



5 Tips for Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations typically involve things such as performance reviews, managing up, budgets, professionalism, and the like. During the Covid-19 crisis, not only are these conversations magnified, but many managers and leaders are laying off employees, experiencing significant budget cuts, and working in challenging environments. All of this with incredibly high uncertainty. Compounding the difficulty, most of these conversations are over the phone, Zoom, or email because we cannot gather in person.

There are no magic words that can be sprinkled over these scenarios to make the difficulty disappear. No matter how skills, experienced, and talented we are, none of us are fully prepared for what's happening. But there are a few practices and approaches that can help ease the challenge of having tough conversations.

Rather than Jumping Right in, Try Taking a Breath

Breath in. Breath out. Allowing a deep, full breath slows our reaction time, giving us more time to be intentional. Even more surprising, when we take a breath, the other person may do the same. This helps us all be less reactive and get our conversation started on the right foot.

Rather than Bypassing Hardship or Uncertainty, Try Witnessing “What Is”

When things are tough, we often want to put a “positive spin” on it so that it does not look so bad. This crisis has created some tough realities: layoffs, pay cuts, uncertainty, long hours for essential workers, etc. When the news of these first land, there is almost no “positive spin” that can help. But just witnessing what is and being with the reality in a non-judgmental way helps build trust and connection.





Rather than Avoiding Emotions, Try Acknowledging Them

Many don't want to acknowledge others' strong feelings. We're afraid we may get sucked into a murky emotional realm and we'll never get back to the task-at-hand. Ironically, when we allow a few minutes for strong emotions, we increase our ability to focus. We don't need to fix it. We don't need a long discussion. We just need to see and create space for the strong emotions and they will pass more quickly.

Rather than Looking at It from Your Usual Point of View, Go to the Balcony

As humans, we are prepared to look at what's right in front of us and to assume that's all there is. When someone else seems like they just don't get it, use that as a reminder to go to the balcony. Imagine yourself rising above the situation and looking at as many pieces as you can. If you don't see anything new, ask the person who "doesn't get it" what you're missing. They are probably happy to tell you, and you may gain some valuable insight.

Rather than Trying to Soften the Blow, Try Being Direct

Difficult conversations are hard for both parties and in our attempt to make things easier, we are sometimes indirect. This can create unintended misunderstandings that only make things harder. When delivering bad news, try being as clear and direct as possible. Your staff will likely appreciate your honesty and you'll need fewer follow up conversations.

The challenges posed by Covid-19 are extreme -- health, economics, social isolation, job loss, uncertainty, home schooling -- and it's arrived all at once. There are no easy answers, but there is a way through. So, take a breath, witness what it is, acknowledge the emotions, and take some perspective. Being present and genuine as you talk with your team will go a long way to helping everyone get through it together.

TO RECAP:

- ▶ Take a deep breath before you start speaking.
- ▶ Acknowledge what is happening, without judgment.
- ▶ Verbally acknowledge emotions.
- ▶ Be direct and consistent.