

The Difficult Conversation

A difficult conversation is sometimes known as a challenging or crucial conversation. It is a discussion between two people where opinions vary, emotions run high and something important is at stake. Stepping up to the difficult conversation can be a daunting task.

Three ways to handle the difficult conversation:

- Avoid it.
- Face it and handle it poorly.
- Face it and handle it well.

The key is preparation!

Preparing for the Difficult Conversation

The majority of the work in any difficult conversation is work you do on yourself. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy.

Before going into the conversation, answer the following questions:

1. What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome?
2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? Assume the other person's intentions are good.
3. How have you contributed to the problem? How have they?
4. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? What personal history is making you react?
5. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be.
6. What might the employee be thinking about this situation? Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are their needs and fears? What solution do you think they would suggest? Begin to reframe the employee as a partner.
7. Potentially, is there any common ground? Start with what you agree on.

Be sensitive to the impact of external circumstances that may be causing the person to act in a non-typical way.

Opening the Difficult Conversation

How you open the conversation is critical. You do not want to sound or appear threatening. Your intention is to present the opportunity to talk.

Possible opening sentences:

- *"I have something I would like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively."*
- *"I would like to talk about _____ with you. Do you have a few minutes so I can understand your point of view?"*
- *"I need your help with _____. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"*
- *"I think we have different perceptions about _____. I think it is important we share our perceptions so we can better understand each other."*
- *"I would like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas on how to _____."*
- *"I would like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your (feelings, thoughts, ideas, etc.) about this and share my perspective as well."*
- *"I would like to tell you how this appears to me. I want to understand how it appears to you."*

Working with the Unwilling Participant

If the other person is unable to have the conversation immediately, ask to schedule a time in the near future when you can talk. *"If not now, when can we schedule a time?"* Be persistent.

If the person is unwilling to engage in the conversation, then you must move to the next phase of the conversation, which is aligned more with managing than coaching. You should share your intentions, share choices and explain the consequences.

Example: "I want to discuss this in a way that can help both of us reach a solution. If you are not willing, I will have to follow a more formal process, which will be more difficult for both of us."

Tips for Handling the Difficult Conversation

Do Not Lose Control

The only thing you can control in a difficult conversation is yourself. A successful outcome will depend on two things: how you are and what you say. How you are (centered, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say and how you say it.

Tips for increasing your chances of a successful dialogue:

- Practice listening – be curious, stay focused.
- Remember, these conversations are called difficult for a reason.
- Acknowledge emotional energy – yours and theirs – and direct it towards a useful purpose. For example: *"I sense you are [name the emotion: uncomfortable, angry, resistant, upset, etc.], can we continue or should we take a break?"*
- Do not take verbal attacks personally. Stay grounded and help the person come back to center.
- Do not assume they can see things from your point of view.
- Practice the conversation with a trusted colleague before holding the real one. (Safeguard confidentiality.)
- Mentally practice the conversation. See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you're hoping for.
- Prepare with relaxation, breathing or meditation.

The following pages contain a couple of forms you can use to plan your conversation. Make copies as needed.

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Preparation	Your Answers
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2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? Assume the other person's intentions are good.	2.
3. How have you contributed to the problem? How have they?	3.
4. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? What personal history is making you react?	4.
5. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be.	5.
6. What might the employee be thinking about this situation? Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are their needs and fears? What solution do you think they would suggest? Begin to reframe the employee as a partner.	6.
7. Potentially, is there any common ground? Start with what you agree on.	7.

Preparing for the Difficult Conversation

Your opening for the conversation:	Other person's potential reaction:
Explain your point of view:	Other person's potential reaction:
Ask for the other person's point of view:	Other person's potential reaction:
State how you would like to move forward (to coaching or managing):	Other person's potential reaction:

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