

Managing Difficult Conversations

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Objectives

- Increase knowledge on types of difficult interactions with faculty and staff and what factors may contribute to their responses and reactions
- Increase knowledge of de-escalation techniques and high-concern communication
- Increase confidence and competence in using de-escalation and high conflict communication techniques

Introduction

- Importance of Effective Communication in Academic Leadership
 - Building trust and credibility
 - Enhancing collaboration
 - Addressing challenges and conflicts
 - Aligning vision and goals
 - Fostering a positive organizational culture
 - Navigating sensitive topics

Scenario

As department chair, you receive a complaint from a graduate student. She cannot schedule her candidacy exam because her advisor refuses to come to campus any time except for a two-hour block during finals week.

The two-hour block does not match the schedules of other committee members. You have other information about this particular faculty member (the advisor) – he had hoped to be appointed chair AND he did not get the full professional leave he requested. You decide you need to discuss this faculty member availability to students, and his overall commitment to the department.

Common Triggers and Challenges in Academic Settings

Difficult conversations encompass dialogues that are uncomfortable, sensitive, or potentially conflict-ridden. These discussions often involve differing viewpoints, performance concerns, or policy changes.

- Performance issues
- Disputes and conflicts
- Policy changes and implementation
- Sensitive topics

Impact of Unresolved Issues on Department Dynamics

- Erosion of trust
- Decreased morale
- Inhibited innovation

Risk Communication Approach

- Vincent Covello, Director of the Center for Risk Communication, has dedicated his career to understanding and enhancing communication in high-stakes situations.
- His research focuses on risk communication, which involves addressing sensitive and potentially controversial topics with the aim of building understanding, trust, and collaboration.

Source: Dr. Vincent T. Covello, Director, Center for Risk Communication, New York, NY

Preparing for Difficult Conversations

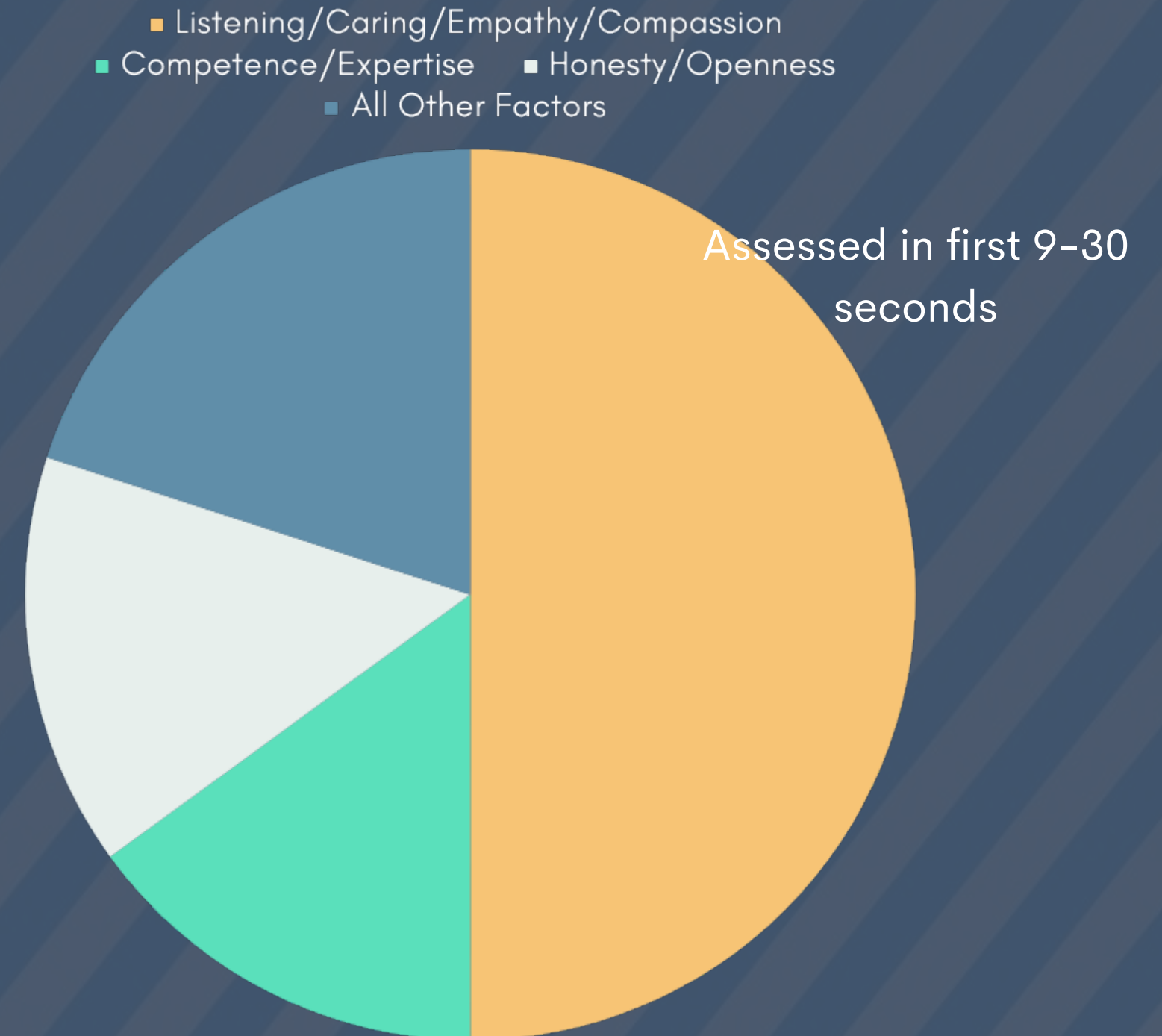
- Self- Assessment
- Setting the Right Environment for Conversations
- Understanding Different Communication Styles
- Planning and Goal Setting

