



Handling Difficult Conversations

Courage

My perspective and what I need.

Consideration

The other person's perspective and what they need.

Begin by expressing your:

Purpose

The important issue I need to raise and the progress I need to make.

Positive Intent

How I want the other person to benefit from the conversation.

Respond to emotional reactions using these tools:

Get Curious, Not Furious

Maintain a neutral tone, a poker face

Pause, Don't Panic

Speak at a slower cadence and lower your register

Observe, Don't Judge

State your view rather than evaluate others' beliefs or actions

Ask, Don't Assume

Ask for what you need rather than assume it's clear

Difficult Conversation Planner

Use this tool to organize your thoughts and plan your approach.

Consider Your Purpose

What's the important issue I need to raise?

What has happened up to this point?

Focus on the facts of the situation, without making judgments.

What's the long-term progress I want to make—on the issue and in my relationship with the other person?

What progress do I want to make in our upcoming conversation about the issue?

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Consider Your Positive Intent

How might the other person be experiencing the situation?

What positive outcome do I want for them as a result of the conversation?

What goals do we share?

What information might I be missing about the issue and how they see it?

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Examine Your Dynamic

How might the power dynamic between us affect the conversation?

What communication styles do we have that could get in the way of progress?

What could I do in this conversation to help us get to a good outcome?

- I could express Courage by...

- I could express Consideration by...

Difficult Conversation Planner

Make Your Plan

Use your answers from the previous sections to write:

- Your opening message of Purpose and Positive Intent.

- The main points you want to make.

- The questions you want to ask.

- The emotional reaction(s) you anticipate from them and yourself how you'll respond.

Don't let Preparation become Procrastination

I commit to having this conversation by _____(date).

Phrases to De-escalate Tension in a Difficult Conversation

One big reason people dread a difficult conversation is that they think it will go badly—spiral off topic, devolve into name-calling and accusations, lead one person to dominate and drown out the other, or change the relationship for the worse. When stakes are high, it's easy for emotions to hijack our ability to think clearly, raising the defenses of even well-intentioned people.

When you notice rising emotions—in yourself or the other person—try one or a combination of these phrases to decrease tension so that you both stay engaged and working toward a good outcome. Choose the phrases that seem best for your situation.

1. Suggest a pause.

This simple tactic can create just enough space amid the intensity of the discussion for a mental reset and to refocus on the topic at hand. Try it when you or the other person is:

- Feeling upset or misunderstood (“You just don’t get it!”)
- Overwhelmed by too much information
- Getting sidetracked (“That’s only one of the problems here!”)

Examples:

- *Let’s step back for a minute ...*
- *I need a moment to gather my thoughts.*
- *How about we take a short break and come back to this conversation?*

2. Make a factual observation.

Stating a fact can help you both shift from making assumptions to thinking more objectively about the situation and even find points of agreement. If it’s appropriate, ask for clarification of your observation so the other person can agree or correct your understanding. Try it when:

- You notice unhelpful patterns when talking (Ex: raising your voices, repeating yourselves, etc.)
- You’re having trouble finding common ground
- You or the other person are making judgments, rather than stating facts (“It was so irresponsible ...”)

Examples:

- *I notice that we keep repeating ourselves.*
- *I understand that we got the request two weeks ago. Is that right?*
- *When I said X, you seemed [frustrated/sad/uncomfortable/confused]. Do I have that right?*

Phrases to De-escalate Tension in a Difficult Conversation

3. Ask about the other person's perspective.

Learning more about the other person's point of view could change how you perceive them or their behavior. And understanding their perspective can help you tailor your approach to the conversation and look for an outcome that benefits both of you. Try it when you:

- Don't know how the other person feels about the situation or don't have all the information
- Aren't sure what the other person means and need clarification
- Sense that the other person is not feeling fully heard

Examples:

- *I'm curious to hear your perspective on X.*
- *When you say X, what do you mean?*
- *What's your biggest issue with X?*
- *What do you most want to happen with X?*

4. Acknowledge the other person's point of view.

Stating that the other person's feelings and perspectives are valid—whether or not you agree with them—can help the person see you as empathetic and be more willing to work with you on the issue. Try it when the other person:

- Shares their feelings about the situation
- Talks passionately or sends other signals that an issue is important to them

Examples:

- *It's totally understandable that you feel X.*
- *You're right—this is a tough situation.*
- *I can see how important this is to you.*

5. Calmly express your needs.

You also need to express your needs (purpose) clearly—and have the other person hear them—in order to make progress on the issue. Speak calmly so they don't just react to your emotions. Try it when the person:

