

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Conflict is not about who is right or wrong.
If the conflict is bothering you then it is yours to resolve.

Difficult Conversations, Stone, Patton and Heen (1999) point out that each conversation is about three things: what really happened, how you feel about what happened, and what this situation says about your identity (how worthy, competent or lovable you think you are).

Choose your Battles!

- Is this an opportunity to better a situation or relationship?
- What is the benefit of having a conversation with the other party?
- What are the potential risks?
- Do the benefits outweigh the risks?
- Does the situation truly impact me or am I just making it my business?

Rules

1. Getting clearer about how you are thinking and feeling will tell you whether this is a hot-button issue for you.

Tip: Fold a piece of paper in half lengthwise. In the right-hand column, describe the situation. Then in the left-hand column write down what you are thinking, feeling and not saying. Reflect upon the following questions: what was your intention -- what were you trying to accomplish? Did you achieve the results you intended? Why didn't you say what was in the left-hand column? What do you think the other person would put in their left-hand column? What were the costs for the payoffs of operating this way?

2. If you decide not to move forward, let it go! Do not bring it up for future ammunition.

You may decide to wait and see if a pattern develops. If the pattern is starting to get to you, then have the conversation. Use recent examples and say that you feel it seems to be a pattern.

3. Be as timely as possible with the conversation. Let enough time go by to speak objectively without emotion but don't let too much time go by so that the other person can't remember what you are talking about.

Do your homework

- Do you know the other person's intentions?
- Ask yourself why this bothers you. Identify your own triggers so you can respond calmly.
- Ask yourself if you can be a leader and take the high road. For example, the other person may become very emotional – can you remain calm and acknowledge their feelings?

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Rules

1. If your answer is “yes, I know the other person’s intentions,” then you are not ready to have the conversation. Even if you think you know, you are judging the other person's actions and assigning meaning to them.
2. Don't let your emotions get the best of you.
3. If emotions are high or you don't feel safe in initiating a conversation with the conflicting party, consider a third-party mediator.

Mentally prepare for “the talk”

- “Go out before staying in”-Going out means letting the other party explain their side first. They won't be able to hear what you have to say until they feel you have heard them.
- Seek mutually beneficial solutions: when people feel listened to and acknowledged they generally relax and lower their defenses.
- Ask clarifying and open ended questions.

Rules

1. Stay open, leave judgment out of it and truly work to understand the intentions and purpose of what the other person is trying to communicate. Validating the other party's concerns shows you are willing to collaborate.
2. Separate the issue from the person-this will help folks stay away from personal attacks.
3. Always treat the other party with respect.

Tip: If you feel your temperature rising, take a deep breath and imagine a force field around you. Let the words of the other person hit that force field and dissipate. This will give you time to count to slowly count to five before reengaging. This can be tough to do but it works! If things get out of hand consider postponing the conversation.

The Talk

Now it's time to engage in the conversation. First, you must invite the other party into the conversation.

Possible Openings

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work better together. Would that be okay? Mutually, decide when and where.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I think we have different perceptions about_____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I've noticed a reoccurring disagreement we seem to have and would like to figure out why this happens.

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Eight Step Checklist to a Successful Talk!

1. Invite the other party into the conversation: Write your opening sentence(s).

2. Clarify your purpose: What are my hopes and my positive intentions? Mutually agree on purpose.

3. Inquiry: What are some open ended questions I can ask to better understand the other person's story? Remember-let them tell their story first.

4. Acknowledgement: How will I remember to acknowledge and summarize what the other person is saying?

5. Advocacy: What is my story? How will I keep it succinct, respectful and non-judgmental? How I describe how it impacted me?

6. Jointly design solutions: Where do we agree? Where are the disagreements? How can we move forward? Where are some points of action? What is my preferred outcome?

7. Sustain: Should we monitor progress and discuss again?

8. Center: How will I stay centered, objective and focused on the purpose?