

# Managing Difficult Conversations

In general we would rather avoid difficult conversations and even when we are brave enough to start one we often back away by circling around a subject and hiding behind generalisations. On the whole we worry too much about 'saying the right thing', fearing that if we say the wrong thing we will make it worse. In reality though, it's not saying anything that more often makes things worse. If you do say something clumsily you can always apologise and try again. The thought of having the conversation is usually scarier than the conversation itself.

## 1 Prepare to be direct and emotionally courageous

Before you have a difficult conversation, take the time you need to prepare so that you can be direct about the subject in hand and be honest about your own and others' emotional states. It is OK to admit to frustration, anger and sadness yourself and it helps others to do the same which immediately diffuses the charge of a difficult conversation. This is because these emotions will be present anyway and it is more unsettling when they are not acknowledged. If you do admit your own feelings, be sure to own them by saying "*I feel*" and not "*you have made me feel*". [Non-violent communication](#) techniques offer a useful framework for resolving conflict. This framework is based on the assumption that people come into conflict because they have adopted different strategies for getting their needs met and these strategies have clashed.

## 2 Prepare the context of the conversation

Think carefully about where to meet and the message this sends. You may want to avoid power dynamics by choosing a neutral place. Be positive in your invitation to have the conversation; state your intention to resolve a problem, rather than simply to discuss it. State your intention to understand the perspective of the other person and to work or think together to move things along.

## 3 Prepare your state of mind

Anticipating difficult conversations raises our blood pressure and heart rate and quickens our breathing. We feel agitated and tense. Take time before the conversation to quiet your mind by going for a walk or using [breathing techniques](#) to lower your arousal level so that you can think more clearly and be less emotionally reactive during the conversation. Acknowledge that you are about to do a difficult thing. You would prepare thoroughly for an interview or exam; give this the same time and thought. Seek to understand a complex problem rather than to go into battle.

**"Remember not only to say the right thing in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment." ~ Benjamin Franklin**

## 4 Prepare what you want to say

Think in advance about what you want to say. Prepare to be honest about your own discomfort, to state your intention for a positive outcome and to tell the person that you genuinely seek to understand their perspective on things. Also prepare to directly and specifically describe any problems that you see and the implication if these are not resolved. Try to stay with the facts as you see them rather than inferring the other person's thoughts, feelings or intentions.

## 5 Prepare the tone you will speak with

Tone of voice conveys even more than the words we use so think about this too and be careful that your tone and your body language don't contradict your message. If you seek to understand and resolve, make sure that your tone does not accuse or condemn. To get some perspective on how you are coming across you could practise with a trusted friend, a family member, or with an MCCN staff member.

## 6 Listen as well as talk

Don't let your difficult conversation become a difficult lecture! Conversations are a two-way exchange involving questions and answers and you'll need to go with the flow rather than sticking to a script. Keep in mind (or in a notebook) the points that you want to get across but be fluid about how and when you speak and when you listen. It may help to let the other person blow off steam about the situation before the conversation can move on. Demonstrate that you are really listening by paraphrasing back what the person has said to check your understanding, rather than launching into a defence. In some situations it may be very hard not to react emotionally, especially if your words or intentions have been misunderstood. Rather than reacting to the misinterpretation, try to clarify your real intentions. It may be appropriate to apologise for any suffering your clumsiness may have caused, while holding on to your original intention.

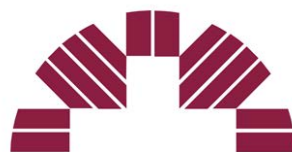
## 7 Objectify the problem. Co-create the solution

One technique to open up constructive dialogue is to describe 'the problem' objectively as a third party which you and the other person have come to discuss solutions to. So, make 'the problem' the 'bad guy'.

Example: "I know we are both frustrated when the trash doesn't get taken out; what can we do together to solve that?"

VS

"You never take out the trash and it is driving me crazy, just do your part around here!"



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# Possible openings

- ◆ I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together better.
- ◆ 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 need your help with \_\_\_\_\_. Can we talk about it (soon)? If they say, "Sure, let me get back to you," follow up with them.
- ◆ I think we have different perceptions about \_\_\_\_\_. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- ◆ I've noticed a recurring argument (conflict, disagreement, problem) we seem to have. I'd like to talk about why that happens.
- ◆ I'd like to see if we can reach a better understanding about \_\_\_\_\_. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.
- ◆ **Write your opening here:**

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# A Six-Step Checklist for Holding Powerful Conversations

The following checklist will help guide you in holding powerful and purposeful conversations. Use it before and during the conversation to help keep your purpose clear, the conversation safe, and your preferred outcome in sight.

1. **Center** : How will I remind myself to center before the conversation and to re-center periodically?

2. **Purpose** : What is my purpose? Is it a useful purpose?

3. **Inquiry** : What are some honest, open-ended questions I might ask my partner? What do I need to learn about how s/he sees this situation?

**4. Acknowledgment:** What feelings might surface that I can acknowledge? How will I remember to summarize?

**5. Advocacy:** What is my primary message? How will I tell my story while maintaining a respectful and non-judgmental stance?

**6. Move to Action/Build Agreement:** What are possible scenarios my partner might offer? What will I suggest? What is my preferred outcome?

## REFERENCES

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**About the Author:** Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, stories and practices on the connection between aikido, conflict, and living a purposeful life. As the founder of Power & Presence Training, Judy specializes in unique workshops on conflict, communication, and creating a more positive work environment. Judy is a black belt in aikido and chief instructor of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH, USA. Subscribe to Judy's free award-winning e-newsletter, *Ki Moments*, at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>

**Note:** You're welcome to reprint all or parts of this article (including "About the Author" or a link to my Website). If you have any questions, send me a note at [judy@judyringer.com](mailto:judy@judyringer.com).

## Resources

*The Magic of Conflict*, by Thomas F. Crum ([www.aikiworks.com](http://www.aikiworks.com))

*Difficult Conversations*, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen ([www.triadcgi.com](http://www.triadcgi.com))

*Crucial Conversations*, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler ([www.crucialconversations.com](http://www.crucialconversations.com))

**FAQ about Conflict**, by Judy Ringer <http://www.JudyRinger.com>



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