



Mastering Difficult Conversations



Effective Strategies for Engaging
with Challenging Employees

Improving Operations, Effectiveness, and Management

DLG | LEARNING CENTER

Course Purpose & Learning Objectives

- Understand why supervisors must address difficult conversations early
- Apply structured communication models
- Reduce liability and morale damage
- Build accountability while maintaining professionalism



Why This Training Matters

- Avoided conversations become lawsuits, grievances, and discipline failures
- Supervisors shape culture more than policy manuals
- Early corrective conversations protect officers and agencies



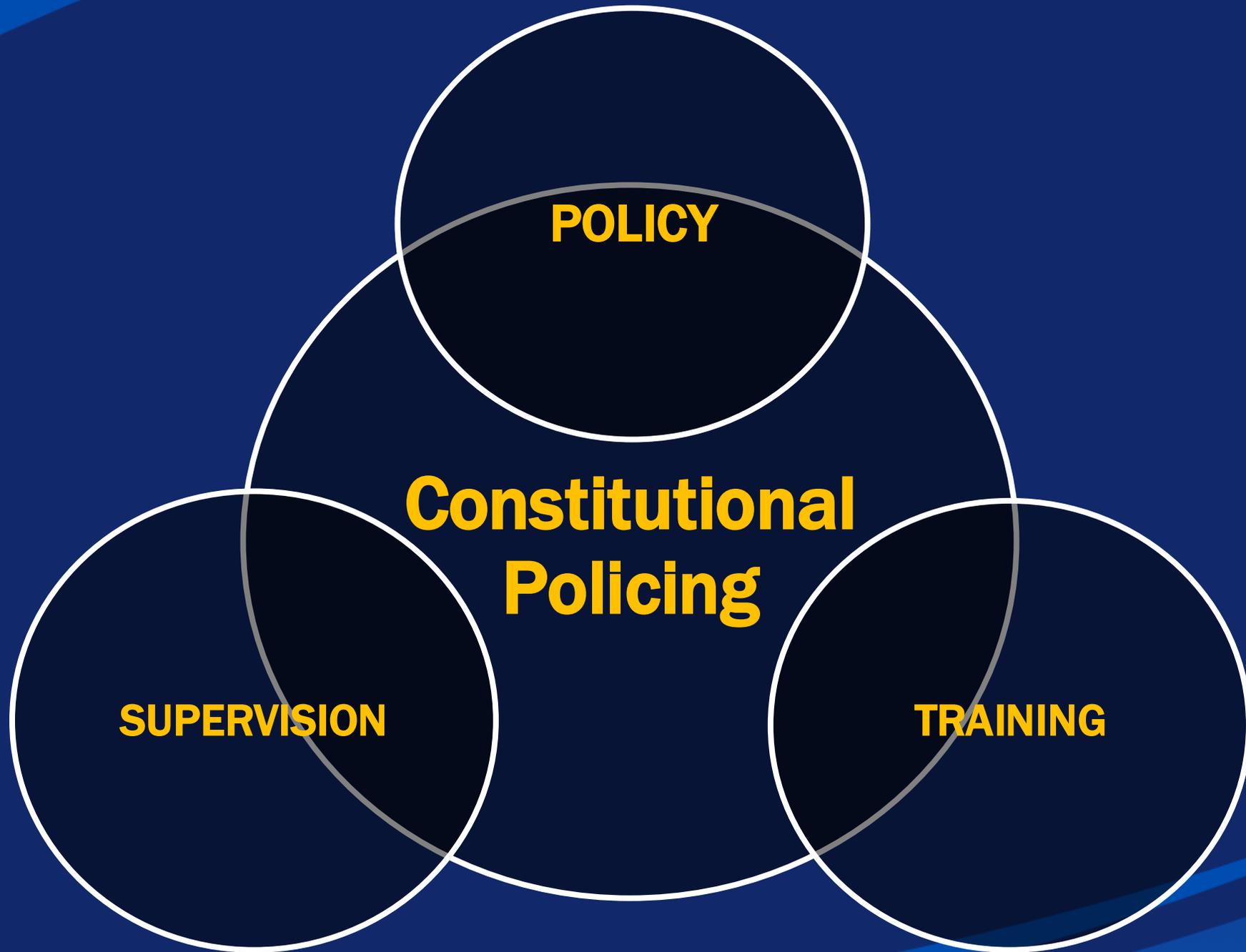
Module 1: Supervisor Responsibility & Human Behavior



It All Starts With Supervisors

Shall ensure that supervisors have the knowledge, skills, and ability to provide close and effective supervision to each officer under the supervisor's direct command; provide officers with the direction and guidance necessary to improve and develop as police officers; and to identify, correct, and prevent officer misconduct.





