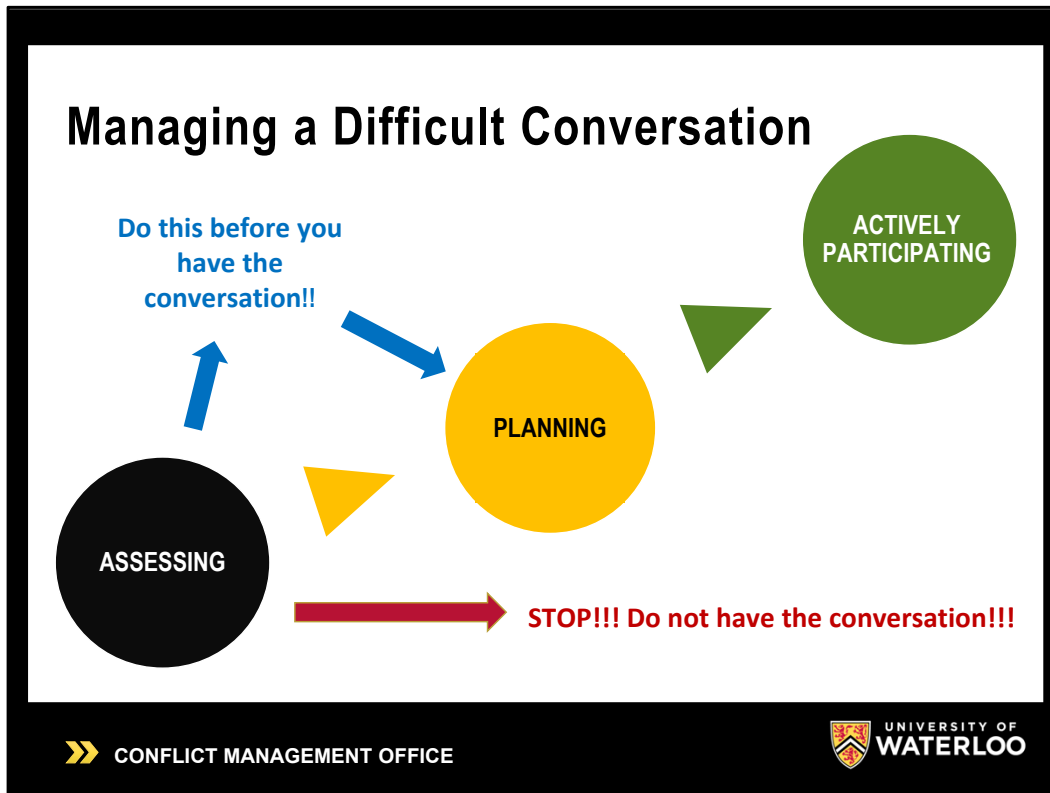


Welcome to Maintaining Effective Relations with coworkers, colleagues, and supervisors, Part 4 – Blue Zone Tools (Theory). This is the fourth module in a series of short recordings designed to provide you with tools and resources to help you respond effectively when tension arises in work or academic relationships.

If you have not yet completed Parts 1 through 3, please take the time to do so as the content of this module builds on what was learned in the earlier modules.

Before we begin, pause the video and take time to download the worksheet associated with this module so that you can jot down your thoughts as we go along.



Managing a difficult conversation .... involves three steps assessing, planning, and then actively participating in the conversation.

This module will focus on the assessment step because it may tell you not to have the conversation at all, or it may tell you what you need to do before you have the conversation.

## **ASSESS**

1. Is a conversation appropriate?
2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?
3. Set context

## **PLAN**

4. Clarify the issues
5. Be aware of communication barriers.
6. Communicate impact using “I” statements
7. Consider the setting
8. Prepare for follow-up questions
9. Plan the conversation

## **PARTICIPATE**

10. Participate actively in the conversation

The assessment process has three components, assessing whether a conversation is appropriate in this situation, assessing what factors will make the conversation difficult, and then assessing and how to invite the other person to have a conversation. We call this “setting context”.