Source: Dr. Vincent T. Covello, Director, Center for Risk Communication, New York, NY

Fearful, Stressed or Upset People Typically...

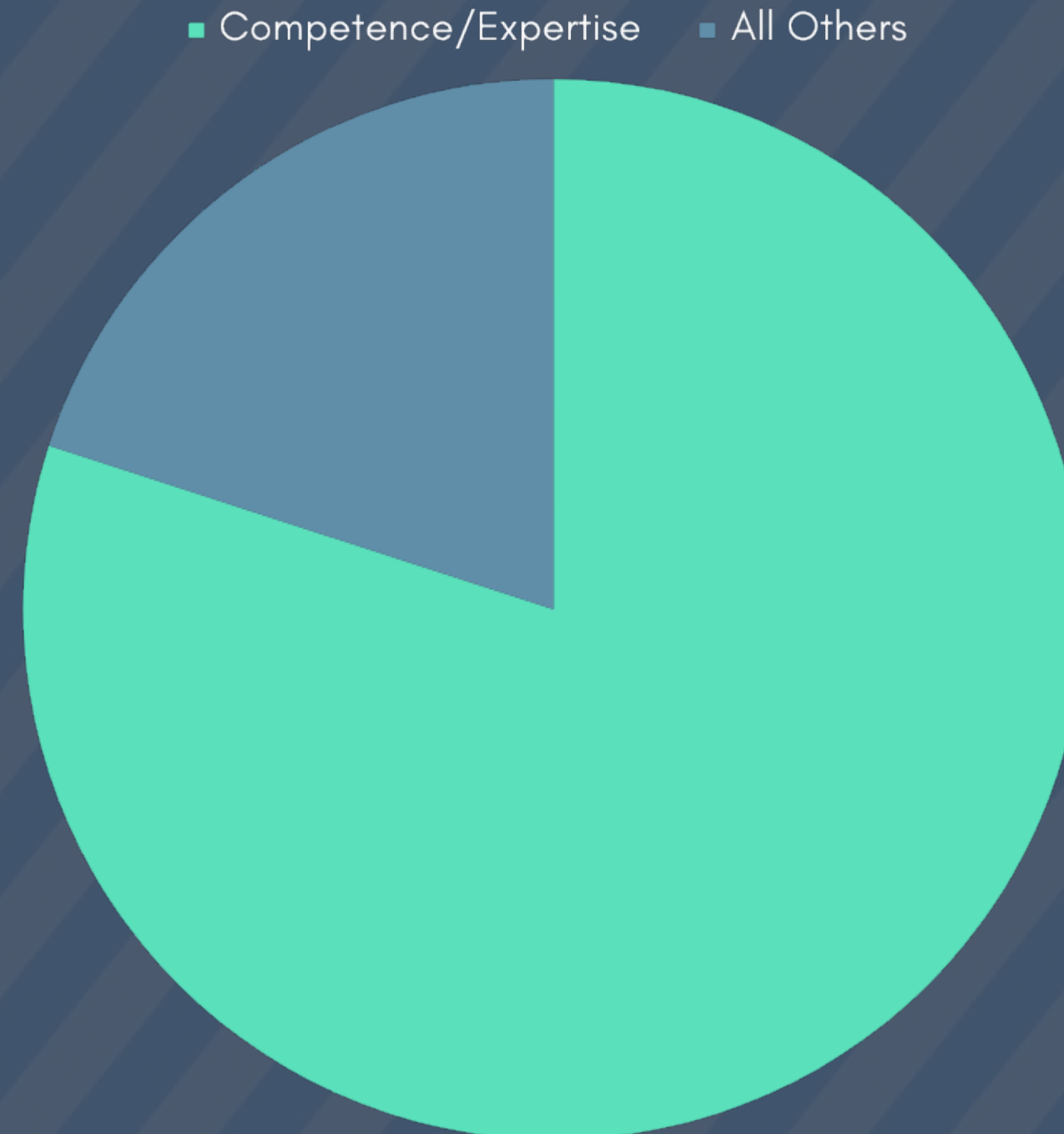
Want to know that **you care**, before they care what you know

