Navigating Difficult Conversations:

4 Strategies to Tackle Tension With Confidence

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For organizations to accomplish major goals—for example, selling more products, helping more clients, or lowering costs—all team members must collaborate and complete their work at the highest level. Whether an organization is successful in accomplishing its goals or having challenges, there will still be points of friction along the way. Misunderstandings, misaligned incentives, underperformance, interpersonal conflicts, and other difficulties can arise, and managers must find solutions. Often, a difficult conversation is required in order to work together as cohesively as possible as a team. Of course, these discussions can be fraught, especially if there hasn't been proper preparation. Relying on the smart strategies outlined here can reduce stress and lead to a productive outcome.

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1. Difficult Conversations: Mistakes to Avoid

No one wants to get through a challenging talk only to wonder what just happened and why. If you're clear about your purpose ahead of time, you can steer the conversation toward your goal.

Putting off or never having the conversation.

When you become a manager, you're agreeing to take on more responsibility. That includes sometimes having to navigate difficult conversations about performance or behavior problems, misaligned expectations, and personality conflicts. You may have steered clear of such talks previously. But once you become a leader, avoidance will only allow issues to grow into ever-larger problems.

Softening or burying your message.

Once you're set to have a difficult conversation, one you've planned or one initiated by someone else, it may be tempting to offset awkward truths with praise or good news. This is another form of avoidance—it will muddle your message and can backfire—and sets the stage for an even more difficult conversation in the future. **Straightforward, calm, and open-minded** is a better approach.

Losing sight of the conversation's purpose.

No one wants to get through a challenging talk only to wonder what just happened and why. Avoid this by identifying your objective. Your goal might be to learn more about someone else's point of view, to deliver bad news, or to find a solution to a sticky problem. If you're **clear about your purpose** ahead of time, you can steer the conversation in that direction.

Backpedaling to avoid more conflict.

Sometimes in difficult conversations you discover something that changes everything. Let's say a team member has been underperforming, and when you discuss it, they reveal their spouse just filed for divorce. In such instances, adjusting your approach to accommodate the new information often is appropriate. Other times, however, when a conversation gets uncomfortable, managers may find themselves giving someone an undeserved second chance or making concessions that could hurt their team or organization. This may feel good in the moment, but will probably be counterproductive long term.

Key Questions

1. Are you putting off a difficult conversation because it's uncomfortable?

2. Are you muddying your message by offering excessive praise or good news?

Ignoring or suppressing feelings central to the conversation.

There's an old saying that it's best to check your emotions at the door. But sometimes emotions are central to a workplace problem. Ignoring what you and others are feeling can lead you away from the truth and away from solutions you should be exploring. Calmly describe what you're feeling without blaming or attacking others. For example: "It's upsetting to me when you ask for my input and then ignore it," versus "It's rude of you to ignore my input."

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Seeking validation of assumptions instead of deeper understanding.

We often head into difficult conversations with intentions and beliefs. This is a typical human response. It can also become dangerous if you get so attached to these assumptions that you focus on proving you're right, instead of **understanding a situation**. Is it really true that one of your team members is "just lazy?" There's usually more going on than what's apparent—within others as well as yourself. Stay curious.

Exaggerating.

"The entire project was a disaster." "You make your team members feel like failures." When a situation gets tense or emotional, you might turn to generalizations and exaggerations—partly because people tend to overemphasize negative events. It may feel good momentarily, but exaggerations are inaccurate and unfair, and tend to escalate conflicts. **Focus on specific situations and facts**, and seek to describe them with accuracy rather than rhetorical punch.

Failing to account for cultural or other types of differences.

Could a team member's behavior be based on different values about responding to authority? Is it possible that complaints about a team member's formality in conversation stem from intolerance? Is a generational disconnect the culprit behind frequent disagreements between a younger and older colleague? As a manager, it's your job to cultivate an awareness of differences potentially based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, and more—and consider these before reaching conclusions.

" A common pitfall is not being direct enough. The team member with whom you're speaking may not even hear your intended message because you've packaged it in bubble wrap so as not to upset the person at all.

Filling uncomfortable silences.

