

Turning a Difficult Conversation into a Satisfying Experience

When a friend doesn't know the depth of your concern or a coworker is ignorant of performance gaps, two opportunities are lost: each person misses the chance to use potentially helpful information, and you miss an opening for building a more effective or satisfying relationship.

Difficult conversations are often powerful relationship-building opportunities. Author Robert Fritz refers to them as "moments of truth" that generate energy and fresh solutions that move relationships and organizations forward. Resolving conflicts successfully also builds the trust needed to deepen and strengthen relationships.

Have you been putting off having a difficult conversation? We typically avoid difficult conversations because we don't want to hurt someone's feelings, we dislike conflict, or we feel uncomfortable expressing our own needs or preferences. We may anticipate that the other person won't be receptive and the problem will actually get worse because we tried to talk about it.

Some key principles identified by the Harvard Negotiation project* include:

Avoid assumptions, not people

One of the key ways that these conversations get derailed is that we think we know not only our own point of view, but also the motivations and point of view of the other person/people.

Imagine walking down the street and someone runs into you from the side. Your immediate reaction is likely to be one of anger that the other person was careless, maybe dangerous, and wasn't watching where s/he was going. You are upset at his or her carelessness. You turn to scowl or perhaps to make a rude remark. Then you see the white cane. Your anger evaporates because you see that you were wrong about the intention.

When we assume we know others' motivations, we often get angry or upset, as if our assumptions are actually true. Check your assumptions at the door.

Do not confuse the person with the problem

"The problem is the problem. The person is not the problem."**

Find a way to state the problem in a neutral way that invites collaboration rather than resistance; a way that does not assign blame, make assumptions about the other person's motivations or criticize their behavior. For example, don't say "I've been getting complaints that you're not doing your fair share of the work;" this will bring resistance and argument. Instead, try something like, "There have been some questions around workload distribution. I'd like to discuss this with you and see how the situation can be improved."

Clarify the problem

A clear problem statement avoids judgment, lectures and blame. For example, for a problem that is presented as someone “not doing her fair share”, what are the actual signs that there is a problem? Are some people working a lot of overtime? Are important tasks not getting done? Is there a lot of interpersonal conflict in the work group? Is everyone targeting the same person or is there a diversity of opinion? Until the nature of the problem is clear, it is unlikely to be solved.

Prepare emotionally, mentally and logistically

Emotional states such as anger, frustration or anxiety have the effect of narrowing your thinking, clouding your judgment, and pressing you into ill-considered action. In a difficult conversation, you want to have the best access to creative thinking and problem solving, the ability to understand the other person’s point of view, your best judgment and the ability to delay action until the issues have been thoroughly reviewed. So cultivate a calm and open attitude.

Ask yourself if you are prepared to listen and collaborate with the other person. The strong feeling that you are completely right and know the perfect solution should be a warning signal to you that you need to broaden your thinking before attempting to have a conversation about it.

Explore and clarify your own thoughts and feelings about the situation (not what you think the other person’s thoughts and feelings are!) Often it is useful to talk it over with someone else who is outside the situation.

Choose an appropriate venue for the conversation and be sure that you have enough time to adequately address the situation. Rushing to a premature solution will only prolong the problematic situation.

These five steps will make a successful conversation more likely

- Prepare yourself emotionally, mentally and logistically (as described above).
- Start the conversation by stating the problem/issue in a neutral way.

This is the moment that can make or break the conversation, by either inviting collaboration or resistance.

- Inquire and listen.

Ask for the other person’s perspective. Use active listening to make sure you understand their point of view. Sometimes we go into a difficult conversation with the idea that we will get the other person to see the rightness of our position and change their behavior to accord with our point of view. An unlikely recipe for success!

For example, if it bothers you that your friend smokes, you might ask her why she smokes. Not rhetorically: “I can’t believe you smoke! It’s so bad for you!” Rather, if you are really asking why she doesn’t stop, she might tell you “I am worried that if I stop I will gain weight and my husband won’t love me anymore.” Or, “it is the only way I have of calming down from the stress of my work.” Now you have some information to go on, because each of these reasons has a different solution.

- Tell the other person what your real concerns are.

In the smoking example, you could tell your friend all the reasons why smoking is bad for her. However, chances are, she already knows this and will quickly tune you out. But this isn't the heart of the matter, really. You want her to stop because it would break your heart to see her sick and dying of such a preventable health condition. You care about her.

- Problem solve.

If things have gone well in the conversation so far, you are in a good position to problem-solve. All parties to the conversation can contribute to identifying and working toward solutions. Your friend might have ideas about what would help her to stop smoking, and you might be more available to help, now understanding her reasons. In a workgroup discussion about workload, it might turn out that the team member's shyness is misinterpreted as an unwillingness to pitch in and help, or that she is doing work that the rest of the group is unaware of. Or, it may be that a redistribution of workload is needed.

At every step of this process, it is essential that you use your good communication skills: effective listening, self-reflection, courtesy, clarity and respect. Using these steps will build trust with those with whom you live and work; this is the kind of trust that is essential for strong relationships. In this way, difficult conversations can be opportunities to strengthen a relationship.

If you would like help with a strategy for a difficult conversation, EAC consultants can help. Consultants are available anytime at 1-888-327-0027.

*See, for example, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss what Matters Most*. Stone, Douglas; Patton, Bruce; Heen, Sheila. Viking Penguin, 1999.

***Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Fisher, Roger; Ury, William. Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

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