- Caring, empathy and listening typically account for as much as 50% of trust determination
- Trust is established in first 9-30 seconds and difficult to regain once lost



Source: Dr. Vincent T. Covello, Director, Center for Risk Communication, New York, NY

Low Stress Situation: Trust Factors



Source: Dr. Vincent T. Covello, Director, Center for Risk Communication, New York, NY

De-Escalation Techniques

Do

- Use low, deeper tone / gentle, soft voice
- Speak slowly and confidently
- Take deep breaths, slow your breathing, remain calm
- Be firm, specific, directive about behavior you will accept
- Explain your intent before making any moves
- Consider taking a quick break
- Show empathy

- Set aside your thoughts, responses and judgment
- Focus on what you are hearing
- Allow them to tell you what's upsetting them
- Paraphrase your understanding of their experience
- Acknowledge their strengths
- Validate their possible emotions
- Get them to say yes



De-Escalation Techniques

Do NOT

- Argue
- Focus on them/use adjectives or labels
- Restrict their movement/corner them
- Meet behind a closed door if you foresee possible danger
- Touch them or make sudden moves

- Prompt possible defense or aggression by threatening them
- Press for explanation about behavior
- Increase their defenses by using “why” questions
- Take their behavior or remarks personally



Templates for High Concern Communication



Basic Templates

R3

(Rule of 3)

Use when responding to any high stress or emotionally charged question.

Recommendation: Provide no more than three messages, ideas, or points at a time.

IDK

(I Don't Know)

Use when you don't know, can't answer, or aren't the best source.

Steps:

- Repeat the question (without negatives)
- Say "My ability to answer is limited by...;" or "I don't know"
- Say why you can't answer
- Provide a follow up with a deadline
- Bridge to what you can say

P/R

(Primacy/Recency)

Use when responding to any high stress or emotionally charged question.

Recommendation: Provide the most important items or points first and last.

FA

(False Allegation)

Use when responding to a hostile question, false allegation, or criticism.

Steps:

- Repeat/paraphrase question without repeating the negative; repeat underlying value or concern, or use more neutral language
- Indicate the issue is important
- Indicate what you have done, are doing, or will do to address the issue

G/WI

(Guarantee/What If)

Used when asked a "what if" question or to guarantee an event or outcome.

Steps:

- Indicate that the question is about the future
- Indicate that the past and the present help predict the future
- Bridge to "what is": known facts, processes or actions

AGL-4

(Average Grade Level Minus Four)

Use when responding to any high stress or emotionally charged question.

Steps:

- Provide information at four or more grade levels below the average grade level of the audience.