Words Matter



Clearly Established Law



Deliberately Indifferent



Ethics, Integrity & Values



Custom



Culture



Pattern & Practice



Extreme Ownership



The Role of the First-Line Supervisor

- First-line supervisors are the most legally significant leaders
- Daily interactions shape behavior and morale
- Inconsistent supervision undermines discipline

Extreme Ownership is not theoretical—it defines supervisory responsibility.



Supervisors Own the Standard

- Addressing performance deficiencies promptly
- Correcting misconduct or unprofessional behavior
- Ensuring employees understand expectations clearly
- Reinforcing agency values and policy requirements



Why Employees Become “Difficult”

- Stress, burnout, or unresolved conflict
- Perceived unfairness or inconsistency
- Lack of clarity in expectations
- Learned behavior from weak supervision



Accountability is Not Punishment

- The goal of difficult conversations is improvement, not punishment.
- Professional accountability protects both the employee and the agency.
- Employees build trust with leaders who take responsibility and address issues fairly and directly.
- Supervisors are responsible for addressing problems early, directly, and professionally



Module 2: Preparing for Difficult Conversations



We Need Difficult Conversations

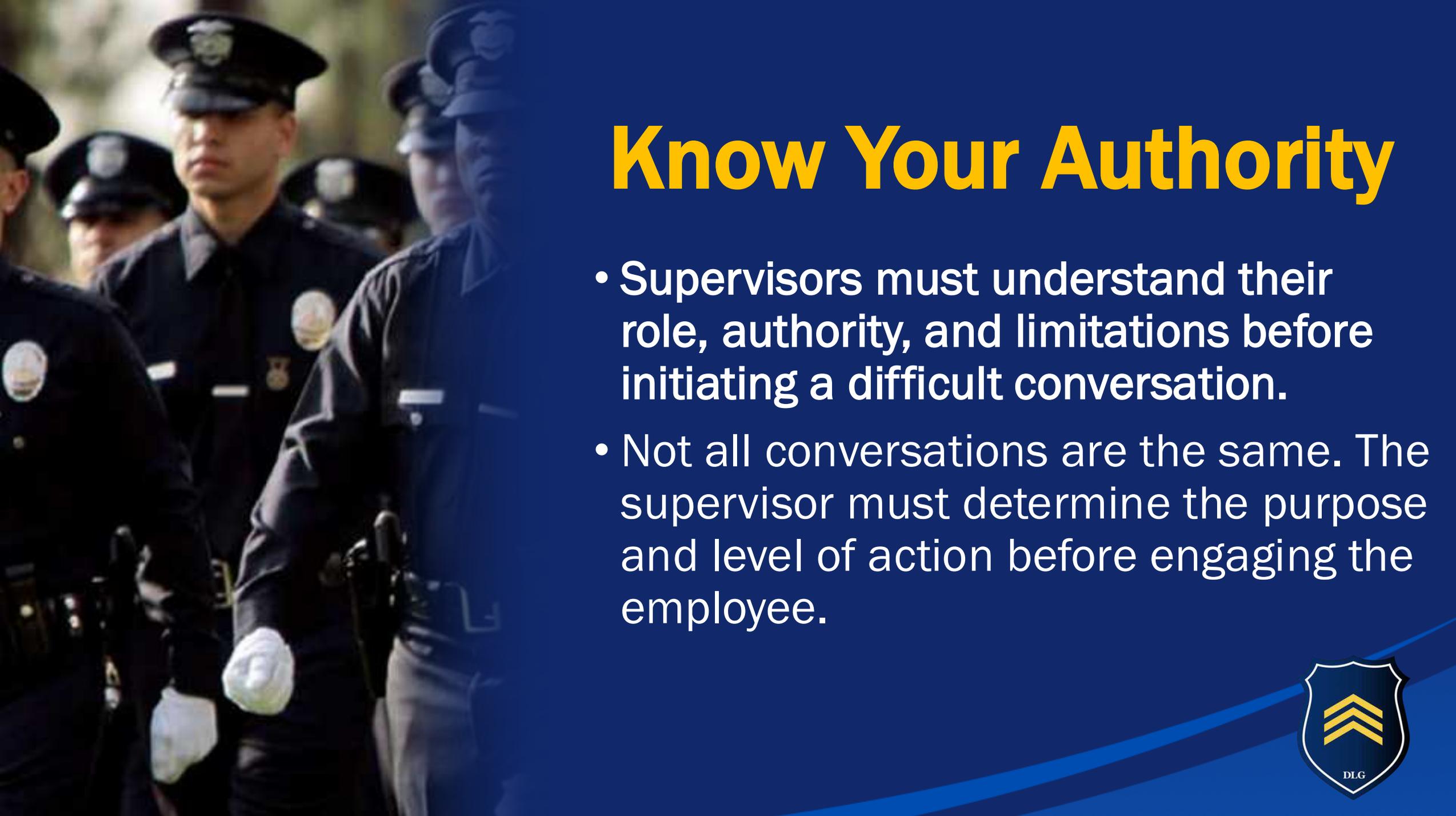
Difficult
Conversations



Preparation is Risk Management

- Unprepared conversations escalate conflict
- Preparation reduces emotional reactions
- Preparation strengthens documentation and defensibility
- Preparation increases consistent application of agency standards
- Preparation reduces unfair and objective treatment of employees





Know Your Authority

- Supervisors must understand their role, authority, and limitations before initiating a difficult conversation.
- Not all conversations are the same. The supervisor must determine the purpose and level of action before engaging the employee.



Determine the Nature of the Conversation

Not every issue is discipline, but every issue requires response.

- Coaching and informal guidance
- Documented counseling or performance correction
- Formal discipline
- Administrative inquiry or fact-finding
- Referral to Internal Affairs or higher command



Understand Your Supervisory Authority

- Know what corrective actions you are authorized to take
- Follow agency policy, disciplinary procedures, and chain of command
