

How to Have a Difficult Conversation in 10 Steps

So you need to face up to an issue with someone close, or deal with a tricky situation at work. Having tough conversations need not be difficult with a bit of planning.

1) Solve the right problem: What is driving you to have this conversation? What do you want to change as a result? Don't tell your partner to stop leaving plates by the sofa, if the real problem is you feel your work tidying the house is ignored.

2) Think about the Conversation from different perspectives: If you were on the receiving end of the conversation what would you feel? How do you think they will react? If you were advising a friend in the same situation what would you tell them to do?

3) Be Clear on Outputs: Make sure it is easy for the other person to understand what you want to change as a result of the conversation.

4) Be Clear on What Impression you want to leave: What are the 2 or 3 things you want the other party to have left the conversation thinking? (ie "I understand what x is saying, they do have a point", rather than – "what on earth was that about?"

5) Keep it Positive

Take time to see the positive in the other party, or the situation, and use this as a starting point to build.

6) Don't Get Emotional: Try not to get emotional, particularly if the other party is either emotional or unsettled by emotion. State your views succinctly, and clearly leaving time for response before you jump back in.

Remember their perception of the situation is just as valid as yours. You will not resolve things unless you really understand their side. If things get heated, use an excuse to take a time out.

7) Keep Factual:

Use facts, don't twist them to support your argument – this will only cause friction. How you feel is a fact, so phrases like "when you do x, it makes me feel frustrated because" can be useful. Don't feel guilty feel honest.

8) Admit 10% of the blame:

It is rare that in a difficult situation one side is 100% right. By admitting your part, you can make it easier for the other party to accept some blame too. Eg I know I haven't been supportive here, however if I do x and y going forwards, would you be able to do a and b?

9) Open the Door to Follow Up

If it's a tricky situation, it may not be solved by one conversation. Enabling a follow up conversation is useful. –eg "Can we talk again once we have x and a sorted?"

10) Practice

Practice with a friend, and talk through the possible outcomes/ unintended consequences of the conversation and how you will handle these.