

# How to Have Difficult Conversations

The trouble with ‘difficult conversations’ is that it’s hard to have them when you’re feeling upset. If you do, the chances are you’ll blurt out your emotions and say things you later regret.

So how can you say what you really want to say, in a way that someone will listen, without them flying off the handle? And, how can you turn these situations into a positive opportunity?

As you know, everything in life is perception and intention.

Perception is simply how we make sense of our past, learned by our fight or flight responses. Intention is our true intention, what we really intend.

As human beings, we hate uncertainty, so we want to prove ourselves right.

When we can’t predict the outcome, it’s scary. In evolutionary terms, to predict is to survive. So, we must first accept that everything we believe is a bias of our perception. This is true, not just some of the time, but all of the time.

As in evolution, the most successful species are those that adapt. And we can’t adapt if we’re not open to the possibility we might be wrong.

We often go into a difficult conversation trying to prove the other person wrong. But we should remember, of course, that they’re trying to do exactly the same thing!

Conflict is set up so we each try to win, not to learn. So, we should start with a clear intention to learn something from a difficult conversation. And then, if our intention is pure, we have a much better chance of it going well.

Ultimately, we should try to start difficult conversations, with questions not answers.

## Here are my Top 10 suggestions around difficult conversations:

1. Don't think of it as a difficult conversation.  
If we start a conversation expecting it to be difficult, expecting a hostile response, we're likely to begin defensively which will set up the angry vortex right up front. So try not to anticipate their reaction.
2. Know your intention.  
Be really clear what you want to achieve. Are you trying to make someone feel bad? Make them understand? Change their behaviour? Or apologize?
3. Keep it simple and clean.  
Don't give mixed messages. For example, don't smile to try to make a difficult message more palatable. Mixed messages usually make things worse.
4. Say your piece once.  
Don't keep repeating a message. Once you've said your piece, stop. When we get upset, we often repeat our argument to make it more forceful. But it has the opposite effect. Say it once and then stop talking.
5. Listen without judgement.  
Nerves and anger can make us stop listening. Give them time to speak freely.
6. Ask questions.  
You're trying to understand where they are coming from. For example:  
(a) If someone isn't performing well or is behaving badly, ask 'What would you do if you were in my shoes?'  
(b) Feedback their emotional state, as in 'You seem very angry. Tell me about that.'
7. Repeat back what they've said to show that you've been listening.  
This is what Customer Service departments are taught. And it works.
8. Always try to find a win-win outcome.  
No-one wants to feel they've lost. Help them to end up in a good place.

9. Speak slowly.

Try not to look or sound angry - keep your voice and face relaxed. When we get upset we often speed up our speech, which can make us look out of control. We want to look and sound reasonable, so slow down.

Try this breathing exercise beforehand: breathe in for a count of three and out for a count of three, then hold your breath for 10 seconds. Repeat this three times. It lowers your heart rate and really helps slow you down.

10. Make it sound like their idea.

Even if you have a practical solution, don't suggest it right away. Let them think they have come up with a solution all on their own.

If we can learn to have difficult conversations in a calm, open way, we show that we are someone with clear boundaries, who is both strong and reasonable.

I wish you the very best of luck.



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