## **ASSESS**

- 1. Is a conversation appropriate?**
2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?
3. Set context

## **PLAN**

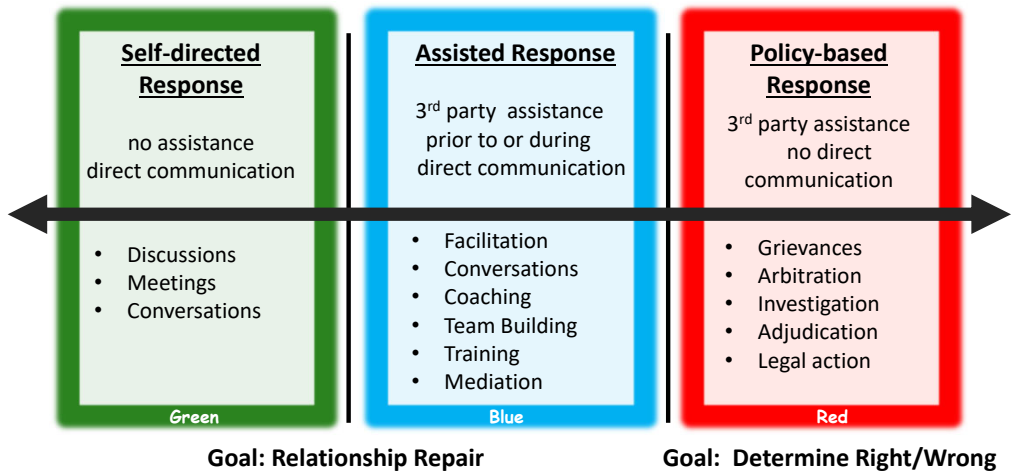
4. Clarify the issues
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9. Plan the conversation

## **PARTICIPATE**

10. Participate actively in the conversation

Determining whether a conversation is appropriate involves assessing impact, a process that was explained in Part 1 of this series. Feel free to go back and review that content if you need to.

## Continuum of Conflict Management Processes



Adapted from: Moore, Christopher et. al. Effective Mediation.  
Boulder: CDR Associates, 1989.

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A conversation can be an appropriate response for situations that fall in either the Green or Blue Zone, but it is not appropriate for the Red Zone. If you have assessed a situation and determined that it is in the Blue Zone, consider how a third party might help you prepare for or manage the difficult conversation. Would it be helpful to have guidance in the planning process? Could they be present during the conversation to help manage high emotions? Would it be helpful to have them facilitate the conversation?

These are all roles that can be taken on by staff in the Conflict Management Office. Feel free to reach out if you would like more information or if you need assistance with assessing impact.

## ASSESS

1. Is a conversation appropriate?
- 2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?**
3. Set context

## PLAN

4. Clarify the issues
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## PARTICIPATE

10. Participate actively in the conversation

After deciding that a conversation is appropriate, take time to explore why it might feel difficult. This step helps uncover underlying factors that may not be obvious at first and ensures you have a clear understanding of the situation.



Image by jamesoladujoye from Pixabay

To understand why some conversations feel difficult, let's first consider what makes a conversation feel easy. Good conversations often involve positive topics—weekend plans, family celebrations, or favorite hobbies.

A conversation becomes difficult when the topic carries a negative emotional impact, such as delivering bad news, addressing a mistake, or discussing conflict. These situations feel challenging because the message may cause discomfort or stress.

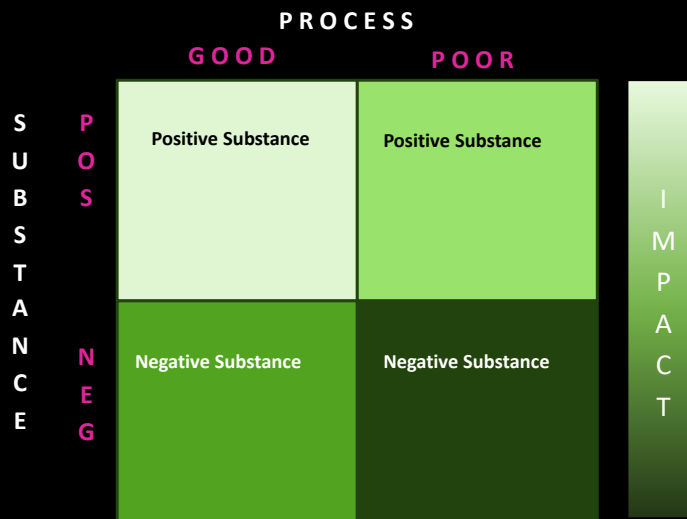
## Consider:

Have you ever had a conversation where the content was positive and yet the conversation took a bad turn?

What factors contributed to that?