AAF

(Acknowledge, Action, Follow-up)

Steps:

- **(A)cknowledge Uncertainty:** Identify knowledge gaps and challenges
- **(A)ction:** State actions you have taken, are taking or will take to address the issue
- **(F)ollow-up:** Provide information on where people can obtain timely and credible information

Y/N

(Yes/No Template)

Use when asked a yes/no question that cannot be answered yes or no.

Steps:

- Indicate you have been asked yes/no question
- Indicate it would be difficult to answer the question yes or no
- Indicate why it would be difficult to answer the question yes or no
- Respond to the underlying concern

Key Templates

CCO

(Compassion, Conviction, Optimism)

Use when asked a question with high emotion.

Steps:

- Compassion (Caring, Empathy, Listening)
 - Conviction
 - Optimism
- Example:** (1) "I am very sorry to hear about...;" (2) "I'm confident that...;" (3) "In the future, I believe that..."

27/9/3

(27 Words, 9 Seconds, 3 Messages)

Use when responding to any high stress or emotionally charged question.

Recommendation: Be brief and concise in your first response; no more than 27 words, 9 seconds, 3 messages.

IN=3P

(One Negative Equals Three Positives)

Use when breaking bad news or stating a negative.

Recommendation: Balance one bad news or negative message with at least three or more positive, constructive, or solution-oriented messages.

KDK

(Know/Don't Know)

Use when there is high uncertainty.

Steps:

- State what you know
- State what you don't know
- State what you are doing to achieve greater certainty or knowledge

ALE

(Authority, Logic, Emotion)

Use to encourage appropriate attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors.

- **(A)uthority Message:** Appeal to authority—those perceived as high in credibility
- **(L)ogic Message:** Appeal to logic (if x, then y).
- **(E)motion Message:** Appeal to an emotion (anger, fear, joy, empathy, surprise, grief, hope, etc.).

TBC

(Trust, Benefit, Control)

Use when responding to questions or concerns indicating high perceived risks or outrage.

- **(T)rust Message:** Listening to messages communicating listening, caring, or transparency.
- **(B)enefit Message:** Messages communicating benefits to the individual, org, or society.
- **(C)ontrol Message:** Messages that give people things to do or give them a sense of control.

CAP

(Caring, Action, Perspective)

Use to give upset people a greater sense of control.

- **(C)aring Message:** Communicates listening, caring, empathy, and compassion.
- **(A)ction Message:** Actions you are taking to address the concern.
- **(P)erspective Message:** Helps put the concern in perspective.

C/S

(Caring/Sharing)

Use when responding to a question or statement containing incorrect information.

- **(C)aring Message:** State what you and the person holding incorrect information have in common.
- **(S)haring Message (1):** Invite person holding incorrect information to share their information w/ you.
- **(S)haring Message (2):** Share the correct information again.

Advanced Templates

KDG

(Know, Do, Go)

Use to give upset people a greater sense of control.

- **(K)now Message:** Share what is most important for people to know.
- **(D)o Message:** Share what is most important for people to do.
- **(G)o Message:** Share where people should go for credible information.

KDD

(Know, Do, Do)

Use to give upset people a greater sense of control.

- **(K)now Message:** Share what is most important for people to know.
- **(D)o Message:** Share what you are doing to address the concern.
- **(D)o Message:** Share what people can do to address the concern.

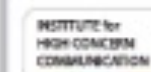
VCD

(Voice, Choice, Do)

Use to give upset people a greater sense of control.

- **(V)oice Message:** Messages communicating listening, dialogue, or participation.
- **(C)hoice Message:** Messages communicating options, alternatives, or available choices.
- **(D)o Message:** Messages that give people things to do, increase feelings of hope, etc.

Reference



Dr. Vincent Covello, Director
www.centerforriskcommunication.com



Maga Design, Visual Strategists
www.magadesign.com

High Concern Communication

R3 – The Rule of 3

When Responding to Any High Stress or Emotionally Charged Question

Provide no more than three messages, ideas, or points at a time

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High Concern Communication

P/R – Primacy/Recency

When Responding to Any High Stress or Emotionally Charged Question

Provide the most important items or points FIRST and LAST

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High Concern Communication

CAP

Use to Give Upset People a Greater Sense of Control

Caring Message:

Communicates listening, caring, empathy, and compassion

Action Message:

Actions you are taking to address the concern

Perspective Message:

Helps put the concern in perspective

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Use to Give Upset People a Greater Sense of Control	
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Perspective Message:	Helps put the concern in perspective

After the announcement of changes in the department's curriculum, a faculty member approaches the academic chair expressing frustration and concern about the potential impact on their research-focused courses.