- Do not exceed your authority or promise outcomes you cannot control



Check Required Legal Protections

- Administrative vs. criminal questioning
- Employee representation rights when applicable
- Agency policy and collective bargaining requirements
- Documentation requirements and reporting obligations



The 3 Ps Framework

Effective preparation can be organized into three key areas:

Purpose – What must change and why

People – Who is involved or impacted

Plan – How the conversation will be structured



Purpose

What must change and why?

- **Supervisors should clearly identify:**

- What outcome is needed
- What standard must be reinforced
- What improvement is expected

- **Example purposes:**

- Correct performance deficiencies
- Address misconduct or policy violations
- Clarify expectations
- Support employee development



People

Who is involved or impacted?

- **Supervisors must focus on:**
 - The employee's experience level
 - The employee's personality and communication style
 - The employee's prior performance history
 - Whether the employee may become defensive, emotional, or receptive



Plan

How the conversation will be structured

- **Supervisors should prepare:**
 - Key points to communicate
 - Collect any documentation available
 - Desired outcome
 - Possible employee responses
 - How to maintain professionalism and control



Supervisor Preparation Checklist

- ✓ Identify the specific issue
- ✓ Review policy and expectations
- ✓ Gather facts and documentation
- ✓ Anticipate emotional responses
- ✓ Select appropriate time and location



Module 3: Communication Models for Supervisors



How Miscommunication Happens



Core Communication Principles

- Be direct, professional, and respectful
- Focus on behavior, not personality
- Avoid assumptions or labels
- Listen actively



Active Listening

Most supervisors think communication is about talking. It is actually about listening. Active listening reduces defensiveness and increases compliance.

Effective supervisory communication requires:

- Speaking clearly
- Listening actively
- Understanding employee perspective
- Confirming understanding





Builds Credibility

Active listening helps supervisors:

- Reduce employee defensiveness
- Improve cooperation
- Demonstrate fairness
- Strengthen trust and credibility



The SBI-E Feedback Model Overview

The SBI Feedback Model provides a structured framework for delivering clear, objective, and professional feedback.

