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Navigating Challenging Conversations Effectively

Difficult conversations are a natural part of working with other people. They can come up when a deadline is missed, when priorities are unclear, when someone feels overloaded, or when a message lands in a way that creates tension. They can also show up in personal life, when we need to ask for support, set a boundary, or talk through a misunderstanding.

These moments are common, but they're not always easy. Many people hesitate because they worry about how the other person will respond, whether the relationship will change, or whether they'll say the "wrong" thing. Sometimes, it can feel safer to avoid the conversation altogether. For some people, avoidance may also come from past experiences with conflict, fear of rejection, people-pleasing tendencies, or concern about

damaging an important relationship. Yet avoiding difficult conversations often allows tension to build, creates confusion, and can lead to stress, frustration, or disconnection over time. Learning how to approach difficult conversations with clarity, care, and respect can help prevent small issues from becoming larger ones and can strengthen trust over time.

Why difficult conversations matter

Difficult conversations are not just about addressing problems, they're also about creating understanding. They help clarify expectations, repair miscommunication, and ensure that concerns are addressed before they grow into larger challenges.



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When conversations are avoided, the impact can build gradually. Small issues may go unaddressed, assumptions can take hold, and people may begin to feel unheard or unsupported. Over time, this can affect trust, collaboration, and overall well-being.

On the other hand, addressing concerns early and respectfully can:

- Strengthen trust and transparency
- Prevent misunderstandings from escalating
- Support accountability and shared expectations
- Create space for different perspectives to be heard

Understanding what makes conversations feel difficult

Difficult conversations often involve more than just the topic at hand. They can be challenging because of:

- **Emotions:** You may feel anxious, frustrated, or uncertain. The other person may as well.
- **Relationships:** The closer or more important the relationship, the higher the perceived risk.
- **Uncertainty:** Not knowing how the conversation will be received can make it harder to begin.
- **Power dynamics:** Conversations with managers, peers, or direct reports can each feel different.

It's also common to worry about causing harm or making things worse. These concerns are human and valid, but they don't have to prevent the conversation from happening.

Communication styles can also vary based on culture, lived experience, personality, or neurodiversity. Some people communicate more directly, while others may place more emphasis on harmony, reflection, or emotional processing. Approaching conversations with flexibility and curiosity can help create more understanding across these differences.

Before you begin: pausing and preparing

Taking time to prepare can help you feel more grounded and focused. You don't necessarily need a script—though for some people, a rehearsed script can be helpful—but a bit of reflection can make the conversation more constructive. Others may find it helpful to have a visual, like a post-it-note, with key points to support effective communication.

1. Get clear on your purpose

A clear purpose helps you stay focused and prevents the conversation from drifting into unrelated concerns.

Ask yourself: Why am I having this conversation? What outcome am I hoping for?

2. Focus on observable facts

Try to separate what you've observed from how you've interpreted it. For example, instead of thinking "they're not committed," focus on what you've noticed: "the last two deadlines were missed." This helps keep the conversation grounded and reduces the chance of sounding judgmental.

Ask yourself: What have I actually seen or heard?

3. Notice your assumptions

It's natural to form a story about what's happening, but that story may not be complete. Approaching the conversation with curiosity rather than certainty creates space for understanding.

Ask yourself: What story am I telling myself, and what else could be true?

4. Consider timing and setting

Choose a time when both you and the other person can engage without feeling rushed or overwhelmed.

Whenever possible, opt for a real-time conversation (in person or virtual) rather than relying on email or instant messaging, especially when emotions may be involved. Written exchanges can often be misinterpreted because we are not able to infer the tone of written language.

Ask yourself: Is this the right time, place, and format for this conversation?

For some people, especially those who process information differently or feel overwhelmed during emotionally intense situations, it may also help to write down key points ahead of time or take breaks during the conversation if needed.

5. Check in with yourself

If emotions are running high, it may help to pause and revisit the conversation when you feel more settled. When we feel overwhelmed or stressed, the brain shifts into a fight, flight, or freeze response, making it difficult to think clearly, process information, or respond thoughtfully in the moment.

Ask yourself: Am I calm enough to listen and respond thoughtfully?

A simple blueprint for the conversation

Having a clear structure can make difficult conversations feel more manageable. The following five-step approach can help keep the discussion focused, respectful, and collaborative.

