

Difficult Conversations: Our Top Tips

Difficult conversations are, by their very definition, difficult! And they take many forms: critical feedback, a difference of opinion, raising a contentious issue, unwelcome news or, really, any conversation where at least one party feels uncomfortable...

Many people have a strong aversion to having difficult conversations. They always have! These interactions are 'riskier' and may carry a strong emotional charge. The underlying fear for many is not just that they will find the experience of having the conversation awkward and uncomfortable, but that it may provoke an unpleasant reaction and even cause lasting damage to a relationship.

Anecdotally, we have learned that the evasion of difficult conversations is at an all-time peak! This is unsurprising. Interactions which were already likely to be challenging have been made even more so by having to have them, not in person, but over video call. Where once a bruised relationship might have been repaired by a conciliatory coffee, or a walk around the block, or a smile across the corridor, we are cut-off from our colleagues, unable to assess easily how they might be responding to our words and actions.

So, what can individuals who need to have difficult conversations at this time do?

Our Top Tips:

1. Have the conversation!

It can be tempting to avoid these conversations altogether. In the current environment, it is easy to rationalise reasons why now may not be the right time. But, we must continue to talk about what is hard and to treat others respectfully, as grown-ups, who deserve our honesty and transparency.

Avoiding these conversations will inevitably lead to unchallenged poor performance, undesirable results and the erosion of trust. Deferring until a later date will minimise the strength and relevance of your message and potentially cause resentment that you didn't communicate at the time when corrective measures could have been promptly taken.

But, this does not mean that we should not be thoughtful and sensitive to the pressures and stresses of this environment. A difficult backdrop

for a difficult conversation just means we must take more time and care in planning our conversation, not abandoning it entirely.

2. Register your discomfort and plan accordingly

If you are feeling uncomfortable about having a conversation, you usually have good reason to! Listen to your discomfort and take it as a cue that you will need to invest time and energy in making sure you do this well. Do not try and wing it!

(Conversely, if you know on an intellectual level that a conversation is likely to be challenging for the other party and yet you are not feeling nervous about it, consider whether maybe you should be....Have you considered what the impact of your words is likely to be on the other party? How might this play out over the longer term? Perhaps consider whether some more work on your side is warranted...).

3. Give notice

Delivering a difficult message with no forewarning may feel like an ambush. Consider providing some notice. This can be a simple phone or video call which sets the topic in context and conveys the tone you want to set.

e.g. "We need to have a conversation about X so I am going to find some time in both our diaries to do this."

This gives the other party some time to consider the topic in advance of your conversation and means that it will be 'top of mind' when you meet. It sets your difficult conversation in the sphere of an issue to be solved together as opposed to a random 'attack' from one to another.

4. Cut the small talk

A common – but misguided – approach to starting a tricky conversation is to bulk out the front-end with small talk and niceties before switching to the meat of the message.

In our experience this is a risky strategy. The person you are talking to is likely to take a very mixed message from the interaction. *"They started off casual and friendly, but then said this very critical thing, where do I stand with them?"*

At its heart, it is not a particularly humane approach, salving our own discomfort or conscience with superficial small talk before delivering a killer blow!

An alternative could be this: call it what it is – a difficult conversation. And then get on with it.

“This is likely to be a difficult conversation for us both, which is why I wanted to find some dedicated time to have it.....”

5. Planning and structuring your message – aim for concision and clarity

Plan your messages well to ensure they are concise and clear. Your objective is not necessarily to be agreed with, but to be clearly understood.

Structure is your friend – it will help you to keep clear, even if you feel nervous. It will also help the other party to understand the message you are delivering.

We would advocate structuring any important message using a clear, 3-step process –

Situation = what is the specific incident, event or issue that is under discussion? This has to be where you start so that the other party can focus their attention on this specific item. This will lend your message credibility as opposed to talking in generalities which the other party may not recognise.

Impact = what is the impact of this? On a task, reputation, relationship....? It needs to be clear why this discussion *matters*.

Modification = what should be done differently? What are your expectations of what should happen next?

6. Stay with it, even if it's hard

While we can plan carefully what we will say and do in these conversations, we cannot fully plan for the response we might receive on the other side.

The other party may get angry or upset. The temptation in this event may be to bring the conversation to a swift close at this point. We would recommend instead, allowing space for that reaction and acknowledging it. *“I can see that you feel strongly about this. Would you like to take a moment? When you are ready, please tell me more if you would”*.

Give the individual space to gather themselves, allow them to be upset or angry and switch from talking to listening carefully to what they have to say.

Crucially, try to avoid feeling irritated or scared by an emotional reaction. It is normal and understandable if somebody has received a difficult message. It is your responsibility to handle their reactions in a respectful and humane way.

Staying focused in these ways on the specific problem that needs to be understood and addressed, helps you to do two important things at the same time: maintain your ongoing relationship and resolve immediate concerns.

Communication in 2020 and beyond - let's make it better

Feel free to share these thoughts as widely as you like

Amy Dempsey & Alan Robertson

dempseycoates.com talk-wise.com