

**Difficult Conversations**

# **How to Handle Difficult Conversations at Work**

by Rebecca Knight

January 09, 2015



Difficult conversations — whether you're telling a client the project is delayed or presiding over an unenthusiastic performance review — are an inevitable part of management. How should you prepare for this kind of discussion? How do you find the right words in the moment? And, how can you manage the exchange so that it goes as smoothly as possible?

## **What the Experts Say**

“We’ve all had bad experiences with these kind of conversations in the past,” says Holly Weeks, the author of *Failure to Communicate*. Perhaps your boss lashed out at you during a heated discussion; or your direct report started to cry during a performance review; maybe your client hung up the phone on you. As a result, we tend to avoid them. But that’s not the right answer. After all, tough conversations “are not black swans,” says Jean-Francois Manzoni, professor of human resources and organizational development at INSEAD. The key is to learn how to handle them in a way that produces “a better outcome: less pain for you, and less pain for the person you’re talking to,” he says. Here’s how to get what you need from these hard conversations — while also keeping your relationships intact.

### **Change your mindset**

If you’re gearing up for a conversation you’ve labeled “difficult,” you’re more likely to feel nervous and upset about it beforehand. Instead, try “framing it in a positive, less binary” way, suggests Manzoni. For instance, you’re not giving negative performance feedback; you’re having a constructive conversation about development. You’re not telling your boss: *no*; you’re offering up an alternate solution. “A difficult conversation tends to go best when you think about it as a just a normal conversation,” says Weeks.

### **Breathe**

“The more calm and centered you are, the better you are at handling difficult conversations,” says Manzoni. He recommends: “taking regular breaks” throughout the day to practice “mindful breathing.” This helps you “refocus” and “gives you capacity to absorb any blows” that come your way. This technique also works well in the moment. If, for example, a colleague comes to you with an issue that might lead to a hard conversation, excuse yourself — get a cup of coffee or take a brief stroll around the office — and collect your thoughts.

## Plan but don't script

It can help to plan what you want to say by jotting down notes and key points before your conversation. Drafting a script, however, is a waste of time. “It’s very unlikely that it will go according to your plan,” says Weeks. Your counterpart doesn’t know “his lines,” so when he “goes off script, you have no forward motion” and the exchange “becomes weirdly artificial.” Your strategy for the conversation should be “flexible” and contain “a repertoire of possible responses,” says Weeks. Your language should be “simple, clear, direct, and neutral,” she adds.

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## Acknowledge your counterpart's perspective

Don't go into a difficult conversation with a *my-way-or-the-highway* attitude. Before you broach the topic, Weeks recommends asking yourself two questions: “What is the problem? And, what does the other person think is the problem?” If you

aren't sure of the other person's viewpoint, “acknowledge that you don't know and ask,” she says. Show your counterpart “that you care,” says Manzoni. “Express your interest in understanding how the other person feels,” and “take time to process the other person's words and tone,” he adds. Once you hear it, look for overlap between your point of view and your counterpart's.

## Be compassionate

“Experience tells us that these kinds of conversations often lead to [strained] working relationships, which can be painful,” says Manzoni. It's wise, therefore, to come at sensitive topics from a place of empathy. Be considerate; be compassionate. “It might not necessarily be pleasant, but you can manage to deliver difficult news in a courageous, honest, fair way.” At the same time, “do not emote,” says Weeks. The worst thing you can do “is to ask your

counterpart to have sympathy for you,” she says. Don’t say things like, ‘I feel so bad about saying this,’ or ‘This is really hard for me to do,’” she says. “Don’t play the victim.”

### **Slow down and listen**

To keep tensions from blazing, Manzoni recommends trying to “slow the pace” of the conversation. Slowing your cadence and pausing before responding to the other person “gives you a chance to find the right words” and tends to “defuse negative emotion” from your counterpart, he says. “If you listen to what the other person is saying, you’re more likely to address the right issues and the conversation always ends up being better,” he says. Make sure your actions reinforce your words, adds Weeks. “Saying, ‘I hear you,’ as you’re fiddling with your smartphone is insulting.”