1. State your purpose

Start by explaining why you wanted to connect. This helps set a constructive tone.

For example: “I wanted to check in because I value our working relationship and want to make sure we’re aligned.”

2. Share your observations

Describe what you’ve noticed using neutral, specific language without judgment.

For example: “I’ve noticed that a few recent deadlines have been missed.”

Avoid generalizations or labels and focus on what can be observed.

3. Invite their perspective

Ask open-ended questions to better understand their experience.

For example: “Can you share what’s been happening from your perspective?”

This step is essential. It shifts the conversation from one-sided feedback to a shared dialogue.

4. Share your needs or request

Once you have a clearer understanding, express what you need moving forward.

For example: “Would you be open to letting me know earlier if timelines might be tight?”

Framing this as a request rather than a demand encourages collaboration.

5. Agree on next steps

End the conversation by identifying how you’ll move forward.

For example: “Let’s check in next week to see how things are going.”

This creates clarity and supports follow-through.

Listening as a core skill

One of the most powerful tools in a difficult conversation is listening. When people feel heard, they are more likely to engage openly and less likely to become defensive.

Active listening

Active listening means showing the other person that you are fully present and paying attention. Small actions such as putting your phone away, turning toward the speaker, making occasional eye contact, nodding, or using brief responses like “mm-hmm” can help the other person feel heard and understood.

Listening in this context also means:

- Giving the other person space to speak without interrupting
- Resisting the urge to ‘correct’ the other person
- Acknowledging what you hear, even if you don’t fully agree
- Asking follow-up questions to deepen understanding

Simple phrases can help show that you are engaged:

- “I hear what you’re saying.”
- “That sounds frustrating.”
- “Can you tell me more about that?”

Listening does not mean agreeing. It means showing respect for the other person’s perspective and creating space for a more productive conversation.

When emotions come up

Not every conversation goes the way we hope. Emotions can rise, messages can be misunderstood, or someone may leave feeling hurt or unheard. Emotions are a natural part of difficult conversations. If things begin to feel tense or overwhelming, it can help to slow the pace.

You might:

- Pause before responding
- Take a moment to gather your thoughts
- Acknowledge what’s happening in a calm, neutral way

If needed, it's okay to step away and return to the conversation later. For example: "I think this is an important conversation, and I'd like to continue it when we both have more time to focus." Taking a pause can protect both the relationship and the quality of the discussion.

Revisiting the discussion later can help rebuild understanding and trust. Repair may involve explaining your intent more clearly, acknowledging something you would express differently, offering an apology for how something was said, or picking things up again once emotions have settled. It can also involve recognizing that each person may have experienced the conversation differently.

Active listening, curiosity, and thoughtful follow-up can help reduce defensiveness and lead to more constructive communication over time. Difficult conversations take practice, and they won't always be perfect. What makes the difference is a willingness to reflect, reconnect, and move forward with care and respect.

What to do when change does not happen right away

Not every conversation leads to immediate change. In those situations, it can help to focus on what is within your control.

You may choose to:

- Accept that you've shared your perspective and given the other person awareness
- Set boundaries around what you will do if certain behaviours continue
- Adjust how you work together, if needed

These approaches help you stay grounded while still respecting the other person's autonomy.

Everyday habits that make conversations easier

Some conversations feel difficult because they've been building over time. Developing a few simple habits can make them easier to navigate.

Address concerns early. Raising an issue sooner rather than later can prevent it from becoming more complex or emotionally charged.

Ask for what you need. Clear, respectful requests reduce confusion and help others understand how to support you.

Set boundaries. Being open about your limits supports well-being and models healthy communication for others.

Moving forward. Difficult conversations are not about getting everything right. They are about showing up with intention, clarity, and respect. Each conversation is an opportunity to build understanding, strengthen relationships, and contribute to a more supportive work environment.

With practice, these conversations can become less overwhelming and more constructive. Starting small—by pausing, asking a question, or naming a concern—can make a meaningful difference.

Over time, these skills can help create a workplace where people feel more comfortable speaking up, working through challenges, and supporting one another in a thoughtful, inclusive, and respectful way.

If you're finding a situation particularly challenging, you don't have to navigate it alone. Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) offers confidential support to help you prepare for difficult conversations, explore your options, and build confidence in how you approach them.





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