

Prep before a Difficult Conversation

There are times when you know you should talk to someone, but you don't. Maybe you've tried and it went badly. Or maybe you fear that talking will only make the situation worse. You need 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.

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?
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? 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 horribly 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 and positivity.
5. How have you contributed to the problem? What could you have done differently?

No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy. Breathe, center, and continue to notice when you become off center—and choose to return again. By choosing the calm, centered state, you'll help your opponent/partner to be more centered, too.

Inquiry: Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Try to learn as much as possible about your co-worker's point of view. Watch body language and listen for unspoken energy as well. Let your co-worker talk until they are 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.

Acknowledgment: Acknowledgment means showing that you've heard and understood.

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

Advocacy: When you sense your co-worker has expressed all his thoughts on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that he's missed? Help clarify your position without minimizing 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."

Problem-Solving: Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here. Ask your opponent/partner what he thinks might work. Whatever he says, find something you like and build on it. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage.

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 think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this. 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.