

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Conflict Management Resources

THIS RESOURCE WAS PREPARED FOR VIASPORT BRITISH COLUMBIA BY NOW WHAT FACILITATION, A TEAM OF FACILITATORS WHO HAVE EXTENSIVE EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE AND MEETING FACILITATION.

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

From time to time we all need to say something to another person that is difficult. Being able to do this can be stressful while at the same time is the foundation for managing conflict which makes it crucial to the relationship. Here are some tips to make preparing for and engaging in the conversation a little easier.

CONSIDER HOW YOU ARE COMMUNICATING: VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Verbal communication includes words that are spoken, as well as written words—including emails, texts, social media posts and written letters.

Non-verbal communication is any communication that does not involve words. What we know is that most communication is done through body language and only a small part of communication involves the words that we write or say. Eye-rolling, tone of voice, and posture are all non-verbal communicators. They say more to us than the words that we are using or writing when we are trying to figure out how somebody feels.

In managing conflict, face-to-face verbal communication is not generally problematic, as we can see non-verbal cues and consider them, which helps with avoiding or working through disagreement. Phone communication is also verbal, and, although not as effective as talking face-to-face, we can still hear tone and engage in back-and-forth dialogue. For individuals trying to resolve conflict, it is written verbal communication that has been the most devastating.

In conflict, face-to-face communication can be scary or emotional but is crucial. Using the following concepts, you can prepare for a difficult face to face conversation.

CONSIDER YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

No one has the power to read minds, however when we are having an interpersonal dispute, we are faced with the task of trying to understand what others are thinking. We do this so we can determine our own actions. Often, we make assumptions which lead us to misinterpret others' motivations. Assumptions are what we believe to be true but are not based on fact. Assumptions are made using the selected facts we take from a situation. Assumptions inform our decisions—we analyze information and draw conclusions about reality based on them.

There are two ways that help with managing assumptions.

- Be curious, not judgmental. Slowing things down and getting curious about what is motivating the other person's actions.
- Assume positive intent. Believing the best in those around you gives you and them the confidence that you will be able to resolve the issue together.

SET THE STAGE

By spending some time considering how to create optimal conditions for the conversation ahead of time you will set the stage for success. Here are some ideas:

How will you invite the other person to the conversation?

Try email. By inviting the other person this way you are allowing them a chance to emotionally and mentally prepare. Be careful not to go into too much detail in your email. Here is an example:

Hi Lucy I'd like to see if we can reach a better understanding about being on the team together. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my thoughts. Are you free for coffee this week? Let me know when it works best for you. Thanks, Sam.

1. Where and when will you meet?

Consider a neutral and private location at a time when you don't have to rush off afterward.

2. How will you manage emotion?

Some people cry, others raise their voice. Regardless of your temperament they are called tricky conversations for a reason. Try box breathing or any deep breathing exercise before you meet in order to manage nerves.

USE A TRICKY CONVERSATION STARTER SCRIPT

The following script, modeled after Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication process, takes you through five steps to poise your conversation for success while creating a dialogue that is free of blame or shame.

1. **Acknowledge.** Thank the other person for being willing to talk.
2. **Describe.** "I heard . . ." "I saw . . ." Describe the problem starting with "I."
3. **Feeling.** "I feel . . ." Describe how the problem is making you feel.
4. **Need.** Explain what you need to feel better about the problem. "I really want to get to the bottom of this. I am hoping we can figure it out together."
5. **Request.** "Would you be willing to share your thoughts?" Invite a bigger conversation

Pay particular attention to the third point—FEELING. At this point you need to really stop and think about how the behaviour that you describe in Point 2 made you feel. It can be disappointed, sad, hurt, left out. Saying, "*I feel that when you _____, it is not fair*" is not describing what you're feeling. Many people get tripped up on this point, but it is crucial to the whole conversation.

IDEAS FOR DURING THE CONVERSATION

- Be descriptive and avoid ambiguous language. Eg: "I saw you roll your eyes" rather than "You were disrespectful."
- Clarify and ask questions. There is no shame in bringing a piece of paper with you with some examples of great open-ended questions (that can't be answered with yes or no) to have at your fingertips during the conversation. Bringing notes shows that you care about making things right. Here are some examples:

"I really want to get to the bottom of this. Help me to understand" or "What does that look like?" "What's on your mind?" or "What does that mean to you?" "What am I missing?" or "Tell me more."
- Show empathy. Empathy is being able to relate to another person by reflecting on a time when you have had similar feelings.
- Avoid shame and blame. This only promotes negative feelings and inhibits problem solving

EXERCISE

Prepare for a difficult conversation that you need to have by answering the following questions and developing a script. You can use a personal example or one of the scenarios below:

1. What are my fears and apprehensions about this conversation?
2. Why is this conversation important to me?
3. Why might this conversation be important to the other person?
4. What are the key issues?
5. Assuming positive intent – what is their intention behind their behaviour?
6. What is important in this dispute to me?
7. What might be important to the other person? Why do I think this?
8. What assumptions am I making?
9. What are some possible negatives coming out of the conversation?
10. How can I set the stage for success? Where and when will we meet?
11. How will I invite the other person to the conversation? Email, face-to-face, text or phone?

Fill in the below five statements for your conversation starter script:

Acknowledge:

Describe:

Feeling:

Need:

Request:

PRACTICE SCENARIOS

- a) Two athletes on a team just don't seem to get along and their inability to relate or dislike for one another is affecting team cohesion as they are regularly dissing each other to their teammates and argue or name call in the change room from time to time. The team is beginning to feel divided as they take the side of their respective friend.
- b) A coach hears the club head coach berating athletes during a training session. The coach tells them they are worthless and unable to listen to basic instruction and aren't good enough to compete. The club coach knows that the club head coach is dealing with some personal issues that may be affecting her judgment.
- c) You sit on a club board. A fellow board member likes to talk about politics and often texts you articles showcasing their views. You don't not care that much about politics and find your colleague's political views to be a little extreme. You like your colleague and have thought of just pretending to agree or telling them you would rather talk about other subjects. You suspect that they will be insulted if you go with the second option.