

Seven Suggestions for Managing Difficult Conversations

In general we would rather avoid difficult conversations and even when we are brave enough to start one we often back away by circling around a subject and hiding behind generalisations. On the whole we worry too much about ‘saying the right thing’, fearing that if we say the wrong thing we will make it worse. In reality though, it’s not saying anything that more often makes things worse. If you do say something clumsily you can always apologise and try again. The thought of having the conversation is usually scarier than the conversation itself. Your Human Resources Manager is available to talk things through informally and off-the-record when you want to plan how to approach a tricky situation without getting into anything formal.

1 Prepare to be direct and emotionally courageous

Before you have a difficult conversation, take the time you need to prepare so that you can be direct about the subject in hand and be honest about your own and others’ emotional states. It is OK to admit to frustration, anger and sadness yourself and it helps others to do the same which immediately diffuses the charge of a difficult conversation. This is because these emotions will be present anyway and it is more unsettling when they are not acknowledged. If you do admit your own feelings, be sure to own them by saying “*I feel*” and not “*you have made me feel*”. Non-violent communication techniques offer a useful framework for resolving conflict. This framework is based on the assumption that people come into conflict because they have adopted different strategies for getting their needs met and these strategies have clashed.

2 Prepare the context of the conversation

Think carefully about where to meet and the message this sends. You may want to avoid power dynamics by choosing a neutral place rather than meeting in your office. Be positive in your invitation to have the conversation; state your intention to resolve a problem, rather than simply to discuss it. State your intention to understand the perspective of the other person and to work or think together to move things along.

3 Prepare your state of mind

Anticipating difficult conversations raises our blood pressure and heart rate and quickens our breathing. We feel agitated and tense. Take time before the conversation to quiet your mind by going for a walk or using breathing techniques to lower your arousal level so that you can think more clearly and be less emotionally reactive during the conversation. Acknowledge that you are about to do a difficult thing. You would prepare thoroughly for an interview, exam or viva; give this the same time and thought. Seek to understand a complex problem rather than to go into battle.

“It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult.” Seneca

4 Prepare what you want to say

Think in advance about what you want to say. Prepare to be honest about your own discomfort, to state your intention for a positive outcome and to tell the person that you genuinely seek to understand their perspective on things. Also prepare to directly and specifically describe any problems that you see and the implication if these are not resolved. The suggestions for Giving Feedback may help you to be specific and balanced. Try to stay with the facts as you see them rather than inferring the other person's thoughts, feelings or intentions.

5 Prepare the tone you will speak with

Tone of voice conveys even more than the words we use so think about this too and be careful that your tone and your body language don't contradict your message. If you seek to understand and resolve, make sure that your tone does not accuse or condemn. To get some perspective on how you are coming across you could practise with a trusted friend or with your [Human Resources Manager](#) beforehand, or watch some [video clips](#) to get some ideas.

6 Listen as well as talk

Don't let your difficult conversation become a difficult lecture! Conversations are a two-way exchange involving questions and answers and you'll need to go with the flow rather than sticking to a script. Keep in mind (or in your notebook) the points that you want to get across but be fluid about how and when you speak and when you listen. It may help to let the other person blow off steam about the situation before the conversation can move on. Demonstrate that you are really listening by paraphrasing back what the person has said to check your understanding, rather than launching into a defence. In some situations it may be very hard not to react emotionally, especially if your words or intentions have been misunderstood. Rather than reacting to the misinterpretation, try to clarify your real intentions. It may be appropriate to apologise for suffering your clumsiness may have caused, while holding on to your original intention.

7 Objectify the problem. Co-create the solution

One technique to open up constructive dialogue is to describe 'the problem' objectively as a third party which you and the other person have come to discuss solutions to. So, for example, "*your refusal to engage with the curriculum*" becomes a discussion about "*a mismatch of needs between your portfolio and the department's new curriculum.*"