

Difficult Conversation Courage

Often when we are faced with initiating a “difficult” conversation, we procrastinate. We think, “Things will just get better” or “This isn’t really my problem to deal with.” We remember conversations gone wrong, when someone has lashed out, gotten emotional, or remained silent. We make excuses, saying things like, “I don’t want to hurt the other person’s feelings.” When we’re tempted to avoid a difficult conversation, we must consider the impact of not having the conversation; when we don’t say what we need to say, the situation will stay the same or get worse. The only way to create positive change is to have the conversation you need to have. Here are a few tips to help you successfully navigate a difficult conversation:

Prepare

Preparation is the key to a successful difficult conversation—and it may look different depending on how you process information. You may feel most comfortable writing down what to say, while others would rather talk it out. Figure out what works for you, but make sure in your preparation to identify:

- The issue. What is happening?
- The impact. Why is the issue significant?
- The role I play. Am I doing something to contribute to the problem?
- The other person’s perspective. How does the other person see things?
- Any assumptions. What assumptions am I making in approaching the person about this issue?
- The result. What do I want to happen because of this conversation?

Also, consider your relationship with the other person. Have you known each other for long? Have you had positive interactions in the past? How do you think the other person may react?

Even if you only take a few minutes to prepare, take the time! It may make all the difference.

Start Positively

Get the conversation off to a positive start by asking the other person for permission. This might sound like, “Do you have a few minutes to talk right now?” or “Could we get some time on the calendar for a conversation?” Once they’re prepared to hear you, state the purpose of the conversation and describe the impact of what is happening. You may be tempted to “beat around the bush,” but do your best to get to the point quickly and with care and empathy. In Kim Scott’s excellent book, *Radical Candor*, she describes the most effective approach as the marriage between caring personally and challenging professionally. Also consider your body language—how will you demonstrate care in your facial expression, tone of voice, and posture?

Hear the Other Person’s Perspective

If you want to hear the other person’s perspective, you must ask for it. Come to the conversation with an open mind and open ears—be ready to withhold judgement and listen. Seek to truly understand the other person’s side of the story. Avoid interrupting, jumping to conclusions, and distractions, and do your best to listen more than talk. Embrace silence as the other person processes the information. If you feel yourself becoming defensive or emotional, put the conversation on hold and come back to it later. Simply say, “I think it would be helpful if we continued this conversation tomorrow.”

Focus on the Future

As the conversation wraps up, return to your desired outcome. What will change going forward? State what you need, while remaining flexible. What if you go into the conversation wanting a certain result, and then you learn the problem is something unexpected? The good news is that you don't have to solve the problem in one sitting—it may take multiple conversations over time. Be on the lookout for false agreement, which happens when someone agrees just to end the conversation. End the conversation by agreeing to action items and developing a plan for follow up. Make sure both of you are clear on the next steps.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Here's what we do know—practice makes perfect. The more that you initiate difficult conversations, the more comfortable you'll feel and the more you'll learn each time. If it doesn't go well—the other person explodes or doesn't say anything or you become defensive—keep having the conversation. Be patient, realizing that success may not be immediate and know that you are better off having the conversation than not.

The next time you're tempted to avoid a difficult conversation, lean into the discomfort and have the conversation you need to have!

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