APS Supervisor Desk Guide: *Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations*

Developed by Valerie Smith, LCSW, Consulting, Advocacy and Therapeutic Services, LLC.

June 2024. Remediated 2026. Contact APStraining@sdsu.edu for questions or feedback

Academy for Professional Excellence

APSWI
Adult Protective Services Workforce Innovations

© 2026 Academy for Professional Excellence. All rights reserved.

The Academy for Professional Excellence is a project of the San Diego State University School of Social Work

APS Supervisor Desk Guide: Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations

Introduction:
Welcome to the Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations Desk Guide! This resource is designed to enhance your professional growth and development. Whether you're preparing for performance evaluations, important meetings, or critical phone calls, this guide can be your trusted companion.

- In any work setting, having difficult conversations is an inevitable part of the work with peers, direct reports, management, and interest-holders. As an APS supervisor, you may have already had to deliver tough employee feedback, reset a client or interest-holder's expectations, or address conflicts among staff (Landry, 2019). Whatever the situation, this guide allows us to understand some key takeaways from **three frameworks** that we can use when engaging in difficult conversations. Having an understanding of these can help prepare us to stay engaged as necessary and reduce harm (to self or others).
- This desk guide will feature three frameworks to support APS supervisors when engaging in difficult conversations. A significant piece of using the frameworks will require that a person is open to learning about themselves and be willing to continue learning, and building skills.

How to Use This Guide

1. **Read**: Dive into three different frameworks and materials. Develop an understanding of best practices to have and respond to challenging conversations.
2. **Watch**: Engage with the accompanying demonstration videos, materials, and discussions. Visual learning can provide fresh perspectives and spark new ideas.
3. **Learn**: Reflect on what you've read and watched. Consider how the information applies to your role, team, and personal growth. Identify areas where you can expand your skills and knowledge.

4. **Reflect**: Take time to check in with yourself. Consider alternative ways to respond, or start a professional development journal. Ask yourself questions such as: What insights did I gain? What challenges did I encounter? How can I apply these learnings to my work?
5. **Quarterly Review**: Make it a habit to revisit this guide every quarter. Use it as a compass to navigate your professional journey. Reflect on your progress, celebrate achievements, and set new goals.

Content Warning:

We recognize that APS work is both challenging and rewarding and APS professionals are whole human beings who have their own experiences before and during APS work. Content and video clips in this Desk Guide may activate feelings based on personal or professional experiences, including vicarious trauma and we encourage everyone to do what they need to do to safely engage in this learning.

Framework #1: Growth Mindset

What is it?

A growth mindset is a theory that was first applied to educational outcomes related to intelligence and the success or failure of students. Stanford professor and psychologist Carol Dweck has continued the research and identified two approaches that have an impact on outcomes of success: 'fixed mindset' and 'growth mindset'.

According to research, (Dweck, 2015), people's theories about themselves had a significant impact on their motivation, effort, and approach to challenges. When individuals demonstrate a belief that they can develop new skills and abilities, (growth mindset), they are more likely to embrace challenges and continue even if there are mistakes.

Because of this important research, developing a growth mindset has been applied to business and work settings, and many companies are looking for leaders to develop a growth mindset.

The model of fixed and growth mindsets highlights how cognitive, affective, and behavioral features are linked to one's beliefs and flexibility of their knowledge and skills.

- A growth mindset is the idea that basic abilities can be developed and improved through dedication and hard work. It includes being able to adapt to changes, to learn from mistakes and is a strengths-based perspective.
- A fixed mindset is described as being inflexible, fear of making mistakes, not being open to learning, and having a difficult time with changes or challenges.

Using a growth mindset may come into play in numerous ways throughout your day, in both professional and personal situations. In work settings, many companies, and organizations face unexpected and continuous changes such as addressing budgets, implementing new laws/regulations, developing efficiencies in providing services, and remaining operational during natural disasters, and more recently a global pandemic.

Agencies and organizations have learned that they need to be flexible and develop processes so services can continue and they are looking for employees who can be flexible in their approaches to the work.

A growth mindset doesn't mean an employee has to become a "yes person" to everything. Instead, it means a person is open to learning or changing, taking a risk, and understanding that it may not result in the expected outcome. It means that a person can see changes as growth opportunities to develop new skills, knowledge, and abilities.

