

Managing Difficult Conversations

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

To help maximize the effectiveness of a difficult conversation consider the strategies that follow.

Strategies for Starting the Conversation

You can use the strategies in this table to help your conversation get started on the right foot.

Strategy	Details
Consider the setting	Think about when and where you plan to talk to the other person and determine if the setting supports what you are trying to accomplish. When possible, pick a comfortable location and providing the other person with advanced notice. In some situations, you may need to change the setting from a group to an individual conversation to reduce the chance you will embarrass or shame the other person.
Don't make assumptions	Since you can't really know someone's intentions, don't assume they are bad. Conversely, don't assume that because you have good intentions the other person sees it that way. Instead, ask open-ended questions to help the other person feel comfortable so they are more likely to explain what is truly bothering them.
Open from a neutral position	When the conversation starts, approach it from the perspective of a neutral observer to avoid turning it into an argument. Keep your cool and control your tone of voice and body language.
Consider how the other person may react	When someone feels threatened, they usually react strongly, and this can make it hard to resolve problems. Think about how hierarchy may impact the conversation. You should also be aware of your own triggers to help you stay balanced during the conversation.
Adapt your approach to the individual	Recognize that what works for one person won't always work for everyone. Consider the other person's strengths and weaknesses, motivations and drivers, and communication style to adapt your approach to the individual.

Strategies to Use During the Conversation

You can use the strategies in this table to help you keep the conversation professional and effective.

Strategy	Details
Use a collaborative approach	Work through issues together and find a solution where both sides' concerns are addressed.
Consider body language	By watching the other person's body language, you can identify the emotions behind the words and understand their complete message.
Listen actively	Avoid interrupting the other person or being distracted during the conversation. Instead, ask the other person questions to clarify their points and to create a shared understanding of their perceptions, assumptions, and feelings. When the other person knows that you are listening actively, it can help them feel like they are being heard and increase the likelihood that they will listen to you.
Consider the other person's perspective	Learn about the other person's point of view by imagining what they might be thinking and why.

Strategy	Details
Don't assign blame	If people think they will be blamed, they may be less likely to cooperate. Instead, explore how each person contributed to the situation.
Speak tactfully	Be honest when expressing yourself, while considering how your messaging of the situation might make the other person feel. How you deliver the message can also impact how the other person reacts.
Keep your message clear	Stay on message by remembering what you want to say so you don't get sidetracked. Be respectful and avoid using loaded words that can generate strong emotions and lead to a negative reaction from the other person.
Keep the tone professional	Don't be afraid to speak up but remember to maintain a professional tone throughout the exchange. Focus on keeping the conversation constructive to help the individual identify solutions.

Strategies for Closing the Conversation

You can use the strategies in this table to help you close your conversation on the right note.

Strategy	Details
Problem solve	Take the lead in brainstorming potential ways to resolve the issue.
Build consensus	By sharing ideas, brainstorming together, and seeking common ground, you can help overcome resistance.
Follow through	Be persistent and stick with it; difficult conversations can take time and patience to resolve. There is no guarantee that everything will be fixed within a certain amount of time. It may even be necessary to have more than one discussion with the other person.
Confirm what was discussed	Confirm the results of the conversation with the other person and identify next steps.