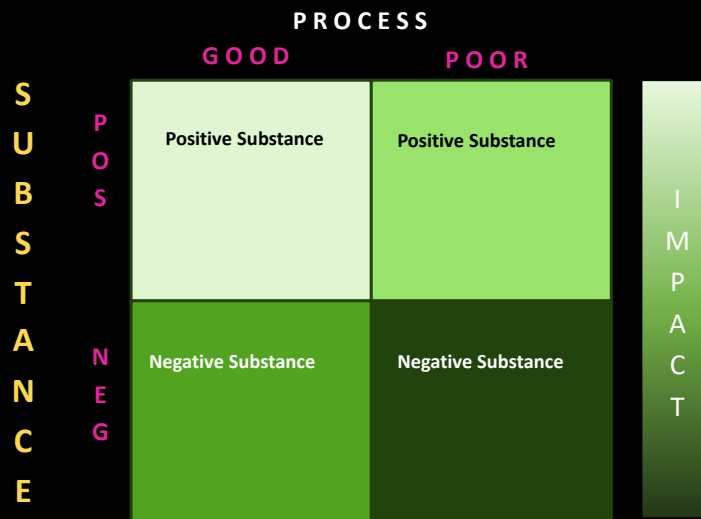
But the topic of a conversation is not the only factor that contributes to making it difficult. Have you ever had a conversation where the topic being discussed was positive and yet the conversation took a bad turn? If so, consider what factors contributed to that? Jot your thoughts down on your worksheet.

# Difficult Conversation Matrix



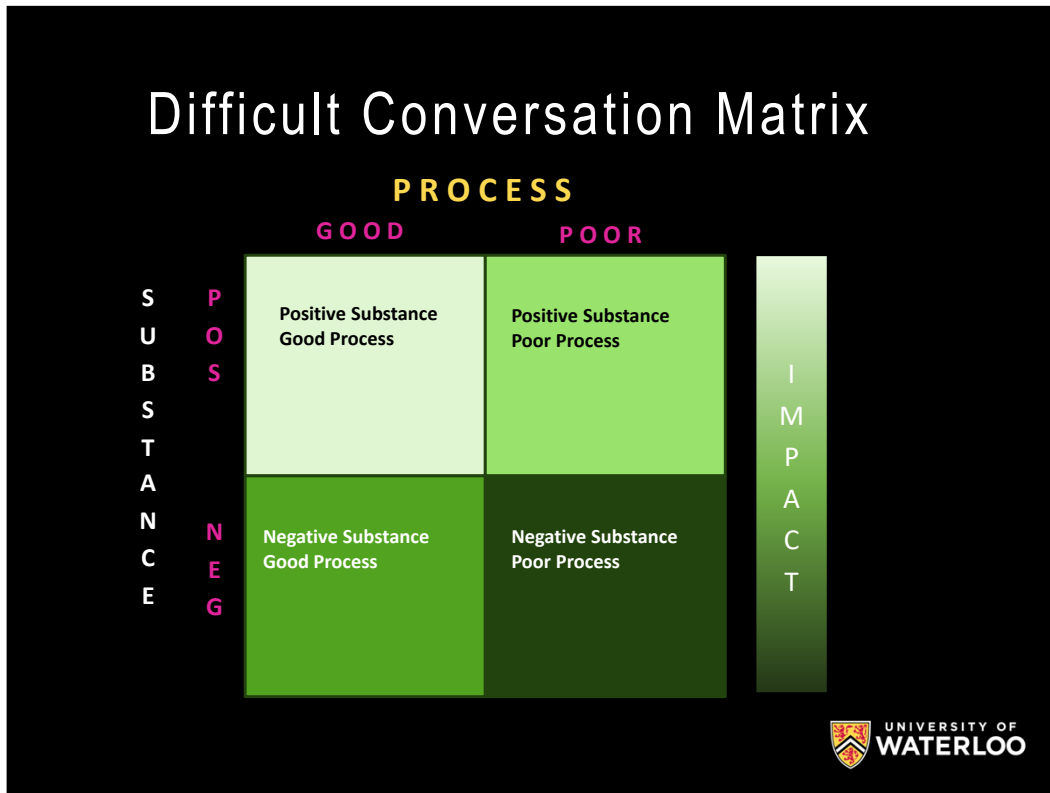
The Difficult Conversation Matrix can be a helpful tool for identifying factors that make a conversation challenging. On the left side, you'll see the substance of the conversation. Across the top, you'll see the process. These are two factors to consider when determining why some conversations feel more difficult than others.

