

Difficult Conversations

By Justin Pinkerman

If you've ever had to fire someone, reject a request for a raise, or give a negative performance review, then you have firsthand knowledge of the stresses surrounding difficult conversations. These conversations are filled with tension, tend to be emotional, and threaten to blow up if the wrong words are chosen. Anticipating the unpleasantness, we are tempted to handle them indirectly or avoid them altogether. However, as author Holly Weeks writes, "dodging issues, appeasing difficult people, and ignoring antagonisms is costly for managers and companies alike." In her article, "Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations," Ms. Weeks gives instruction on navigating difficult conversations. Her advice is immensely valuable for leaders facing tough talks.

KEYS TO NAVIGATING TOUGH TALKS

1) Clarity

In an effort to soften the blow, some leaders mislead difficult conversations and unintentionally create confusion. For instance, to avoid seeming overly stern, a leader may adopt a friendly, non-confrontational tone while attempting to deliver a sharp and serious message. The mismatch between the leader's posture and the leader's talking points leaves the listener feeling confused.

At other times, leaders simply talk around problems or euphemize to the extent that their core message loses its meaning. When initiating difficult conversations, a leader should use honest and direct language. Although it may not seem easy, clarity will help to facilitate resolution of the problematic conversation.

Preparation Tip: Before the conversation, write down the brief content of your message and devise a strategy for delivering it.

2) Neutrality

Difficult conversations serve as emotional pressure cookers. When personal grudges and past injuries exist, a tough talk may unleash a torrent of anger and hurt. A leader must stay neutral and refuse to allow negative emotions to derail a difficult conversation.

While you cannot control the emotions of the person you're speaking to, you can make an effort to defuse them. Monitor your nonverbal messaging by adopting calm facial expressions, body language, and voice intonation. A poised demeanor goes a long way in draining the negative emotion out of a challenging conversation.

Preparation Tip: Before the conversation, take mental inventory of the mannerisms you adopt when angered. Awareness beforehand will help you to avoid provoking your listener with negative nonverbal signs in the heat of the moment.

3) Temperance

Avoid escalating a difficult conversation by moderating the use of extreme language. When speaking, phrase your ideas with words that convey your intent with respect. Heed the words of Wendell Johnson: "Always and never are two words you should always remember never to use."

Preparation Tip: Role-play a difficult conversation with a friend to rehearse your lines. Although it may seem awkward, it's the best preparation for a tough talk.

About the Author

An abstract of Holly Weeks' article, "Taking the Stress Out of Stressful Conversations," is available through [Harvard Business Publishing](#). In addition, Ms. Weeks has recently released a new book entitled, *Failure to Communicate: How Conversations Go Wrong and What You Can Do to Right Them*.

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