It's easy to talk yourself into a corner when you're nervous. If there's a pause after you speak or an awkward moment, wait it out rather than ramble. Take a breath and see if the other person fills the silence. **Listen. You might be surprised by what you learn**.
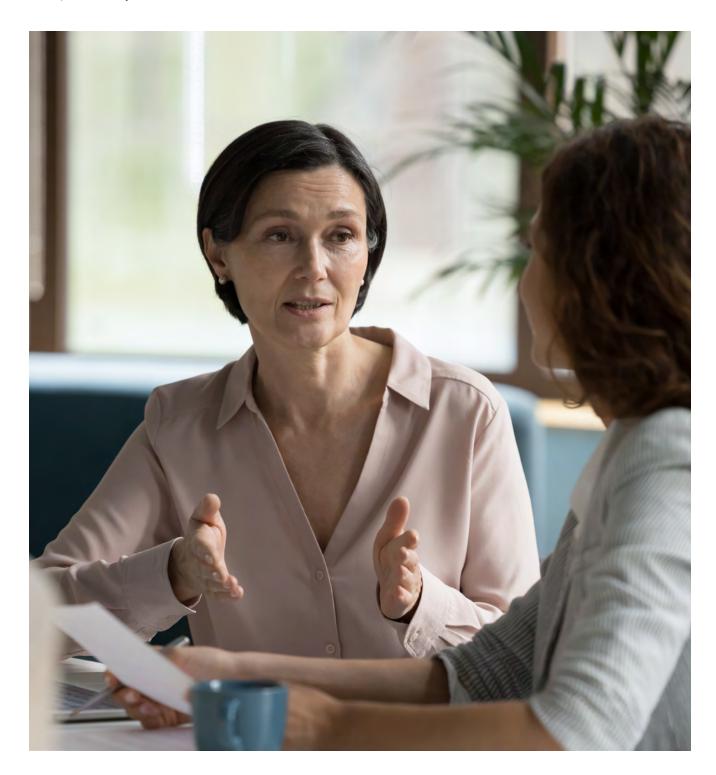
Insufficient preparation.

You prepare for interviews with job candidates and team meetings. Why wouldn't you prepare properly for a conversation that will be tougher? Equally important: Don't take your preparation too far. You're getting ready for a conversation, not a performance. There may be elements—unexpected admissions, emotional outbursts—beyond your control. If a situation gets too intense, suggest taking a break.

Key Questions

1. Do you have a plan to prepare properly for a difficult conversation?

2. During the conversation, are you aware you should be cautious about filling awkward silences?

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Before a difficult conversation, a lot of people mistakenly say, 'This is work. I want to take the emotion out of it.' But that's not realistic because we're human.

2. How to Initiate a Difficult Conversation You've Been Putting Off

Why do it?

Challenging situations—from underperforming team members to angry colleagues, to tough news that must be shared—often get even more difficult when you avoid them. A positive mindset can help: Won't it be a relief to solve the problem? Imagine if you could let go of all the dread, stress, and worry?

How to do it:

1. Define—and write down—goals for the conversation.

The main pitfall to avoid is beginning without knowing what you want to get out of the conversation. Start by asking yourself these key questions:

- What is the most important reason this conversation is **necessary**?
- How can this conversation **benefit** me, the other person, and my team and/or organization?
- Is what I want **realistic**?

2. Craft a direct and measured opening.

Oftentimes, the most daunting part of a difficult conversation is the beginning, so plan carefully what you'll say first. It can be tempting to start by easing tension, but if you don't **approach the conversation in a direct way**, you run the risk of confusing the other person or making them feel manipulated. Once you've crafted your opener, practice it.

3. Ask the person or people involved if they can chat, or send a meeting request.

Use a straightforward approach. For example, if a team member hasn't been responding promptly to customer emails, you could send this message: "Samir, do you have 30 minutes today or tomorrow to discuss a concern regarding customer emails?"

4. Have the conversation—and follow up.

During the conversation, remember that it's a dialogue, not a monologue. What the other person has to say is important. End by recapping any action steps and thanking the person. Even if it goes remarkably well, schedule reminders to check in with the other person. And do it. If you've **taken the initiative** to have a difficult conversation, make sure it wasn't an exercise in futility.

Key Questions

1. What is the most important reason this conversation is necessary?

2. Are you prepared to listen carefully to what the other person has to say to ensure the difficult conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue?
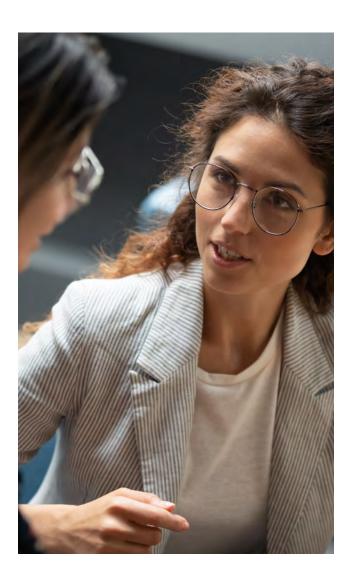
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Craft a direct and measured opening to a difficult conversation. Oftentimes, the most daunting part is the beginning, so plan carefully what you'll say first.