Situation – When and where

Behavior – What occurred

Impact – Why it matters

Expectation – What must change



Why Supervisors Should Use SBI-E

The SBI Model helps supervisors:

- Communicate objectively and professionally
- Focus on facts, not opinions
- Reduce emotional or defensive responses
- Improve employee understanding and performance
- Reduce organizational and legal risk



Module 4: Managing Emotional Responses



Addressing Conflict with Care



Common Emotional Reactions

- Anger or defensiveness
- Denial or minimization
- Victim posture
- Silence or shutdown



Recognizing Escalation Warning Signs

- Raised voice
- Interruptions
- Emotional shutdown
- Defensiveness
- Blame shifting



Supervisor De-escalation Tools

- Slow the conversation
- Acknowledge emotions without validating misconduct
- Re-focus on expectations
- Pause if emotions escalate



Embrace Empathy



Embrace Empathy

- Empathy improves compliance, reduces defensiveness, and strengthens supervisory authority.
- Empathy does **NOT mean agreeing with misconduct**. It means understanding the employee's perspective while maintaining professional standards.

Why empathy matters in difficult conversations:

- Reduces emotional escalation and defensiveness
 - Demonstrates professionalism and fairness
 - Builds trust and supervisory credibility
 - Improves employee acceptance of correction
- Supports procedural justice and defensible supervision



Module 5: Documentation & Legal Defensibility



Why Documentation Matters

- Protects supervisors and agencies
- Demonstrates fairness and consistency
- Supports discipline decisions
- Critical in litigation and arbitration



