

A Step-By-Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations

What you have here is a brief synopsis of best practice strategies: a checklist of action items to think about before going into the conversation; some useful concepts to practice during the conversation; and some tips and suggestions to help you stay focused and flowing in general, including possible conversation openings.

Working on Yourself: How to Prepare for the Conversation

Before going into the conversation, ask yourself some questions:

1. What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? Watch for hidden purposes. You may think you have honourable goals, like educating a colleague, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.
2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized, but be cautious about assuming that this was the speaker's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
3. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in films. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
4. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.
5. Who is the opponent? What might s/he be thinking about this situation? Is s/he aware of the problem? If so, how do you think s/he perceives it? What are his or her needs and fears? What solution do you think s/he would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as partner.
6. What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
7. How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?

4 Steps to a Successful Outcome

The majority of the work in any conflict conversation is work you do on yourself. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy. Breathe, centre, and continue to notice when you become off centre—and choose to return again. This is where your power lies. By choosing the calm, centred state, you'll help your opponent/partner to be more centred, too. Centring is not a step; centring is how you are as you take the steps

Step 1: Inquiry

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don't know anything (we usually don't), and try to learn as much as possible about your opponent/partner and her or his point of view. Pretend you're entertaining a visitor from another planet, and find out how things look on that planet, how certain events affect the other person, and what the values and priorities are there.

If your partner really was from another planet, you'd be watching her /his body language and listening for unspoken energy as well. Do that here. What does s/he really want? What is s/he not saying?

Let your partner talk until s/he is finished. Don't interrupt except to acknowledge. Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you. Try to learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush things.

Step 2: Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment means showing that you've heard and understood. Try to understand the other person so well you can make her / his argument for him. Then do it. Explain back to her / him what you think s/he's really going for. Guess at her/his hopes and honour her/his position. S/he will not change unless s/he sees that you see where s/he stands.

Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up. It's fine; it just is. You can decide later how to address it. For example, in an argument with a friend, I said: "I notice I'm becoming defensive, and I think it's because your voice just got louder and sounded angry. I just want to talk about this topic. I'm not trying to persuade you in either direction."

Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. If saying, "this sounds really important to you," it doesn't mean I'm going to go along with your decision.

Step 3: Advocacy

When you sense your opponent/partner has expressed all her/ his energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that s/he's missed? Help clarify your position without minimizing her/his. For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. And I think I am. When I introduce problems with a project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. I don't mean to be a critic, though perhaps I sound like one. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."

Step 4: Problem-Solving

Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here. Ask your opponent/partner what s/he thinks might work. Whatever s/he says, find something you like and build on it. If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage. If you've been successful in centring, adjusting your attitude, and engaging with inquiry and useful purpose, building sustainable solutions will be easy.

Practice, Practice, Practice

The art of conversation is like any art—with continued practice you will acquire skill and ease.

Here are some additional tips and suggestions:

- A successful outcome will depend on two things: how you are and what you say. How you are (centred, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.
- Acknowledge emotional energy—yours and your partner's—and direct it toward a useful purpose.
- Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.
- Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help your opponent/partner come back to centre.
- Don't assume your opponent/partner can see things from your point of view.
- Practice the conversation with a friend before holding the real one.
- Mentally practice the conversation. See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you are hoping for.

How Do I Begin?

Here are a few conversation openers

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?

- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)? If the person says, "Sure, let me get back to you," follow up with him.
- I think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas about how to _____.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

Write a possible opening for your conversation here: