five leadership tips for family physicians working in team-based primary care

Conflict intelligence:

Set of competencies for managing and resolving differences



Conflict intelligence leadership behaviors

- Valuing positive nature of team tensions, disagreement and conflict (mindset)
- Self-awareness
- Self-regulation
- Active listening skills
- Ability to support team member collaboration



It is what you say that matters!

When interacting with others who have different points of view

Use language which calms and de-escalates competitive upward spiral of disagreements



Conflict intelligence leadership tips



Communicate interest in understanding other person's perspectives

Signal curiosity by saying you are curious



Acknowledge other person's perspectives

Restate other perspective to demonstrate active listening



Explore areas of common ground

Step back from specific point of view reveals common beliefs or goals



Model humility Acknowledge you could be wrong

Complex issues have multiple perspectives Tentative language encourages further discussion

Goertzen J. Five leadership tips for family physicians working in team-based primary care. FMF 2025: Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Adapted from:

Coleman PT. The conflict-intelligent leader. Harvard Business Review: July-August 2025.

Minson JA, Collins HK, Yeomans M. A smarter way to disagree. Harvard Business Review: November – December 2025.

HOW THE 10-SECOND RULE CAN CHANGE YOUR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Communicating is one of the most important responsibilities of a leader. As leadership is about influencing others, the ability to communicate clearly and motivate others is a key attribute of effective and impactful leaders.

The challenge is that communication can sometimes be difficult. People don't always understand the message we want to communicate. We may do a poor job of expressing what we mean. The way we communicate is directly affected by our perception of who we are, our leadership position, how we feel about the person we are talking with, and our opinion of the focus or topic of the conversation.

Often these variables combine to make it more difficult to communicate effectively, especially when there is disagreement or emotions start to rise in the conversation. When this occurs, the 10-second rule can dramatically and positively influence the conversation.

How do we implement this 10-second approach? In any conversation when the emotions of the conversation start to rise, wait 10-seconds before you respond. Just stop, take a few breaths, and don't immediately react! Instead, wait and give yourself a moment to be intentional in your response, instead of emotionally reactive. Although this isn't magic, this response can often be impactful.

The 10-second rule can interrupt the reactive cycle which happens when we are offended or frustrated and respond negatively in an effort to get the other person to change. Often, the other person is also frustrated or offended and responds negatively. The result is the conversation escalates pretty quickly and suddenly your communication partner and yourself are not communicating. Rather, you have moved to a combative style driven by intense emotions. By taking 10 seconds to pause, collect your thoughts and emotions before you respond, one interrupts the reactive cycle. This provides an opportunity to respond differently and influence the possibility of stepping back into an effective conversation.

Taking a 10 second pause, also influences your communication partner. The temporary pause is often unexpected and somewhat disarming. Our usual response to criticism is defensiveness or attack. When people are offended they push back and this fuels the reactive cycle. In contrast, when you stop feeding a negative response, the other person has time to collect their thoughts, reflect on your response, and move back into conversation. In addition, taking a pause before you react, provides an opportunity to refocus on the person you are communicating with positive intent. Although we sometimes passionately disagree about an issue, underlying this potential conflict are often shared organizational goals and desired outcomes.

The 10-second rule can dramatically change your difficult conversations and make you a more effective leader. The 10-second pause allows you to move from an emotional reaction to a thoughtful response. This pause provides an opportunity for both conversation partners to de-escalate their emotional reactions, take time to briefly reflect, and move back into conversation.

Goertzen J. Difficult Conversations. jgoertzen@nosm.ca Adapted from: Aten A. How the 10-second rule can dramatically change your conversations and make you a better leader. Inc. Blog: August 12, 2021.