American Red Cross

EMPOWER HOUR
BVWE NORTH CENTRAL DIVISION

Before It Becomes a Concern

H U M A N



What Crisis Work Taught Me About Hard Conversations

Megan O'Connor, SHRM-CP, CPRW | November 18, 2026

Join in your way: Chat | Speak | Listen

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Nobody walks in as only their *role*

"All you can do is what you can do. The rest is up to them."



Private reflection

What story would you have told yourself?

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HUMAN: The Mission in a Hard Conversation

A trauma informed way to have hard conversations



OUR MISSION

"The American Red Cross prevents and alleviates human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors."

Prevent what we can. Ease what we can't.

- **H** — Hold a safe space
- **U** — Understand before you assume
- **M** — Make expectations clear
- **A** — Anchor in calm
- **N** — Never go it alone

Learn more: SAMHSA's trauma informed approaches and programs | SAMHSA's 2014 guide (PDF)



Create enough safety that a person can tell you what is actually happening.

Safe
Show respect and explain why you're meeting.

"I want to understand how this has been for you."

Slow
Name the time you have and what you need to cover.

"We have 30 minutes, and here's what we need to discuss."

Share
Hand over a choice, even inside a fixed agenda.

"What would you like me to understand first?"

H U M A N | *The agenda may be fixed. The person's voice still matters.*



Separate what you saw from the story you're telling yourself, then ask.

Vignette 1: *The Hard Day*

What you see

Sam, a dependable blood services team member, snaps at a teammate and tears up when asked about it.

What you can't see

- A flat tire.
- A sick child with no doctor appointment available.
- Caring for a mom with dementia.

1. What did I actually see or hear?
2. What story am I telling myself?
3. What can I ask instead of assume?

What if Sam only says, "I'm fine"?

H U M A N

Your turn: respond to Sam

H U M A N

Chat Practice 1 of 3: Frustration

Sam says:

"I'm doing the best I can! Why is everyone on me today?"

STARTER SCRIPT

"It sounds like today has been a lot. I'm not here to pile on. I noticed _____. We still need _____. What would help you do that?"

In the chat: Rewrite this in your own words so Sam feels seen and still hears the expectation. Changing even a few words counts.

1. Write for 60 seconds
2. Wait
3. Send together on the count of three



M

Make expectations clear

Define what success looks like early, in a way the other person can use.

Vignette 2: *The Undefined Page*

Terry hears "take more initiative." Both people think the talk went fine. Nothing changes.

Vague

"Take more initiative."

Clear

"After setup, check the task list and choose one open item. Ask the shift lead if none are listed."

A clear expectation covers:

- What
- When
- What done looks like
- Who to ask
- Best format

Replace "Does that make sense?" with "What's your first step?"

H U **M** A N

Your turn: respond to Terry

H U **M** A N

Chat Practice 2 of 3: Confusion

Terry says:

"I don't understand what I did wrong. I've been trying so hard. What do you want from me?"

STARTER SCRIPT

"Thank you for telling me. I wasn't clear, and I want to fix that. What I meant was _____. Success looks like _____. What's your first step?"

In the chat: Rewrite this in your own words so Terry knows exactly what success looks like. Changing even a few words counts.

1. Write for 60 seconds
2. Wait
3. Send together on the count of three



M

Make it clear from day one

Her silence looked like understanding.

Vignette 3: *The New Voice*

Renee, new to the team after a long career, nods along and misses a step.

> *"Before OE closes, check the HRIS for FSA and EAP updates, then send the SPD to your HRBP."*

Remember
What felt confusing in your first month?

Recall
Who helped, and what did you need?

Reverse engineer
What will you do for the next new person?

"Nobody knows this on day one. What can I clarify?"

H U **M** A N

Your turn: respond to Renee

H U M A N

Chat Practice 3 of 3: Overwhelm

Renee says:

"There's so much to learn. Everyone else knows all of this, and I feel like I'm slowing everyone down."

STARTER SCRIPT

"Nobody knows this on day one, and I'm glad you said something. Let's start with _____. What's one thing I can clarify today?"

In the chat: Rewrite this in your own words so Renee feels safe asking the next question. Changing even a few words counts.

1. Write for 60 seconds
2. Wait
3. Send together on the count of three



A
Anchor in calm.

Stay steady so the other person has something steady to meet. Calm is not cold.

Steady yourself

Slow your voice. Pause before you answer. Step away and come back if you need to.

Redirect

"I want to hear you, and we need to keep this respectful."

"You don't have to share more than you want to."

Hold the line.

We don't tolerate abusive or bullying language, and we don't ask for over disclosure.

Our calm can help someone else calibrate.

H U M A N



Hard conversations are shared work. You don't have to carry them, or their outcomes, by yourself.

Think it through | Reach out early to brainstorm, problem solve, or check your assumptions.

Know who to call | Go to Volunteer Relations or HR for safety, harassment, or ethics concerns, or whenever you're unsure.

Know what's yours | Your part is clarity, opportunity, and support. Each person's choices remain their own.

"All you can do is what you can do. The rest is up to them." | H U M A N



H U M A N

We're not silos. We're not islands. And we're not saviors. *We're people supporting people,* united by a mission bigger than ourselves: *to prevent and alleviate human suffering.*

Powered by volunteers. Made possible by generosity. Strengthened by how we support one another.

Remember HUMAN. Now write one sentence you'll use in a real conversation.

AI-Assisted Content Disclaimer: This document was developed with AI assistance and has been reviewed, verified, and approved by Megan O'Connor, SHRM-CP, CPRW, as the human expert of record. Final content reflects the author's professional judgment and subject matter expertise.