- Isn't seeing the situation from your point of view
- Interrupts you or misunderstands you

Examples:

- *I'd like to share my perspective on X.*
- *When you say Y, I feel X because ...*
- *My ultimate goal is to X because I want or need ...*
- *Could you hold on for just a moment? I'd like to finish my point.*

Phrases to De-escalate Tension in a Difficult Conversation

6. Reiterate your positive intent or mutual goals.

Hopefully you shared this information at the start of the conversation—but you may need to revisit it. Pointing out a shared interest or goal can help remind the person that you're actually on the same side of the issue and put you both in a more collaborative state of mind. Try it when:

- The other person gets defensive or stubbornly holds to their position
- The conversation wanders off topic—to refocus it on what you both want to work better

Examples:

- *My intent with bringing this up is to help you/the team do X.*
- *I'm not trying to [be difficult/make your job harder/place blame]—what I'm trying to do is X.*
- *In the end, we both want X.*
- *Given how important X is to both of us, what are some ideas for how we can work toward it?*

Notes:

Follow-up Well After a Difficult Conversation

You just concluded a difficult conversation—congratulations! You may think, “Whew, I’m glad that’s over,” but tough issues typically don’t disappear just because a conversation ended. Proactively continuing the dialogue is your best chance to keep reducing tension and making progress over time.

1. **REFLECT** on how the conversation went.

- What went well? What did I appreciate about the conversation?
- What did not go well? What might I do differently in a follow-up conversation?
- What did I learn that changed my perspective?
- What next steps did we agree on?

2. **RECAP** the conversation in writing and send it to the other person.

Share it ideally within a day of the conversation, so the details and next steps are fresh in everyone’s mind. Be sure to include:

- Appreciation for the conversation and what went well (e.g., “I know it’s hard to talk about things like this. I’m grateful for your willingness to engage”).
- If needed, anything you’d like to clarify or wish you had done differently in the conversation (e.g., “I wanted to share X” or “I should have said Y this way”).
- Next steps you both agreed on (e.g., “As we discussed, since we both want ____, I’ve committed to ____ and you’ve committed to ____”).
- A restatement of your purpose and positive intent to remind everyone what you hope to achieve (e.g., “Thank you again. My goal is to find a solution that works well for both of us”).

3. **REVISIT** the subject next time you talk with the other person.

You may still feel some tension the next time you talk with them after a difficult conversation. Mentioning the conversation again can go a long way toward making the topic feel easier to talk about.

If you resolved the issue, it could be as simple as, “I’m glad we had a chance to talk about X. Thanks again for the conversation.”

You could also check in on the next steps you discussed (e.g., “Here’s what I’ve done since we talked. How are things going for you?”) or ask for another conversation (e.g., “I’d like to reconnect so we can keep talking about X. Could we schedule time for that next week?”).

Finding Common Ground as a Curious Communicator

Step 1: Communicate Courageously

Welcome Other Viewpoints: "What am I missing?"

Solicit Diverse Perspectives: "That's one viewpoint. Let's hear some dissent"

Open Up: Express your own feelings and emotions

Take Off the Mask of Perfection: "I Don't know yet"

Nurture a Sense of Humor at Work: Laugh more (especially at yourself)

Step 2: Level Up Your Listening

Listen to Understand: Develop the discipline of not preparing a response

Be Fully Present: Tame your wandering mind

Clarify Your Understanding: Articulate what you heard

Listen for Emotions: Hear what's not being said

Commit to Curiosity: "Tell me more"

Step 3: Manage Your Reactions

Model Non-defensive Reactions: Hit the pause button

Respond Productively: Label your emotions

Watch Out for Your Blind Spots: What stories are you telling yourself?

Appreciate Being Challenged: Thank people for their courage

Build on Others' Ideas: "Yes, and"

Step 4: Embrace Risk & Failure

Normalize Failure: "This is new to us, so we will experience failure"

Reframe Failures as Learning Opportunities: "Interesting! What can we learn from this?"

Get Comfortable with Discomfort: Welcome difficult emotions

Model Learner Behavior: Admit mistakes, share lessons learned

Celebrate Continuous Learning: Implement "blameless post-mortems"

Step 5: Design Inclusive Rituals

Upgrade Meetings: Appoint an Inclusion Booster

Respect All the Voices: Establish a no-interruption rule

Take Turns: No one speaks twice before everyone speaks once

Check for Psychological Safety: Introduce feedback cards/emails after meetings

Appreciate the Team: Express gratitude

The goal is **NOT TO AGREE.**
It's to **GAIN A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING.**