For example, an employee with a fixed mindset who is informed that a process is changing, might think or say "This is the way it's always been done, why change it?"

An employee with a growth mindset might think or say, "I can see the big picture" or "I'm not sure how to do that yet."

Why should I use it?

Supervisors are responsible for the work in APS through the actions of the employees they supervise and through their interactions with external partners. And by reinforcing expectations, regulations, program operations, and changes from administrators and executives.

Approaching difficult conversations with a growth mindset can help reduce anxiety and stress, provide clear communication, and foster a psychologically safe (Edmondson, Ph. D, 2024) environment between APS supervisors and their staff, their managers, interest-holders, and collateral contacts. By demonstrating a growth mindset, others are invited to do the same and the dynamic can switch from "I can't" or "I won't" to "That's a possibility" or "Let's try".

When should it be used?

- When a supervisor is meeting with others, all parties need to know they are not going to be confronted, reprimanded, or unnecessarily criticized. No one wants to feel like they have to fight for their point of view to be heard and considered.
    - For employees, meeting with a supervisor can be intimidating because of the hierarchical relationship between the supervisor and the employee, where the supervisors have a level of authority that is higher than the employee. This power differential can impact an employee's ability to ask for assistance, and guidance or talk about mistakes and receive

feedback. Supervisors have the responsibility to use frameworks to engage in difficult conversations that foster the employee's self-confidence instead of fixed mindset thinking such as: "I am right and the employee is wrong". This is important so all staff can feel supported and perform their duties with the understanding that making mistakes is part of learning and developing a growth mindset.

- When meeting with external partners, using a growth mindset can foster collaborative and innovative ideas, reduce defensiveness and allow for growth within the group. (See video demonstrations section of Growth Mindset to view this framework being used with external partners).
- Incorporating a growth mindset when working with administration, and executive management, allows for critical thinking, professional development and engagement in new initiatives or changes. (See video demonstrations section of Growth Mindset to view this framework being used with management).

How do I use a growth mindset for difficult conversations?

Supervisors first have to determine if they have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. This will be ongoing work, and it may vary from situation to situation. One technique is to reflect and recognize when you have a fixed mindset about something. Make note of it and the next time, challenge yourself to think of it another way. Consider how fixed mindset tendencies like making assumptions, pre-determining outcomes, and perception of the person or topic of the difficult conversation can impact the ability to stay focused on a resolution.

Having a growth mindset while navigating difficult conversations as a supervisor is essential. Here are some strategies to approach such discussions constructively:

1. **Check Your Mindset**: (Gallo, 2017)
    - Reframe how you think about the conversation. Instead of labeling it solely as "difficult," consider it also as an opportunity to learn.
    - Focus on the task or actions, not the person.

- Keep an open mind, and don't assume you already know the outcome of the conversation.

2. **Prepare**:
   - Gather relevant information and set clear goals for the conversation.
   - Develop information-seeking questions.
   - Anticipate resistance or sticking points, and plan how to address them, offer to schedule follow-up meetings. (How to Train Managers to Have Difficult Conversations, 2022)
3. **Create a Supportive Environment**:
   - Use phrases like "I understand this is a difficult conversation topic, and we can work together to address it."
   - Develop a partnership approach, if applicable explain the outcome of the conversation is to create a plan. For example: "You're sharing a lot with me here and I'd like to ensure we have some common goals in mind. Can we take a moment and check in with what our goals are?"
   - Remind the employee of available resources, such as your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
4. **Active Listening**:
   - Listen carefully and empathetically to the other person's perspective.
   - Show compassion and understanding
5. **Reflect and Learn**:
   - After the conversation, take time to reflect on what went well and what could be improved.
   - Consider how you can learn from the opportunity
6. **Develop Solutions together**:
   - Create action steps to achieve agreed-upon outcomes or solutions.

Difficult conversations provide a chance for growth and improvement. Approach them with empathy, openness, and a commitment to finding solutions.

Video Demonstrations:

The following two videos demonstrate APS supervisors approaching difficult conversations with a growth mindset.

View each video and reflect on what you think went well, what are some areas of improvement, what conversations have you had recently where you either used some of these skills or where they would have been helpful.

- Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Growth Mindset (APS Supervisor and Manager) or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isOZoUXm7RI
    - In this scenario, Terri (APS Supervisor) uses Growth Mindset when meeting with Jim (APS Manager), in preparation for a new Continuous Quality Improvement project.
- Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Emotional Intelligence and Growth Mindset (APS Forensic MDT Meeting) or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuKHi3fDDKw
    - In this scenario, Oscar (APS Supervisor) uses both Emotional Intelligence and Growth Mindset during a monthly APS Forensic Multidisciplinary Team Meeting with Dr. Nguyen (Geriatrician), Dennis (Detective) and Carla (Deputy District Attorney).

Framework #2: Emotional Intelligence

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. According to Psychologist Daniel Goleman, PhD, who developed the term (Goleman, 1995), emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive, understand, and comprehend emotions, and use techniques to identify and manage them.

Where can I use EI?

EI can be used in a variety of settings and situations. From work life to personal life, recognizing and understanding emotions in ourselves and others can help to improve relationships. In a work setting, EI can be used in individual meetings with staff, department or team meetings, multidisciplinary team meetings, with clients and family members, interest-holders, and executive management or other leaders (Goleman, 2004).

Why should I use EI?

EI can help supervisors (or anyone) to consider how their values, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors could make difficult conversations harder. Identifying emotions that may activate reactions and behaviors before a difficult conversation can help you stay focused on the purpose.

When do I use EI?

The first step is taking the time to invest in yourself, by learning how you respond to situations when you are stressed, tired, hungry, or feeling overloaded. And also in situations when you are excited, motivated, and feeling confident. Develop a method to journal these experiences, such as an app, notepad, or an electronic document, and reflect on interactions you have had that didn't go as well as you would have wanted. Try to recall what was going on with you during that interaction- for example, were you irritated about something that happened previously, and during the interaction, you were easily angered?

How do I learn and practice EI?

You likely already have EI skills and a good sense of self and know how things may affect you. The point is that learning, understanding, and practicing EI is a concept that doesn't have an endpoint. There are always situations where we can use EI and also build skills.

To build skills in EI, one must first start with the self which can be summarized in three concepts (McNally Psy.D, 2023):

1. Self-awareness- the ability to recognize and understand how your thoughts and emotions affect you.
2. Self-Regulation- the ability to manage your emotions and when you need a break or self-care
3. Interpersonal Skills- the ability to notice other people's emotions and behaviors and how they respond to you.

All three concepts can also be considered a form of self-care. Self-care involves activities that reduce stress and promote health. As a supervisor, practicing self-care is essential for your ongoing physical and emotional wellness. It helps you become a better leader by enhancing your decision-making abilities and improving your overall well-being.

Self-care can be as simple as taking a break or checking in with yourself about basic needs. It can also be more complex and involve multiple layers of stressors that haven't been addressed or resolved. Try to be compassionate to yourself and don't feel guilty for needing a break or attending to a personal need. Treat yourself like you would treat a staff member you supervise, a colleague, or a friend.

Here are some Self Care tools that may be helpful:

- Self-Care Plan: Social-Work-Tech-Self-Care-Plan-en-1.pdf (socialworktech.com)
- Self-Assessment: Social-Work-Tech-SA-bw.pdf (socialworktech.com)

Video Demonstrations:

The following two videos demonstrate APS supervisors using Emotional Intelligence during difficult conversations.

View each video and reflect on what you think went well, what are some areas of improvement, what conversations have you had recently where you either used some of these skills or where they would have been helpful.

- Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Emotional Intelligence (APS Supervisor and Direct Report) or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHwh1GrTd6I
    - In this scenario, Grace (APS Supervisor) uses Emotional Intelligence when discussing concerns of a performance issue with their direct report, Sean (APS Professional).
- Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Emotional Intelligence and Growth Mindset (APS Forensic MDT Meeting) or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuKHi3fDDKw
    - In this scenario, Oscar (APS Supervisor) uses both Emotional Intelligence and Growth Mindset during a monthly APS Forensic Multidisciplinary Team Meeting with Dr. Nguyen (Geriatrician), Dennis (Detective) and Carla (Deputy District Attorney).

Framework #3: The RAVEN Approach

What is it?