### **Give something back**

If you’re embarking on a conversation that will “put the other person in a difficult spot or take something away something from them,” ask yourself: “Is there something I can give back?” says Weeks. If, for instance, you’re laying off someone you’ve worked with for a long time, “You could say, ‘I have written what I think is a strong recommendation for you; would you like to see it?’” If you need to tell your boss that you can’t take on a particular assignment, suggest a viable alternative. “Be constructive,” says Manzoni. Nobody wants problems.” Proposing options “helps the other person see a way out, and it also signals respect.”

### **Reflect and learn**

After a difficult conversation, it’s worthwhile to “reflect ex post” and consider what went well and what didn’t, says Manzoni. “Think about why you had certain reactions, and what you might have said differently.” Weeks also recommends observing how others successfully cope with these situations and emulating their tactics. “Learn how to disarm yourself by imitating what you see,” she says. “Handling a difficult conversation well is not just a skill, it is an act of courage.”

## **Principles to Remember**

### **Do:**

- Take regular breaks during the day; the more calm and centered you are, the better you are at handling tough conversations when they arise
- Slow down the pace of the conversation — it helps you find the right words and it signals to your counterpart that you're listening
- Find ways to be constructive by suggesting other solutions or alternatives

### **Don't:**

- Label the news you need to deliver as a “difficult conversation” in your mind; instead frame the discussion in a positive or neutral light
- Bother writing a script for how you want the discussion to go; jot down notes if it helps, but be open and flexible
- Ignore the other person's point of view — ask your counterpart how he sees the problem and then look for overlaps between your perspectives

### **Case Study #1: Be clear, direct, and unemotional**

Tabatha Turman, the founder and CEO of Integrated Finance and Accounting Solutions, a financial firm with both government and private sector clients, knew she had a problem with a certain employee. “He was a nice person and he worked long hours but his productivity was an issue,” she says. “He wasn't right for the position he was in.”

She and her team tried a number of interventions — including having him work with a professional coach — but after six months, she needed to take action. “We kept kicking the can down the road, but I realized I was going to have to be the bad guy.” She was going to have to lay him off.

Tabatha dreaded delivering the news. “I really liked this person,” she says. “We’re a small company and all really close—you know about people’s families and you hear about their vacations. At the same time, everybody plays a position on the team and one weak link can bring it down.”

To steel herself for the conversation, Tabatha called on her 20 years of experience as an officer in the army. “I grew up in a military environment where there’s no bluff,” she says. “When you’re at work, you’re at work. You need to be strong for the people around you and take your feelings out of it.”

Her words were simple. She told the employee that he was “not a good fit.” She explained that the company would keep him on until the end of the month and then provided details about the severance package. Tabatha says that while the employee “wasn’t happy” he took the lay-off “like a trooper.”

Even though she didn’t show her emotion during the meeting, Tabatha still says the conversation “lingers” in her mind today. “I still feel badly that it didn’t work out, but it wasn’t right,” she says. “We had to move on.”

### **Case Study #2: Put yourself in the right frame of mind and show empathy**

As Chief Personnel Officer at Booz Allen Hamilton, Betty Thompson, is accustomed to having hard conversations. Recently, for instance, she had to tell a successful, longtime employee that his position was being eliminated.

“Over time, his role had become less relevant to the organization,” she says. “There were also proximity issues — his team was on one side of the country but he was on the other side. It just wasn’t

going to work anymore.”

Betty decided that the message would be best delivered not in one conversation, but in a series of multiple discussions over a couple of months. “I didn’t want to rush things,” she says. “It was a process.”

Before even broaching the subject with the employee, she reminded herself of her good intentions. “You need to have the right energy going into something like this. If you’re coming from a place of frustration—which can happen, we’re only human — it will not be a constructive conversation. You have to think: ‘What’s the best way for this person to hear the message?’”

Her first step was sitting down with the employee to ask how he thought things were going. “I wanted to know what frustrations he was having,” she says. “I wanted him to look in the mirror, not poke him in the eye.”

After he spoke, she offered her own perspective on the problem. He was initially defensive, but by the second time they spoke, he had come around and agreed there was a problem.

By their final conversation, the employee had decided to leave the company. They had a great talk and even ended the conversation with a hug. “He knew that I cared,” she says.

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