

ENGAGING IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

AT WORK
BY GRETA DAVIS

People spend about eight hours thinking about each difficult conversation they need to have at work, according to the Center for Creative Leadership. This workplace rumination can cause personal distress and dissatisfaction, and derail important initiatives. Learning how to tackle difficult conversations not only allows people to get back to work but also seems to have long-term career benefits. *Crucial Conversations*, authored by a roundtable of consultants with expertise in workplace dynamics, found that employees who are most successful and advance in organizations and businesses are those who develop the skills necessary to have difficult conversations. Consider this checklist to help shape what actions to take before, during, and after the conversation.

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION:

GET CALM AND CENTERED. Think about what is troubling you, clarify the problem, and identify hurt feelings. Let go of negativity to move toward a solution-focused approach to the conversation.

DETERMINE SHARED INTEREST AND GOALS. Consider what matters to all parties involved and anticipate what common ground there may be in the conversation. Clarify the ideal outcome and what needs to be accomplished by having the conversation.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING. Be sure there is plenty of margin before and after the conversation to avoid unnecessary pressure and check for willingness to engage. Before talking about the problem at hand, have a conversation to ensure that both parties are ready and willing to talk openly and honestly.

DURING THE CONVERSATION:

CLARIFY INTENT. Convey shared interests and goals and be sure to communicate what you do want to happen, contrasting with what you don't want to happen, as a result of the conversation.

ACTIVELY LISTEN. Be sure to carefully attend to the other person and communicate understanding. Repeat what you heard the person say in order to communicate understanding.

BE ALERT FOR THREATS TO SAFETY. Pay attention to nonverbal behavior (e.g., furrowed brow, crossed arms, tightness in jaw) and verbal behaviors (e.g., interrupting, terse tone, increased volume) that indicate a conversation is derailing. Pause the conversation and acknowledge defensiveness or take a break and revisit the "before the conversation" tips to get calm and reestablish shared interest in productive dialogue.

AFTER THE CONVERSATION:

EXPRESS GRATITUDE. Never underestimate the power of appreciation. Thank your colleague for taking the time to talk through the difficult problem and highlight positive outcomes.

FOLLOW THROUGH ON COMMITMENTS. Clarify next steps and be sure to act with integrity by completing the tasks agreed upon.

ACTIVELY SEEK THE POSITIVE. Look for opportunities to have positive interactions following difficult conversations to strengthen relationships and build trust.

Most workers agree the hardest thing about work is not the work itself but managing difficult interactions with people on the job — whether it is coworkers, a boss, or customers. Engaging in difficult conversations involves practice and commitment to continue to grow these skills. Ultimately, learning how to resolve conflict through effective conversations adds value to the company's bottom line and helps to advance careers.



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