

# How to Have Difficult Conversations

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Difficult conversations at work are challenging and we often try to avoid them. That's not surprising; the reason it's a difficult conversation is because it is *difficult*. The next time you find yourself preparing for a difficult conversation, give yourself a little bit of grace and remember these tips:

1. **Check your intent.** Are you trying to influence a person's behavior or improve their performance? Maybe you're trying to help the organization. Remember, you're not trying to hurt this person or ruin their day.
2. **There isn't an ideal time.** People try to convince themselves that it's not the right time to have a difficult conversation. Don't focus on finding the best time, instead create the space for it. Find a space where you can both focus on one another and take your time with it.
3. **A tough conversation for you may not be a tough conversation for them.** You may be making up a story about how they might respond based on your own responses. Remember how the other person wants to be treated – not how you want to be treated.
4. **There are no perfect words.** With that said, it's always helpful to write out your thoughts so that you can be clear and focused. If the conversation does get uncomfortable, you are both going to want to change the subject. Have some notes ready about what you want to discuss so you can refocus and communicate more effectively.
5. **Be curious and have empathy.** Try to understand their point of view. Ask questions!
6. **Stay calm and rational.** Don't forget the principle of reciprocity. When we give someone something, they tend to give us something in return; feedback is often like that. Be aware of this and don't let yourself get emotionally hijacked. If someone is getting defensive, slow the conversation down, ask some questions, restate what you've heard, and then restate your position.

7. **Conversations are not typically one and done.** If you have to leave things unsettled, that's ok; it doesn't have to be all tied up with a bow. Be willing to come back to the conversation at another time. Take a couple of days to think about it, and then reconnect. Sometimes it takes a day or two of reflection to help that other person come around. Be clear that you are going to reconnect with them at another time.

When tackling a difficult conversation keep in mind to:

1. **Be direct.** When it comes to giving feedback, just say it and keep it simple. Ask, "May I give you some feedback?" Then describe their behavior and the impact of their behavior. If it's a deeper conversation beyond feedback, start with questions. "Can you help me understand x, y, or z? What was your intent? What was your perspective? What impact do you think you had?" Make sure your questions aren't statements disguised as questions and be genuinely curious.
2. **Try to identify what you can both agree to – what they can agree to, what you can agree to, and what needs to be different.** If you can come up with what needs to be different and agree to it, then end the conversation with some positive intent and optimism. Be sure to thank the other person for being willing to have the conversation with you.
3. **Remember, it's best to share the fact that it's a difficult conversation, or that you feel awkward or anxious about it.**

How do you handle difficult conversations? Share the strategies that work best for you! I'd love to hear from you.

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