

Tips on how to transform difficult conversations into learning opportunities



A client is not happy with the service that you have provided and is threatening to make a complaint. You are asked to give negative feedback to an employee who is famous for resisting criticism. You are angry at the manager's decision to ignore your advice and hire the "wrong person" for your team. You have to say 'No'. Your colleague's aggressive manner makes it very difficult for you to work in that environment.

These are but a few examples of the difficult situations that call for 'conversations' we would rather avoid.

Whether with our partners, children, parents, colleagues, employers, employees, clients, competitors. Difficult conversations are constantly there adding a lot of stress to our lives.

WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

A difficult conversation is any conversation that takes us off balance. From years of research in Harvard University observing thousands of difficult conversations, in business, family, politics and other settings, researchers, Sheila Heen, Douglas Stone and Bruce Patton concluded that all difficult conversations have a common structure. Difficult conversations are constructed from three different conversations taking place at the same time: The 'what happened' conversation, the feelings conversation and the identity conversation. Conversations become difficult when there is a gap in the description of what happened – often in order to assign and avoid blame. It triggers strong feelings and it pushes our identity hot buttons and threatens our self-image.

The bigger the threat the more difficult the conversation is.

TIPS ON HOW BEST TO APPROACH A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION IN ORDER TO AVOID ESCALATION

Be prepared!

In a difficult conversation you are angry, frustrated, sad; your arguments that support your story are constantly played in your mind over and over again, your self-image as a parent, a manager, a friend or any other identity is threatened. You are in no position to listen. However if you want to be effective in de-escalating conflict you need to be able to understand where the other person is coming from. So the first thing you need to do is prepare in order to quieten your internal

voice and be more balanced. Through preparation you aim to understand the three conversations you are experiencing - your 'what happened', your feelings and your identity issues. Once you have this mindfulness that there are many ways to describe reality and there is never just one 'Truth' you develop curiosity on what is the other person's description and experience. Instead of choosing a goal of - I want her to understand, I want him to know how I feel etc. you set another important goal: What would I like to learn. Good preparation will also allow you to stay in balance when hot buttons will be pushed again through the conversation (he or she might not read this article or get training in difficult conversations...). Preparation will also suggest having a good opening sentence as a key to create a constructive dialogue.

Open from the third story

We very often start with a But statement: "Listen John I respect your work and your talents but you have been arrogant and disrespectful to me and I want you to know this is unacceptable". The but statement is a common mistake we make that sets the tone yet again for a blaming game. It has been said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity (Einstein). However we often find ourselves whether in the start or the middle of a conversation resulting to the But statements. The best way to start a difficult conversation in order to get away from blaming is to start from the third story. The third story has two main parts. The first is an objective description of our situation, one that a mediator would use. This is a general description which we both would agree with. This part focuses on 'We' as opposed to the adversary I versus You. For example: "We have been working together in this office for two years now". The second part of the third story is that it always ends with an invitation for a joint enquiry or a question. "We have been working together in the office for two years now and I was wondering what your experience is so far?" Any open question that will give the opportunity for the other to share indicating you really interested in hearing what he or she has to say.

Listen to the other story first

Being well prepared we realise that the other person has a different experience of the 'what happened' - they have different facts and other ways of interpreting them, have different feelings and this conversation might be pushing their hot buttons too. If you want to get the attention of the other party

to listen to what you have to say - you need to listen to their 'story' or experience first. This is not a manipulation, this is genuinely based on honest curiosity and realisation of the information you are lacking and the complexity of the situation. Listening is a vital skill and oh so often we fail to do it properly. Good active listening has four main ingredients: Listening without interruptions or judgement; checking if you understood correctly; acknowledgement for the other person's story and ask another question based on the information that was shared. Good active listening will not only allow the transformation of the conversation from blame game to learning opportunity, it is a vital first step for building trust in this attempt to recover the relationship.

Be transparent

When it is time for you to share your story or experience - you are able to do so taking into account the other person's information and intentions as expressed in their story. You can decide how to describe your story - your 'what happened', your feelings and maybe even explaining who you are and why this is difficult for you. Being transparent means to share not only the conclusion of how you see the situation or feel about it, but also the data that you have and how you interpreted it to reach your conclusion. For example: When you didn't invite me to the management meeting I felt angry because in my view I should have been there. I interpreted it as an attempt to exclude me and felt really bad about it. Now that I have learned that you didn't invite me because you interpreted my absence from meetings as lack of interest and not because you didn't think I am needed, I feel better and I want to know how we can prevent these misunderstandings in the future.

Negotiate a mutual resolution

After sharing each other's stories and acknowledging your different perspectives, interpretations and personalities, comes the practical stage of negotiation or problem solving. To begin this stage effectively our advice for you again is to start by asking a question: Based on all of what we have shared and learned in this conversation - how do you suggest moving forward? This is an excellent opportunity to check how much of your story they were able to understand and what other barriers are in your way to reach a resolution. If the other party will say - I suggest doing it my way - you will know that either he or she didn't listen to your story, they are not ready to reach a resolution, or other possibilities. Don't lose hope - try again to understand where this barrier comes from and what



might be necessary to apply in order to enable communication. If you identify that the conversation goes round and round in circles we suggest the following: name the game - we have been discussing this for an hour now and I feel we are going in circles and making no progress - what do you think? Did you notice it too? Ask for advice on what to do next.

Take a break

Difficult conversations are by definition - difficult - and require a lot of concentration and energy. When you feel you are getting off balance again, one of the most effective ways is to take a break, get some fresh air, some new perspective. Conducting a learning conversation requires you to stay balanced and focused - so make sure you are aware of your needs and don't hesitate to say - I need some time to think about it - would it be okay if we take 30 minute break?

Focus on the future

Our last advice in any difficult conversation is to focus on the future. The here and now often clouds our vision and perspective. Focusing on the 'day after' will give us clarity about what is really important to us. Proving we are right and they are wrong seems less important when you think of your career in the long run. Also it is always good to think together how to deal with these conflicts when they come up next time (and they probably will...) as opposed to avoiding them until they escalate again. ■

Printed with kind permission

Ganit Poleg-Spark, Director of GPS Finding Your Way in Conflict a training and consultancy group working with highly professional team of conflict management specialists both in Australia and internationally.

www.gpsnegotiation.com