The RAVEN approach, developed by Dr. J. Luke Wood and Dr. Frank Harris III at San Diego State University, is a structured framework that APS professionals and supervisors can use for difficult conversations when experiencing microaggressions and overt acts of racism, prejudice, and discrimination in workplace settings, in the community, or when visiting clients.

The difference between microaggressions and overt discrimination or macroaggressions is that people who commit microaggressions might not even be aware of them. Microaggressions stem from implicit bias, that everyone carries with them.

According to California Legislative Information (2019), implicit bias is defined as "the attitudes or internalized stereotypes that affect our perceptions, actions, and decisions unconsciously, exist, and often contribute to unequal treatment of people based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, and other characteristics".

Research indicates that unexamined implicit bias causes us to form inaccurate assumptions about people (Independent Lens, 2015). This can lead to microaggressions which are typically brief, indirect verbal and non-verbal put-downs or insults that are expressed toward a marginalized group, and have also been called "subtle acts of exclusion". The experience of microaggressions can lead to stress and is impactful in both the short- and long term. (Psychology Today, n.d.)

Why should I use it?

Racism and microaggressions cause harm and to counter those acts, policies, practices, and procedures are needed to promote racial equity Beabout (2021). Addressing microaggressions is one way to accept responsibility and act to uphold a more equitable power dynamic.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has developed a Code of Ethics with guiding principles, for social work professionals, but can also be used by all social services professionals. Three of these ethical principles and values highlight the need for challenging social injustice, focusing on human

relationships, and providing services ethically. National Association of Social Workers (2021). Code of Ethics: English (socialworkers.org)

- Value: Social Justice
- Ethical Principle: Social workers challenge social injustice.
    - Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision-making for all people.

- Value: Importance of Human Relationships
- Ethical Principle: Social Workers recognize the central importance of human relationships
    - Social Workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.
    - Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process.
    - Social Workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

- Value: Integrity
- Ethical Principle: Social Workers behave in a trustworthy manner.
    - Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them.
    - Social Workers should take measures to care for themselves professionally and personally.

- Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

How do I use the RAVEN approach?

Addressing racism and discrimination in any form can be difficult. Being mindful of our everyday actions promotes equity and reduces harm. The RAVEN approach is a structure that can be used to disrupt and stop microaggressions from continuing.

The RAVEN approach can help supervisors and staff respond and address the behavior proactively. The name is spelled from the first letter of each word: Redirect-Ask-Values-Emphasize-Next Steps. (Harris III & Wood, 2020)

- **Redirect:**

  Intervene as soon as possible to stop further harm from taking place. In a face-to-face meeting, this could mean pausing the meeting, taking a break, or re-focusing on the topic. You might say something like:

  - Supervisor and APS worker scenario: "The purpose of our meeting today is to review your caseload, and we seem to have gotten off the topic. Do you need a break or do you want to reschedule the meeting?

- **Ask:**

  Ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand what occurred and to make visible the invisible message of the microaggression:

  - Supervisor and APS worker scenario: "I think I heard you say that you don't like working with people who have intellectual disabilities. What did you mean by that?"

- **Values:**

  Clarify shared values to remind the individual that their behavior is not in alignment with the values of the class, program, or department and it is not appropriate to act in that way:

        - Supervisor and APS worker scenario: "In this county and the APS program we work hard to create a space that is safe and welcoming for all people. Your comments are not aligned with the county policies on harassment, discrimination, diversity, equity, and inclusion."

- **Emphasize:**

  Express empathy for the marginalized communities that are harmed by the microaggression and also emphasize your thoughts and feelings on the situation:

        - Supervisor and APS worker scenario: "I feel frustrated by that comment and I imagine others, who this directly impacts, would too."

- **Next Steps:**

  End the conversation with concrete feedback and the next steps to assist the individual in what to do differently.

        - Supervisor and APS worker scenario: "Let's talk about some resources or training that can help build capacity to avoid this in the future."

Video Demonstrations:

The following two videos demonstrate APS supervisors using the RAVEN Approach during difficult conversations.

View each video and reflect on what you think went well, what are some areas of improvement, what conversations have you had recently where you either used some of these skills or where they would have been helpful.

