



# Handling Difficult Conversations

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## *Hello*

We all need to have them and we seldom relish the prospect. I am talking about those difficult conversations. The conversation you need to have when someone has violated your personal boundaries. Or the conversation you need to have when you want to put forward a really great idea to someone known as a defensive boss. Or the conversation you need to have with a significant other when he or she has done something that really hurt you.

Before you engage in, what you suspect will be a challenging conversation, here are some points to consider:

1. Ground yourself. Centre yourself. Breathe. Remind yourself what you stand for: What are the values and principles you stand for? Who do you want to be? How do you want to come across? Decide on these before you even start the conversation. You want to act, not react. Reacting means that you allow whatever the other person says or does to determine how you speak and act in response. And that means you are giving them power over you. You are allowing them to determine your response. Take responsibility for your own actions. Act from your own person, don't react because of something someone else said or did.
2. Remind yourself of the purpose of the conversation and the outcome you want to achieve. You need to be focused on the outcome because otherwise too much effort can go into preserving your ego, or defending yourself, rather than achieving the outcome you want.
3. Keep people and problems separate. By separating the person from the problem real issues can be dealt with, without damaging relationships.
4. Strategize before the conversation as to the best way to achieve the outcome you want.
5. Remind yourself not to take anything personally. Anything someone says or does is because of the way he or she interprets information. And we interpret information according to our own beliefs and value systems. So anything someone says or does is about them, not about you. Remind yourself of this.



6. We will interpret any communication we hear and see (that is, verbal and non-verbal communication) according to our values and beliefs. The other person will also interpret any communication they hear or see according to their beliefs and values. In order to get your message across the way you want to, communicate as simply, specifically, and clearly as possible. Leave as little room for alternative interpretations as you can. And that goes for body language and tone of voice too.

7. Before you respond to something someone says, check that you have understood the meaning correctly. So the first step may not be a response, it may be a paraphrasing and checking of the meaning behind the communication. Because we can miscommunicate due to putting our own spin on information according to our own values and beliefs, reflect back to the other person what you understood them to be saying. Use slightly different words to convey the meaning you have understood. For example, "If I understood you correctly, you are saying.....". Check out your interpretation of their communication. They in turn may pick up on what you are doing and check their understanding of your communication as well.
8. When we wake up in the morning and set about the day, we take our values and beliefs with us wherever we go. Our values and beliefs are like spectacles we put on through which we see the world. When you are communicating with anyone, remember that. See if you can put on a pair of glasses to understand the way in which they see the world. Try and understand their motivation and goals. Depending on whether the person believes people are trustworthy, the person values honesty, or the person has experience of people treating them badly, they will respond in their own unique way. If you know what hot buttons will set someone off, then don't use them.
9. Act assertively not submissively or aggressively. You are an adult and you have a right to express your views and ideas in a reasonable manner. Assertively means that you speak up and stand up for yourself while respecting the rights of the other party/parties. You put forward your needs and wants and opinions and ideas while respecting the self-esteem of others. You treat others and yourself with respect. So that means when someone says something degrading or demeaning about you, you then call them on it. If someone becomes aggressive or abusive towards you then point it out and refuse to accept it. If someone is clearly in a very emotional state and you want to discuss some important issue, leave them to calm down and discuss the issue at a later stage.
10. Listen first, talk second. You will not present your case effectively or solve a problem unless you understand where the other party is coming from. By listening carefully you will understand why the person is adopting his or her position. Active listening skills include restating, paraphrasing, and summarizing. If someone gets that you are trying to understand their interests, needs and concerns they will relax their defenses and be much more cooperative. Ask for the viewpoint of the other party/parties and reiterate that you respect his or her opinion.
11. Explore options together. Be open to the idea that a third position may exist and that you can get to this idea jointly.
12. Be flexible. These are not rules, they are guidelines.



Have a wonderful May

Best wishes

**Penny**