

3 Tips for Tough Conversations

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No one wants to have a tough conversation – that just goes with the territory!

However, avoiding the conversations we know–we–should–have–but–really–don’t–want–to, can really backfire:

- We assume the other person knows what we want to say or what we want them to say, but it turns out they really don’t.
- We spend a lot of time rehearsing our anger (by talking with friends, colleagues, loved ones) so when we do bring up the topic, we have a surprising head of steam come spilling out – seemingly from “nowhere.”
- We wait so long, the energy or memory is gone, but the feelings and stories linger on. Our trust is diminished, so we start to act differently. The other person picks up on our changed behaviour, and it feeds their own story–making mill. They start to act differently and that confirms our own suspicions that they are not the person we once knew!

We also carry around a list in our heads of the difficult conversations we should have (but are avoiding). Ask yourself these questions:

- Is there a person in my life with whom I seem to have repeated strained relations with?
- Is there a conversation with a loved one I’ve been avoiding because I think it might hurt her or his feelings?
- Is there an authority figure in my life (eg. a boss or some other person who I perceive has “power over” me) with whom I know I should have a conversation with, but am afraid to?

As you reflect on these questions, do you start to notice there might be a conversation that comes to mind? You know you are on the right track if you think of the possibility of having that conversation, and your stomach turns into a knot, releases some butterflies or reacts in some similar way!

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The good news is if you can identify which conversations need your attention, you are halfway there! It can be so easy to ignore difficult conversations and hope they go away on their own. But really, we know – and often the other person knows – things really are not ok.

Over the years in my work at the Centre for Conflict Resolution at the Justice Institute, I've coached hundreds of people through preparing for difficult conversations. I've also helped facilitate many difficult conversations, as both a community and workplace mediator.

From those experiences, I've culled Three Top Tips to help you navigate a difficult conversation. Difficult conversations are, by their nature, challenging. However, I am confident if you follow these three tips, your conversations will be better than if you had not followed them at all.

Tip 1: Speak in Observational Language

Observational language is specific, action-oriented and behavioural. It is speaking about what our eyes see, what our ears hear – and leaving out what our minds say or interpret about what our senses sense.

When I ask my coaching clients what they see as the specific behaviours and incidents that have prompted the need for a conversation – I often get responses like:

- “She (or he) is a bully (is abusive, a jerk, insensitive...)
- “I wouldn't want to hurt his/her feelings.”
- “He (she) never listens anyway. She's got all the power so can do whatever she wants – and does!”

These are not descriptions of the situation but actually interpretations of behaviours. And there are usually plenty of assumptions about what we believe the other person's thoughts, feelings and intentions are.

Nothing gets people's hackles up quicker than our assuming things about them or using a negative label to characterize their behaviour. The other reacts defensively, we chalk up their reaction as unreasonable and the conversation disintegrates without resolution. We get stuck.

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How do we break out of the cycle?

It begins by training ourselves to see “what is” more objectively. We all come with our biases, prejudices and perspectives; that will never change. We are born story-makers and we need our experiences to help make sense of the world and look for patterns to make our decisions.

Take notice of the incidents and behaviours that contribute to the need to have the difficult conversation. Work back to the other person’s original behaviours or actions. Those behaviours and actions are what you want to discuss with the person.

A behaviour is something you can see – as if a camera sees it.

Try to describe the incident or behaviours on paper. What is it you really want to talk about? See if you can separate the interpretations of behaviours you have from the “facts” or descriptive language.

Taking the time to try to pinpoint what the behaviours are will help you get more clear for bringing up what you want to say. This takes practice – which brings me to my second tip.

Tip 2: Take Time to Practice

Just like you would for speeches, sports or dance performances, it is important to practice having a difficult conversation.

Yet somehow when it comes to having a difficult conversation, we seem to think we should have one when the “opportunity” arises. The problem with that strategy is either:

- the opportunity never arises
- the opportunity arises too long after the incident and the person can’t remember it (since it meant more to you than them, you’ve held on to a memory they’ve long discarded)
- the opportunity arises when we are not ready so we blurt out something which gets us into more hot water than before (and confirms for us that we should not have tried in the first place).

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Once people take the time to identify some specific behaviour and incident then practice how to speak about those observations, the conversations always go better than anticipated.

I've witnessed this principle in action time and again as a conflict and negotiation coach.

The most effective way to practice, I have seen, is role-playing. I recommend this to my clients and encourage them to role-play with someone before going into the "real" thing.

We all remember and learn better when we can act out what we learn. It's not enough to get this stuff in theory; we need support in practicing it as we apply it to the realities of our everyday challenges.

I've worked with so many people who get it in theory, but when we role-played, the rubber hits the road. What they thought they knew, they suddenly don't. They discover their difficult spots – and the tough conversation come to life. People always walk away with some gem that helps them in the actual conversation later.

Take the written descriptions you tried out in Tip 1 and try them out loud with a trusted friend. Listen for what you sound like. Play with the conversation. Make it feel natural. Notice if you are rushing ahead without a breath or are you allowing the other person to respond to you?

Then, have your conversational buddy be you and you be the other person. What do you sound like when you play it from this angle? How might the other person be receiving what you are intending on sending?

What are you discovering by practicing? How can that help you move through the difficult conversation?

Tip 3: Start out "Soft"

Research has shown that we transmit how a whole conversation is going to go in our first three minutes (see John Gottman's work).

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In my own experience as a coach to role players trying to practice having their difficult conversations, I've also witnessed how a "soft start-up" can make a powerful difference.

If that is the case, it makes sense to put most of our emphasis on how we start those difficult discussions.

The most effective way I've seen people open collaborative conversations is to affirm the value of the person, their relationship or their work. Something that acknowledges the person in some way. It usually takes practice (see Tip 2) to identify what you can truly and genuinely appreciate about the other person.

It also helps to frame the problem within that first three minutes (or close to it). That also takes practice. Most people's first attempts sound like an attack. Remember, the problem is the behaviour, the situation, the observation (see Tip 1) but not the person. Unfortunately, we often go about problem-solving by making the person the problem.

Get around this by clarifying at the beginning that the conversation isn't about them, but about a behaviour or situation. We all have ample experience with someone making us the problem when they bring up a topic, probably from our earliest memories. No wonder we have heightened awareness about the minute it starts to feel like a conversation might go in "that" direction.

If, within the first three minutes, the other person thinks the conversation will be personal, they'll close the conversation before it even gets going.

And it really does happen that fast. In my own experiments at the Centre, I have stopped role players sometimes after only 10 seconds, and asked each role player: What is going on for you? Inevitably, if the intention is to dump or attack, the person feels it and is already defending and working out a counter-attack strategy.

That's just the nature of conflict.

Sometimes, participants in my class have also re-started their first minute many times over. Each time they re-start, they gain new awareness about what they thought their intention was vs what it is coming across as.

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So, when you take the time to practice with a learning partner, make sure you spend ample time practicing your first three minutes. As you stop and start, ask yourself what your real intentions are in having this conversation. See what new insights you come up with.

The clearer you are about your best intentions and the best intentions of the other, the softer your start will be.

I always love to hear success stories about how people managed their difficult conversations. If you have a story or tip to share, I'd love to hear from you!

Good luck!

This Report was prepared for you by Julia Menard of Menard Coaching, Mediating and & Training. Julia specializes in helping professionals navigate difficult conversations and develop their leadership abilities.

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"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." ... Charles Darwin