# Difficult Conversation Matrix



Substance refers to the content of the conversation. Consider whether the information that will be shared is likely to have a positive or negative emotional response? Substance is the criteria that people tend to consider most when determining whether a conversation may be difficult, but process is also important.

# Difficult Conversation Matrix



PROCESS is the practice of applying effective communication skills.

Poor process - failing to listening, interrupting, making assumptions, negative body language, and tone of voice - can make a conversation difficult even when the substance is positive.

Whereas good communications skills can help you effectively discuss event very negative content.

## Effective Communication Skills

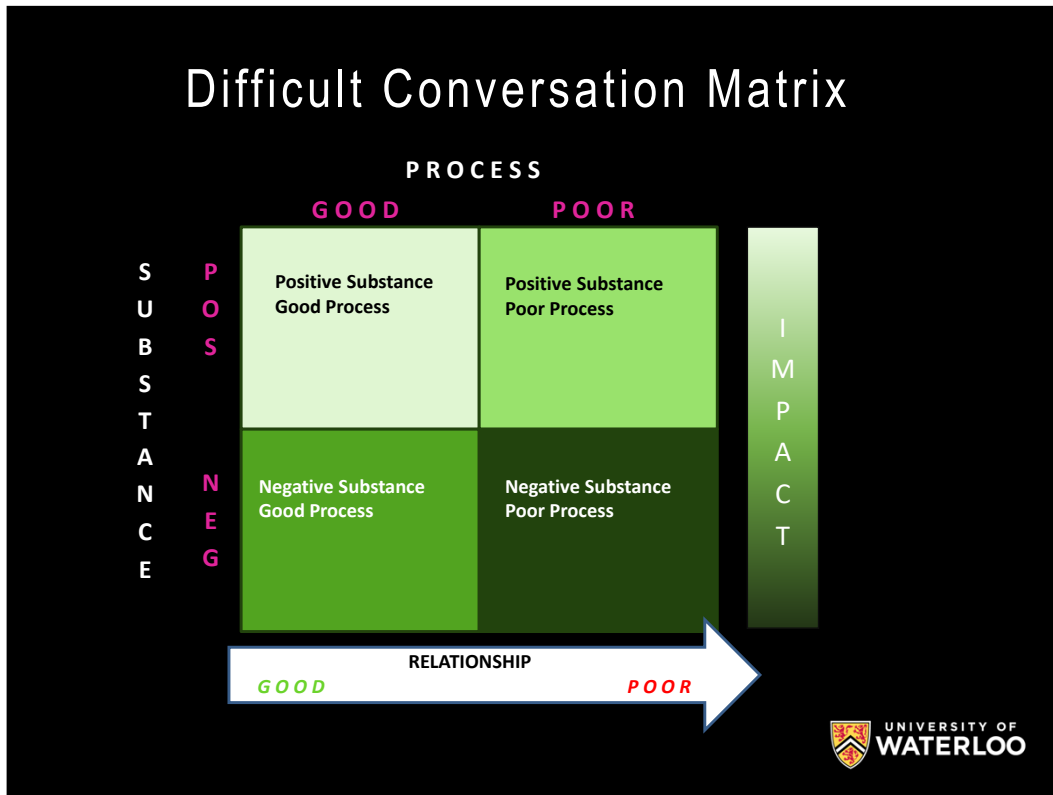
The Conflict Management Office can help you:

- Strengthen active listening skills
- Ask thoughtful, clarifying questions
- Reframe and paraphrase for understanding
- Manage tone and body language effectively

The Conflict Management Office offers conflict coaching services where you can work to strengthen active listening skills, learn to ask thoughtful, clarifying questions, practice reframing and paraphrasing to promote understanding, and learn to manage tone and body language effectively

These are all essential skills for managing a difficult conversation and contribute to good process

# Difficult Conversation Matrix



We've talked about substance and process as two key factors. Before we move on, let's add a third: relationship. Relationship refers to the quality of your interaction with the other person—whether it's strong and positive or strained and difficult. This factor can significantly influence how challenging a conversation feels.