- APS Training Video: Supporting Conversations on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Within APS Programs.
    - In this scenario an APS supervisor shares the RAVEN Approach during a case consultation with their staff who experienced microaggressions during a client visit.
- Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: RAVEN Approach (APS Supervisors Weekly Report Review Meeting) or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS8ce2bIntc

- In this scenario, Julie (APS Supervisor) uses the RAVEN Approach to address unprofessional comments made my Ashely, Crystal, and Norma (Veteran APS Supervisors) to Nico (Newly promoted APS Supervisor from another county program).
- *Please note: The RAVEN framework is a way to respond to various microaggressions that occur in public spaces. While the scenario in this video does not depict microaggressions, the elements from the five-step approach are used to respond to disrespectful behavior in the workplace

References and Resources

Academy for Professional Excellence (Developer). (2024). *Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Emotional Intelligence (APS Supervisor and Direct Report)* [video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHwh1GrTd6I

Academy for Professional Excellence (Developer). (2024). *Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Growth Mindset (APS Supervisor and Manager)* [video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isOZoUXm7RI

Academy for Professional Excellence (Developer). (2024). *Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: Growth Mindset and Emotional Intelligence (APS Forensic MDT Meeting)* [video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuKHi3fDDKw

Academy for Professional Excellence (Developer). (2024). *Frameworks for Engaging in Difficult Conversations: RAVEN Approach (APS Supervisors Weekly Report Review Meeting)* [video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KS8ce2bIntc

Beabout, L. (2021, February 5). *Equality vs. Equity: What's the Difference* Reader's Digest. https://www.rd.com/article/equality-vs-equity/

California Legislative Information. (2019, October 21). *Bill Text - AB-241 Implicit bias: continuing education: requirements.* Leginfo.legislature.ca.gov. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB241

Dweck, C. (2015, March 2). *Carol Dweck: A Summary of The Two Mindsets*. Farnam Street. https://fs.blog/carol-dweck-mindset/

Edmondson, Ph. D, A. (2024). *What is psychological safety at work? Here's how to start creating it*. Apa.org. Previously found at: https://www.apa.org/topics/healthy-workplaces/psychological-safety

Gallo, A. (2017, August 10). *Check Your Mindset Before a Difficult Conversation*. Harvard Business Review. Previously found at: https://hbr.org/tip/2017/08/check-your-mindset-before-a-difficult-conversation

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*. Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (2004, January). *What Makes a Leader?* Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader

Harris III, F., & Wood, J. L. (2020, May 5). *How to Respond to Racial Microaggressions When They Occur*. Diverseeducation.com; Diverse: Issues In Higher Education. https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15106837/how-to-respond-to-racial-microaggressions-when-they-occur#:~:text=The%20R.A.V.E.N.%20is%20a%20five-step%20approach%20that%20entails

How to Train Managers to Have Difficult Conversations. (2022, August 1). Knowledge City. https://www.knowledgecity.com/blog/how-to-train-managers-to-have-difficult-conversations/

Independent Lens (2015). *Test Your Implicit Bias with Science* |blog| PBS. (n.d.). https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/implicit-test/

Landry, L. (2019, May 2). *How to Give Feedback Effectively | HBS Online*. Business Insights - Blog; Havard Business School Online. https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-give-feedback-effectively

McNally Psy.D, M. (2023, November 8). *Understanding Emotional Intelligence | Psychology Today*. Www.psychologytoday.com. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/empower-your-mind/202311/understanding-emotional-intelligence

National Association of Social Workers. (2021). *NASW Code of Ethics*. National Association of Social Workers. https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English

Pacheco, I. (2011, May 25). *Making a Self-Care Plan for You and Your Clients!* Social Work Tech.com. https://socialworktech.com/2011/05/25/making-a-self-care-plan/

Pacheco, I. (2012, September 10). *A Self-Assessment Tool for Clients and Social Work Professionals.* Social Work Tech.com. https://socialworktech.com/2012/09/10/self-assessment/

Psychology Today. (n.d.). *Microaggression | Psychology Today*. Www.psychologytoday.com. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/microaggression

Tworek PsyD, G. (2023, December 21). *Emotional Intelligence (EQ): What It Is and How To Improve Yours*. Cleveland Clinic. https://health.clevelandclinic.org/emotional-intelligence-eq

Our Why:

Revolutionize the way people work to ensure the world is a healthier place

Academy for Professional Excellence

theacademy.sdsu.edu

6505 Alvarado Road, Suite 107; San Diego, CA 92120 (619) 594-3546