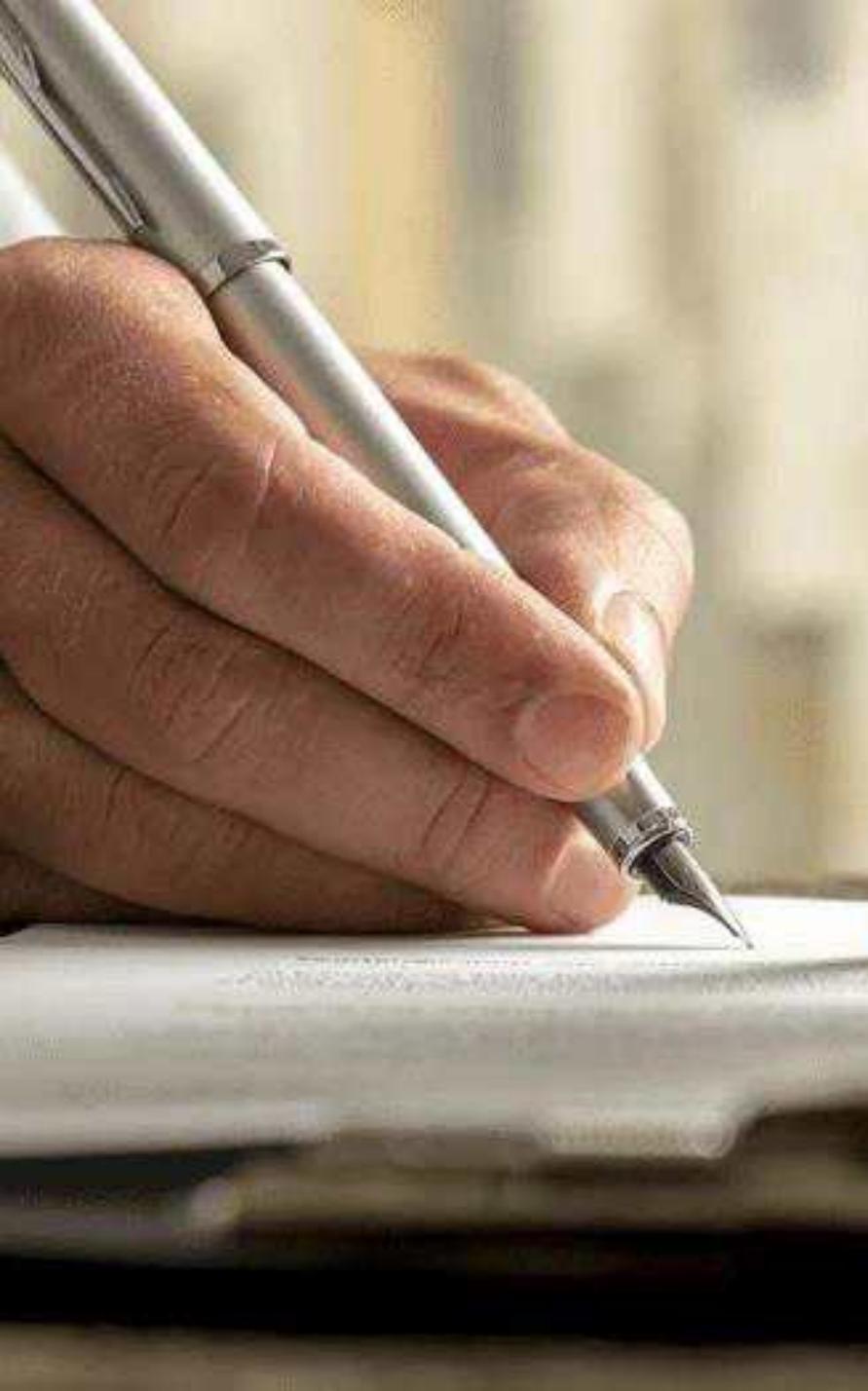
Protects Supervisors Personally

Supervisors may be asked to explain their actions months or years later.

Documentation provides:

- Evidence of professional supervision
- Proof corrective action was taken
- Protection against claims of unfair treatment
- Credibility in court, arbitration, or administrative review





When Supervisors Should Document

- Policy violations
- Performance deficiencies
- Counseling sessions
- Verbal warnings
- Corrective conversations
- Employee misconduct
- Failure to follow instructions
- Any issue that may escalate to discipline



Documentation Should Include:

1. Objective Facts:

- Date and time
- Location
- Specific behavior observed
- Policy or expectation involved

2. Supervisor Actions:

- What was communicated to the employee
- Expectations given
- Corrective instruction provided

3. Employee Response:

- Explanation offered
- Acknowledgment or disagreement

4. Follow-up Expectations:

- Required corrective action
- Timeline for improvement



Documentation Best Practices

- Stick to facts
- Avoid emotional language
- Record expectations and timelines
- Capture employee responses



Supervisory Responsibility Does Not End with the Conversation

Supervisors must:

- Monitor performance
- Reinforce expectations
- Document improvement or lack thereof
- Take additional action if necessary



Module 6: Procedural Justice Improves Difficult Conversations



**Consistency turns principles
into practice and average into
excellence!**



Procedural Justice

- Fairness of the ways information is gathered and decisions are made.
- Procedural justice is the process used by police officers where citizens are treated fairly and with proper respect.
- Procedural Justice (4 Pillars)
 - **Voice** – Let people tell their story
 - **Neutrality** – Explain decisions clearly
 - **Respect** – Treat everyone with dignity
 - **Trustworthiness** – Show genuine concern

These four principles predict whether citizens trust police, comply with commands, and cooperate long term. Stress that these pillars apply **equally to how supervisors treat officers.**



Why Procedural Justice Works

Perception of fairness → compliance

People judge police by *process*, not outcomes

Legitimacy = authority that is accepted

Tyler & Sunshine's research: people comply because they believe officers act fairly, not because they fear punishment. When we explain ourselves, listen, and treat people well, they accept the outcome—even tickets and arrests.