## Consider:

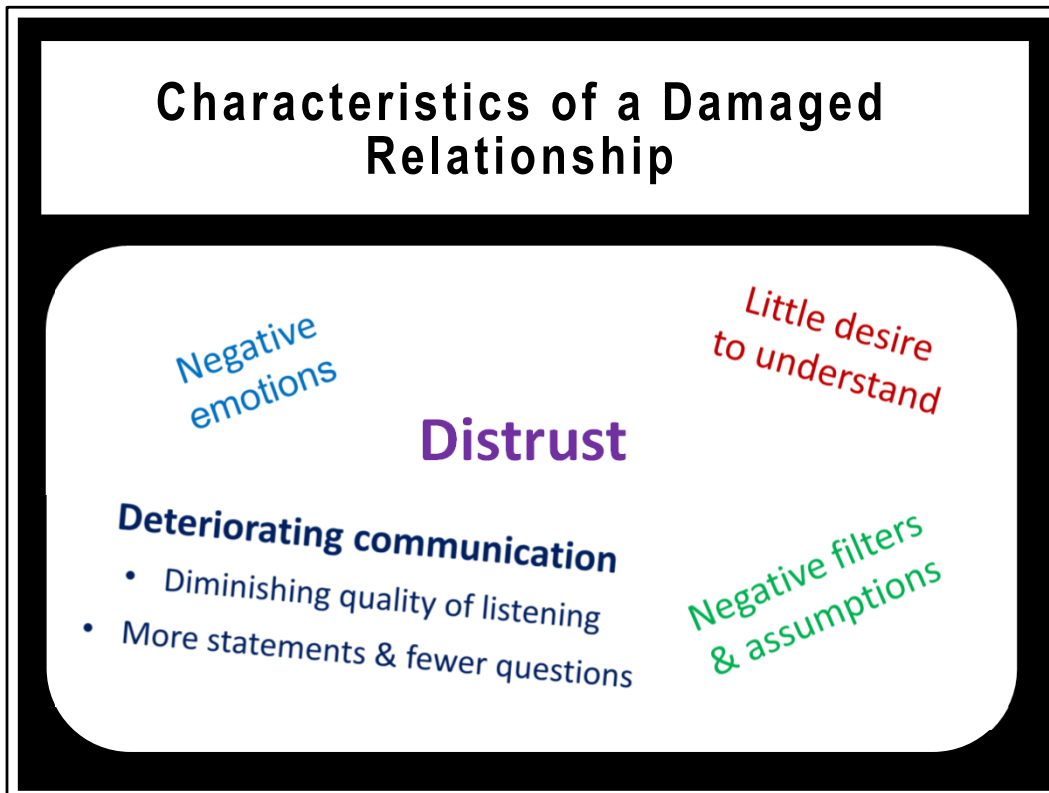
How do we know when our relationship with someone else is poor, damaged or deteriorating?

What symptoms might we see?

How do we know when our relationship with someone else is poor, damaged or deteriorating? What symptoms might we see? Consider your own past experiences or interactions you have witnessed.

Jot your thoughts down on your worksheet.

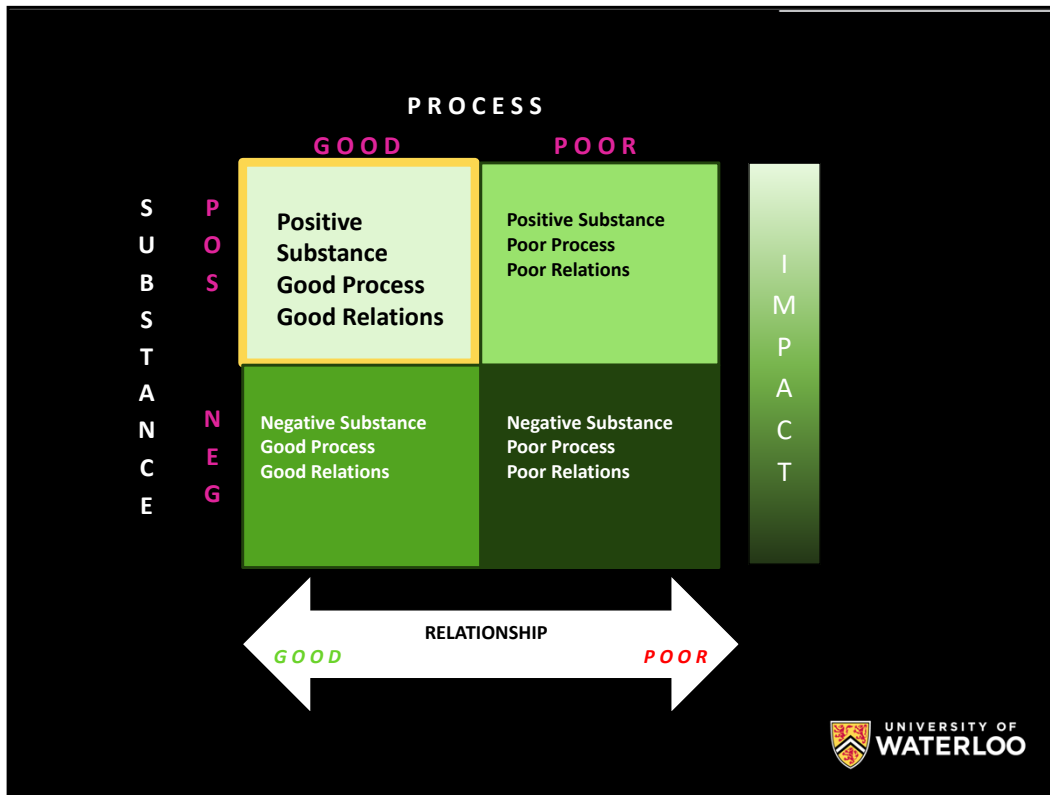
## Characteristics of a Damaged Relationship