Caring Message:
"I want to acknowledge your concern about the recent changes in our curriculum. Your dedication to our research-focused courses and the impact on your work is important, and I hear the frustration you're expressing."

Action Message:
"In response to this concern, I want to assure you that we are actively reviewing the changes and their potential impact on research-focused courses. We have initiated a faculty task force to assess and make recommendations, and your input will be a valuable part of that process. We are committed to finding solutions that align with our department's goals and values."

Perspective Message:
"It's important to recognize that curriculum adjustments are part of the evolving landscape of academia. While change can be challenging, it also provides an opportunity for us to adapt and enhance the quality of our programs. By working together, we can ensure that the changes reflect the evolving needs of our students and the broader academic community."

High Concern Communication

IDK

When You Can't Answer, Don't Know, or Aren't the Best Source

Repeat the question (without negatives)

Say "My ability to answer is limited by..." or "I don't know"

Say why you can't answer

Provide a follow-up with a deadline

Bridge to what you can say

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Bridge to what you can say

During a faculty meeting, a faculty member asks the academic chair about specific details of an ongoing negotiation with external partners regarding a collaborative research project. The chair is not privy to the latest information and cannot disclose certain details due to confidentiality agreements.

Repeat the Question (without negatives):

"I appreciate your interest. If I understand correctly, you're asking for specific details about our ongoing negotiations with external partners for the collaborative research project."

Say "My ability to answer is limited by..." or "I don't know":

"My ability to answer is limited by the confidentiality agreements in place, and I don't have the specific details regarding the ongoing negotiations at this moment."

Say Why You Can't Answer:

"Due to the sensitive nature of the negotiations and the need to uphold confidentiality, I am not in a position to disclose specific details at this time."

Provide a Follow-up with a Deadline:

"However, I understand the importance of keeping everyone informed. I will gather the necessary information and provide an update on the progress within the next two weeks."

Bridge to What You Can Say:

"In the meantime, I'm happy to discuss the broader goals of the collaborative research project or address any other questions you may have about our department's initiatives or priorities."

High Concern Communication

FA

When Responding to a Hostile Question, False Allegation, or Criticism

Repeat/paraphrase question (without negatives)

Repeat underlying value or concern

Indicate the issue is important

Indicate what you've done, are doing or will do to address
issue

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During a departmental meeting, a faculty member raises their concerns about the allocation of research funds, making a hostile comment: "It's clear that some faculty members are getting preferential treatment in receiving research grants, and it's affecting the overall fairness in our department. How do you justify this biased distribution?"

Repeat/Paraphrase Question (without negatives):

"I hear your concern about the perceived preferential treatment in research grant allocations and the impact on fairness within our department. You're questioning how we justify this distribution."

Repeat Underlying Value or Concern:

"Your concern highlights the importance of fairness and equity in the allocation of research funds, and I recognize the significance of addressing any perceived biases in our processes."

Indicate the Issue is Important:

"Ensuring fairness is crucial to the integrity of our department, and your question emphasizes the importance of maintaining transparency in our decision-making."

Indicate What You've Done, Are Doing, or Will Do to Address the Issue:

"To address these concerns, I want to assure you that we are continuously reviewing our research fund allocation procedures. In fact, I am committed to enhancing our processes to ensure transparency, objectivity, and fairness moving forward."

Open Invitation for Further Discussion:

"I understand the complexity of this matter, and I value your input. I would like to invite you to participate in a more detailed discussion, perhaps in a smaller setting, where we can explore this issue together and work towards solutions that align with our shared commitment to fairness."

Scenario

As department chair, you receive a complaint from a graduate student. She cannot schedule her candidacy exam because her advisor refuses to come to campus any time except for a two-hour block during finals week.

The two-hour block does not match the schedules of other committee members. You have other information about this particular faculty member (the advisor) – he had hoped to be appointed chair AND he did not get the full professional leave he requested. You decide you need to discuss this faculty member availability to students, and his overall commitment to the department.

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