

# Preparing for Difficult Conversations

## Objective

To identify techniques to prepare for a difficult conversation to improve your communication skills.

## What to Know

Whether you need to give negative feedback or bring up an uncomfortable topic, remember that often it is more important how you say something than what you say. When you find yourself preparing for a difficult conversation, try this four-step process.

**1. Ask yourself three questions.** Before you say something you think will be difficult for the other person to hear, ask yourself:

- Does this need to be said?
- Does this need to be said by me?
- Does this need to be said by me, now?

**2. Consider time and place.** Usually, it is best to speak with the person privately. Under certain circumstances you might need to call someone out in front of others; for example, if a supervisee is rude or inappropriate. So, decide on a time and place that will allow you to have the conversation in a relaxed setting. This shows respect for the other person, and it makes it easier to have the conversation.

**3. How do you want to communicate?** Choose how you want to communicate based on the following:

- your personal relationship with the other person
- the circumstances
- your strengths and weaknesses

If possible, have a helpful attitude. For example, you might ask for permission to share something you have noticed or share how you have made a similar mistake in the past. This approach can lower the other person's defensiveness and get them to really listen. Be sure to give the person the chance to express themselves and explain how they see the situation.

**4. Continue learning.** Good communication takes practice to improve. So, after you have a difficult conversation, take time to reflect, analyze, and deconstruct the conversation so you can improve your communication skills. You might ask yourself the following questions.

- Did the conversation go well?
- Did I accomplish my goal?
- What worked?
- What would I do differently?

## What to Do

Answer the following questions to prepare for the difficult conversation.

Who will be involved in the conversation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the problem or issue you want to talk about? Describe.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Does something actually need to be said? Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are you the best person to have this conversation? Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Is now the best time to have this conversation? Why or why not?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

If not now, when? \_\_\_\_\_

Where is the best place to have this conversation? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your thoughts and feelings about the problem or issue? About the other person?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How do you think the other person would describe the problem, issue, or situation?

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How do you want to communicate? Is it best to do it in person? By phone? By email? Explain.

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How do you think the person will respond when you have the conversation?

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What is contributing to your feelings about this situation? Be specific.

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What might be contributing to the other person's behavior?

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If this is an ongoing problem, what is the trigger?

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What is your goal or the ideal result of the conversation? Describe.

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Now, imagine having the conversation. When and where will you likely have the most success?  
Be very specific: time of day, location, and so forth.

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Will the person be more receptive if you schedule a meeting? Why or why not?

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Now, write down what you want to say. For example, you might include the following:

“When you \_\_\_\_\_ (*specific behavior*), I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
(*use an emotion, not a judgment*) because \_\_\_\_\_ (*describe the impact of  
the behavior*).”

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What are some potential responses? From the other person? How will you respond?

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The other person might become defensive, so when you are actually having the conversation, listen and reflect what you hear with empathy. Then, repeat, “When you..., I feel..., because...” Once the person takes some degree of responsibility, you can move to problem-solving.

Now that you have prepared for the difficult conversation, you are ready to have it! Once you have had the conversation, answer the reflection questions.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How did the difficult conversation go? Did it go well? Why or why not?

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Did you accomplish your goal? Why or why not?

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What worked?

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What would you do differently?

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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