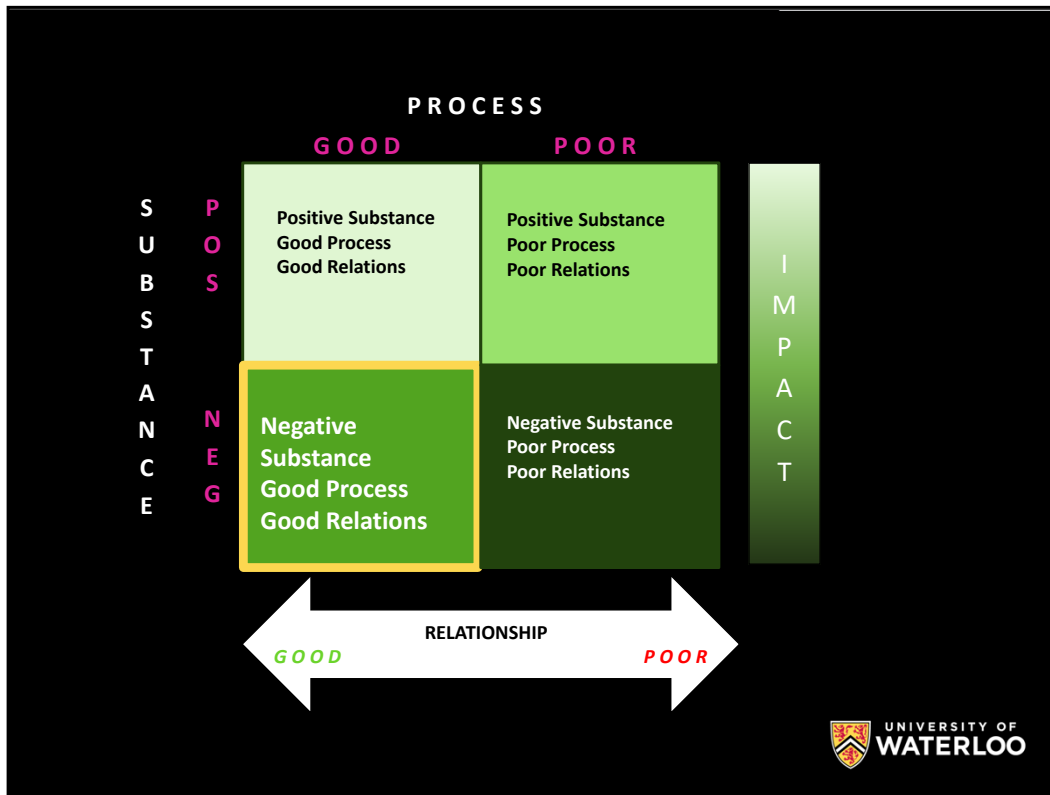
Where there is a damaged relationship

- distrust is high
- negative emotions may have developed
- active negative filters may lead us to misunderstand and pre-judge the other person's motives
- communication is deteriorating so ...
  - the desire to understand the other person's perspective is low
  - and ... the quality of listening diminishes. Questions that promote understanding are replaced by statements meant to convince the other person of how wrong they are or in extreme cases to bully or intimidate.