Leveraging Procedural Justice

- Employees are more likely to accept correction when they believe the process is fair.
- Procedural justice strengthens supervisory effectiveness by increasing trust, cooperation, and accountability—even when delivering corrective feedback.
- Supervisors should apply the four pillars of procedural justice during difficult conversations:

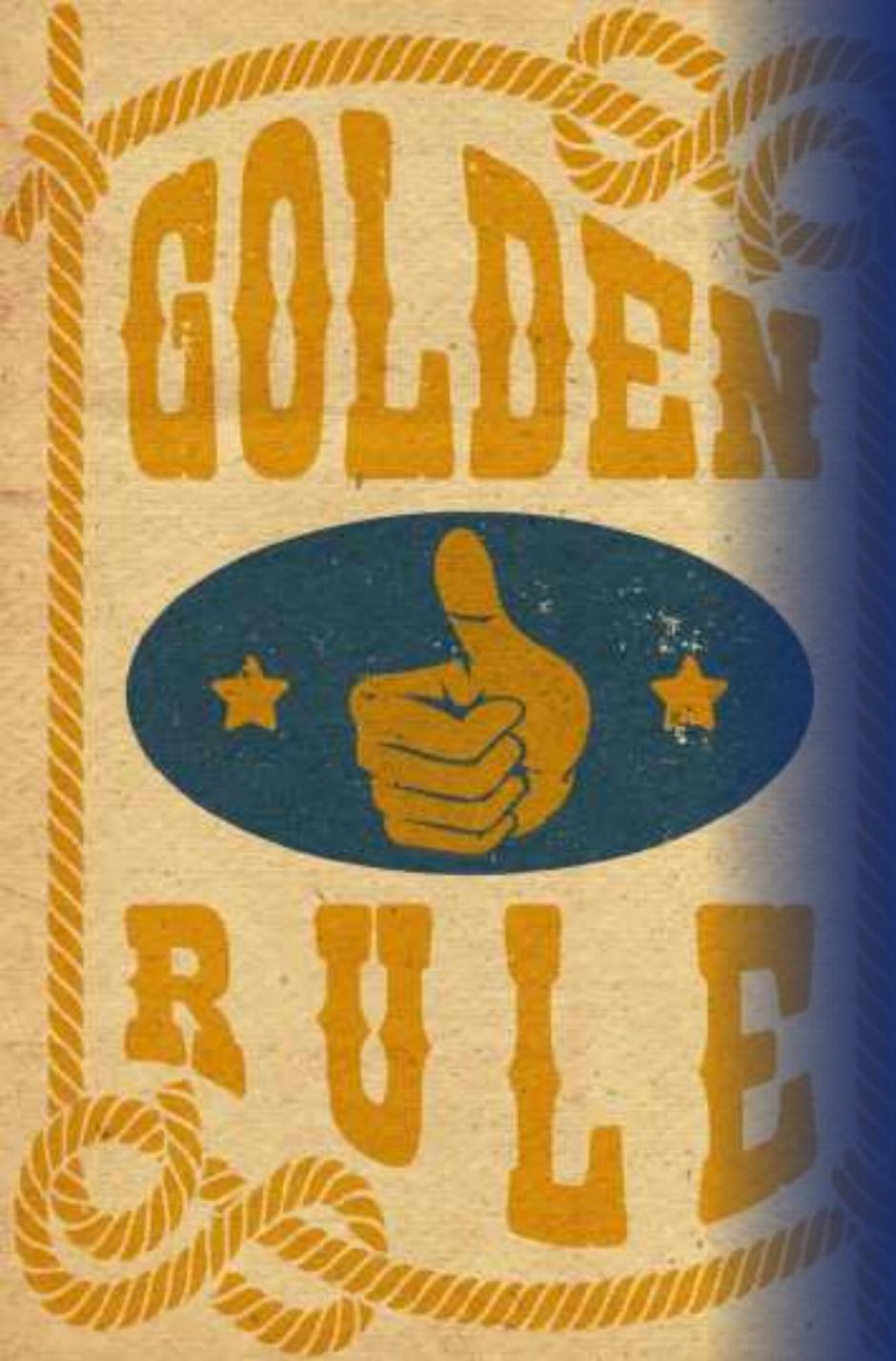


The Golden Rule

Do Unto Others

As you would have others

Do unto to you



**TREAT
OTHERS
THE WAY THAT
→THEY←
WOULD LIKE TO
BE TREATED**

The Platinum Rule

The Platinum Rule accommodates the feelings of others. Platinum Rule understands and accommodates for the fact that not everyone wants to be treated the same way.



Module 7: Impact of a Multigenerational Workforce



Multigenerational Workforces

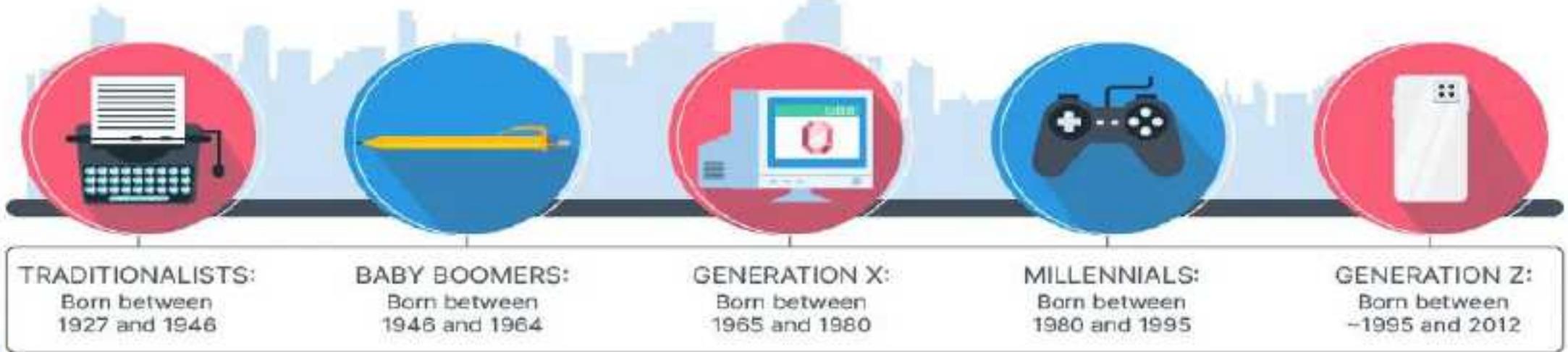
Today's supervisors lead employees from multiple generations, often with different:

- Communication preferences
- Expectations of leadership
- Responses to feedback and correction
- Attitudes toward authority and accountability
- Levels of experience and confidence

These differences can influence how employees perceive and respond to difficult conversations.



The Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Generation



Strengths Include:

- Committed
- Hardworking
- Practical

Weaknesses:

- Inflexible
- Uncomfortable with Change

Strengths Include:

- Commitment
- Self-reliance
- Strong Work ethic

Weaknesses:

- Criticisms
- Need recognition
- Less tech savvy

Strengths Include:

- Adaptability
- Independence
- Resilience

Weaknesses:

- Cautiousness
- Conservative
- Self-Reliant

Strengths Include:

- Creative
- Far-Thinking
- Progressive

Weaknesses:

- One main Complaint Lack Focus

Strengths Include:

- Communicative
- Competitive
- Entrepreneurial

Weaknesses:

- More cynical
- Too reliant on Technology to solve problems

Benefits of a Multigenerational Workforces

- More problem-solving skills
- Different perspectives
- Diverse people skills



Benefits of a Multigenerational Workforces

Simon Sinek, a leadership expert, gives his views on mentorship:

- Reverse mentoring is a new and popular perspective on mentorship. Younger members of your team can assist older team members. One way to boost productivity is by learning new technology. For example, you could have a staff member from Generation Y or Z (often referred to as digital natives) showing a Baby Boomer how to use online workflows and knowledge base software.
- The **different perspectives** of the generations are critical and will help avoid the presence of egocentrism in the workplace. Each generation realizes that not everyone sees an issue the same way. A multigenerational workforce will give a good mix of perspectives based on different life experiences. As a result, your organization will experience greater innovation and creativity.



How to Manage Generational Differences

- While there are many benefits to a multigenerational workforce, it provides additional complexities for leaders on how to effectively lead and communicate.
- While standards remain the same, employees may differ in how they receive correction.
- Supervisors must remain professional, clear, and consistent regardless of the employee's experience level or generation.
- Supervisors should never assume behavior is caused by generational differences. Effective supervision is based on individual assessment, not generational labels



UNTIL NEXT TIME...

**HELP THOSE WHO NEED YOUR HELP,
PROTECT THOSE WHO NEED YOUR PROTECTION,
AND—MOST IMPORTANTLY
KEEP YOURSELF AND OTHERS SAFE.**

DLG