3. Following Up After a Difficult Conversation

When emotions are running high, it's easy for a team member to misinterpret what you say or focus on only certain parts of the conversation. No matter how carefully you prepare, it can be tough to articulate your message clearly.

Sharing the main points in writing afterward can help clarify for your team member (and serve as a record for you) what needs to happen next.

1. Determine the conversation's objective and key messages beforehand.

You're much **more likely to communicate clearly** if you've mapped out what you want to say.

2. Immediately afterward, write down what was said and *agreed upon*.

Because the conversation probably didn't go exactly as planned or may have been initiated by someone else, it's wise to write down what occurred. Documentation will help you share key points with your team member and will be a **written record** in case you face a similar situation again, or need to escalate an issue to your manager or HR.

3. Within 24 hours of your conversation, share the key points with your team member. Include in your recap:

- A thank you for having the conversation.
- The main messages you conveyed.
- The main messages you heard your team member convey.
- Specific actions you are committing to going forward.
- Specific expectations you have of your team member.
- A restatement of any deadlines or deliverables.

4. End your recap with an invitation for your team member to give input and ask questions.

Sending a recap doesn't mean a conversation is over—give your team member **an opportunity** to question points they remember differently, or to clarify. Then move forward with action items and **follow up**.

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How can I get really clear on what's important about the situation for me, what I need from it, and how can I consider the other person's point of view and the perspective that they might be bringing?

4. Role-Play a Difficult Conversation With a Mentor or Trusted Friend

Why do it?

Many people might feel foolish role-playing a conversation, but they may be missing a valuable opportunity to improve their performance when it's time for the live conversation. Role-playing is a low-stakes way to practice what you want to say so you have a better chance of getting your message across properly when emotions are likely to be running high. Speaking the words reveals what feels natural to you, what feels forced, and where you may stumble. Practicing with someone can help you anticipate and respond to the other person's reactions. In the end, you'll feel more confident your upcoming difficult conversation will be a productive one.

How to do it:

1. Think through what you want to say—and how the other person might react. As part of your planning, answer these questions:

- What's my most important reason for having this conversation? What outcome do I want?

- What good outcome do I want for the other person?

- What are the main points I want to make? What questions do I want to ask?

- What reactions (positive and negative) is the person likely to have? How might I respond?

2. Ask a mentor or friend to role-play the conversation with you.

Be sure to ask someone who is not close to the situation. You could say: "I need to have a difficult conversation with my teammate, and I'm planning what I will say. Would you spend time with me to role-play scenarios?" If your difficult conversation is scheduled over video, plan to role-play over video as well so your partner can offer feedback about how you come across on camera.

3. Role-play the conversation a few times and ask your partner to respond with various reactions. Practice using language that's clear and specific, and that shows you're listening to your partner's reactions.

For example:

- " I noticed _____. The impact of that is _____."

- " What are some ideas for how we can improve this going forward?"

- " I hear you saying _____. Is that right?"

Note your emotional reactions to your partner's statements and what triggers them. Being aware of these triggers during the actual conversation may help you stay calm.

4. After role-playing, ask your partner for feedback on how you spoke, listened, and responded. As always regarding feedback, the more specific, the better.

For example:

- " Any tips for how to improve my eye contact, body language, and tone?"

- " How did I do when it came to listening?"

- " Is there anything you suggest I say differently?"

Key Questions:

1. What's my most important reason for having this difficult conversation?

2. How am I prepared to respond to reactions (positive and negative) the person is likely to have?

Navigating a Difficult Conversation

In summary, if you need to initiate a difficult conversation, it's important not to delay because of trepidation. Be careful not to weaken your message because you don't want to hurt the other person's feelings. Be cautious with the words you choose so you don't exaggerate or unfairly generalize. Also be careful not to fill uncomfortable silences, which could lead you to say something unintended.

Request a demo to enhance your team's communication and leadership skills, or buy the course: *Navigating Difficult Conversations: Turn Tension Into Progress*™

Learn more about Navigating Difficult Conversations >

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