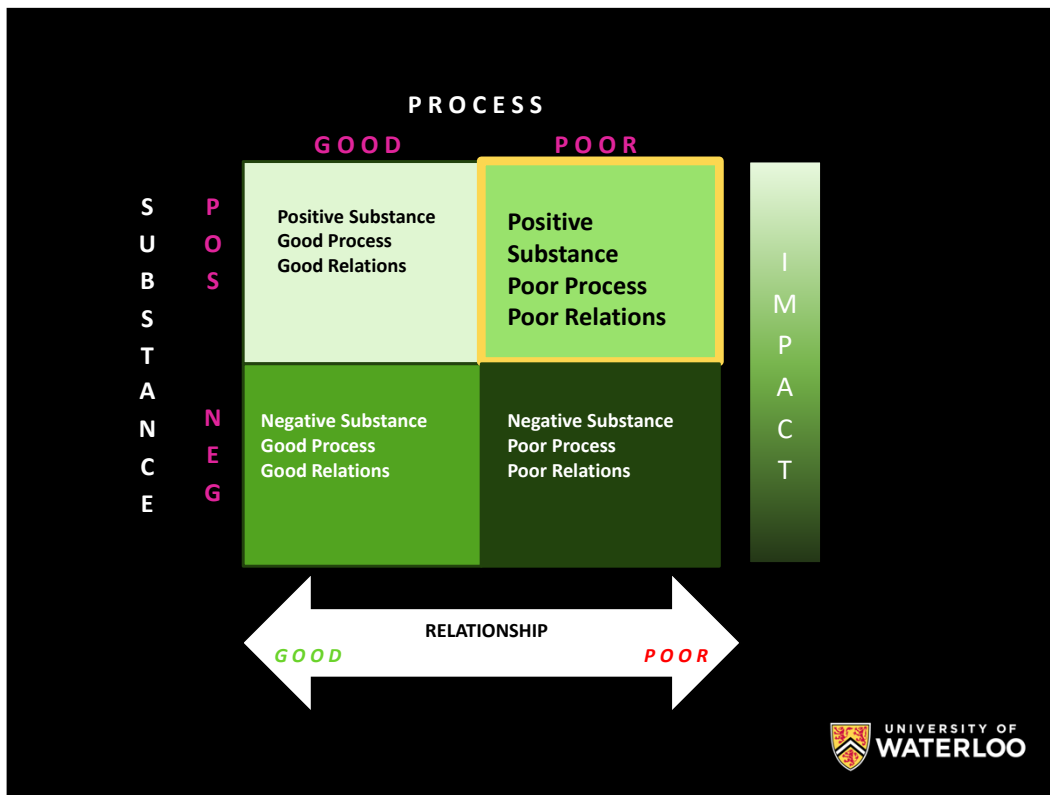
If these characteristics are part of a relationship, it is difficult to have a good conversation.



Let's take a look at our Difficult Conversation Matrix with all three factors considered ...In the top left we have ... positive substance, good process and good relations. This is where we want to be when preparing to have a conversation.



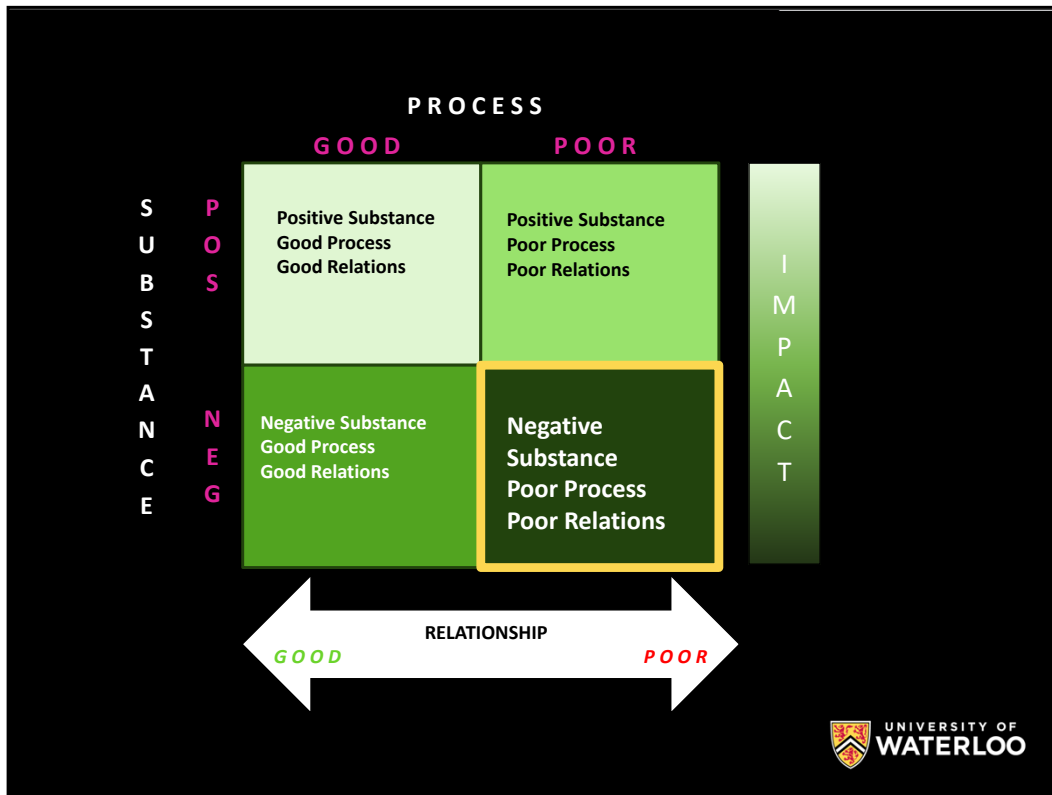
Of course, there will always be times when negative content needs to be discussed. By developing effective communication skills and maintaining positive relationships in academic and workplace settings, we can reduce the negative impact and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome



As we discussed earlier, poor process can reduce the chances of a positive outcome. Distrust and disrespect from poor relationships make this even harder.



Imagine this... your boss suddenly tells you that you can have Friday afternoons off this summer. The substance of the message is positive. If relations are good, you'll likely interpret this as a reward for hard work. If relations are poor, you might assume something negative—such as your boss planning to interview your replacement. This example shows how relationship can filter the substance of a message and influence the process.



Finally, In the bottom right corner, we find negative substance, poor process and poor relations. If you are looking at having a conversation that fits into this quadrant, it is important to consider getting HELP.

## **ASSESS**

1. Is a conversation appropriate?
2. Why is this conversation going to be difficult?

### **3. Set context**

## **PLAN**

4. Clarify the issues
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## **PARTICIPATE**

10. Participate actively in the conversation

Once you’ve decided the conversation is appropriate and identified what makes it difficult. The next question is: will the other person be willing to engage?

Their willingness often depends on your relationship and past interactions. They may not feel ready or see the need to participate. How you invite them matters—setting the right context can make all the difference.



Photo by RODNAE Productions: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/smiling-woman-opening-door-to-office-building-10376013/>

Setting context is like opening a door and inviting the other person into a conversation that promotes mutual understanding.

This step is crucial for managing difficult conversations effectively. In the next module, we'll guide you through creating what we call a context statement—a clear, respectful way to frame your conversation."

## Reflect:

- a. Why do you need to have this conversation?
- b. How will this conversation benefit you and the other person? Will it improve your working relationship, resolve a problem, clear up a misunderstanding, or prevent further issues?
- c. What consequences might there be if you don't have the conversation?
- d. Why do you need to have this conversation now? Will delaying it make the situation worse?
- e. Has something kept you from having this conversation earlier? What is that?



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In preparation for the next module, take some time to reflect on these questions. You can record your answers on the worksheet.

- a. Why do you need to have this conversation?
- b. How will this conversation benefit you and the other person? Will it improve your working relationship, resolve a problem, clear up a misunderstanding, or prevent further issues?
- c. What consequences might there be if you don't have the conversation?
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**Contact:**

Jeremy de Boer

[jdeboer@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:jdeboer@uwaterloo.ca)

Lynn Long

[l3long@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:l3long@uwaterloo.ca)

Photo by Olya Kobruseva: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/question-marks-on-paper-crafts-5428836/>

Remember if you have any questions or concerns or if you would like to access any of the services offered by our office, contact Jeremy de Boer or Lynn Long.

In our next module we will be discussing strategies and tools for responding to Green Zone conflict.