Conflict, Criticism, & Sensitive Subjects

How to Talk about Difficult Topics at Work

CONTACT INFORMATION

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The High Cost of Unresolved Issues

Unmet objectives
  Poor results
  Damaged working relationships
  Bad performance reviews
  Stalled careers
  Increased stress
  Sleepless nights

AGENDA for TODAY

★ Why Tough Topics Terrify Us
★ The Importance of Preparation
★ Managing the Conversation
★ Road Maps for Different Types of Talks
I tend to put off bringing up difficult subjects.

When something bothers me, I want to talk about it immediately.

I think it’s important to let other people know exactly how I feel.

If I am angry with someone, they will probably never know it.

I have a lot of opinions about how people should be doing things.

I worry a lot about hurting people’s feelings.

I find that people often react defensively when I bring up issues.

I am usually surprised when I hear that I have offended someone.

I tend to look for indirect ways to express my irritation.

My discussions with certain people often turn into arguments.

Why Tough Topics Terrify Us
TOUGH TOPIC

Any subject which is likely to produce a negative emotional reaction.

Five Tough Talks at Work

- Giving critical feedback to coworkers
- Discussing performance problems with employees
- Addressing “sensitive” issues & annoying behaviors
- Taking complaints to your boss
- Talking with top executives about almost anything
TOUGH TOPICS

What we fear in difficult conversations...

- Not knowing what to say
- Defensive reactions & hurt feelings
- Losing control of the discussion
- Broken relationships
- Retaliation
- Career damage
- Discomfort with using authority

The Importance of Preparation

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PLANNING

CHOOSE YOUR TIMING

Never tackle a tough topic when you’re angry or upset!

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PLANNING

Reducing the Emotion

FEELINGS

FACTS

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PLANNING

**Preparation Questions**

- **The Problem**
- **The Person**
- **The Leverage Equation**

**Preparation Questions**

- Is this really my concern?
- What is the business problem?
- What happens if this problem is not resolved?
- What are my desired outcomes?
- How is the other person likely to react?
- How would the other person describe the situation?
- What can I do to reduce negative reactions?
- What is the risk/reward balance in this situation?
Assessing the Leverage Equation

The Leverage Equation
The wisdom of learning to let things go

Managing the Conversation
If you’re having an argument, then you’ve already lost.
Mastering Non-Defensive Language

- State facts & observations
- Describe problems, not personality
- Use I-statements & minimize “you”
- Describe their point of view
- Avoid blaming
- Ask clarifying questions
- Focus on the future, not the past

Basic Roadmap for Tough Talks

Before Beginning
- Focus on your goal! Take time to prepare.
- Explain the business problem
- State what you need
- Request a response
- Listen (really listen) to their answer
- Share views & discuss options
- Agree on next steps
Take Time to Plan Your Opening Statement!

**STRATEGIES**

- I think . . .
- I noticed . . .
- I felt . . .

Promoting Collaboration

- Explain effects of the problem
- Calmly describe feelings
- Use reversals or analogies
- Identify areas of agreement
- Make an effort to see their side
- Look for common goals & interests
- Expand the options
**EXPLAIN EFFECTS:** "When I don’t receive information by the 15th, my monthly report is late, and that makes my boss’s report to the CEO late. And then my boss becomes very unhappy with me.”

**DESCRIBE FEELINGS:** "I really felt excluded when you didn’t invite me to the planning meeting.”

**REVERSALS:** "If people frequently went to the CEO to get your decisions overturned, I expect that would make you uncomfortable.”

**ANALOGIES:** "Trying to develop a plan without clear goals is like shooting at a target behind a sheet.”

**AREAS OF AGREEMENT:** “We seem to agree that customers are on hold for too long and that it may be costing us business. We also agree that the problem needs to be solved quickly.”

**SEEING THEIR SIDE:** “I can certainly understand that having to calm down impatient customers would be very difficult.”

**COMMON GOALS & INTERESTS:** “We all want this project to be successful, because if it isn’t, both our departments will look bad.”

**EXPAND OPTIONS:** “Instead of debating whether a dress code is a good idea or a bad idea, let’s brainstorm some other ways to solve this problem.”
Basic Roadmap for Tough Talks

Before Beginning
- Focus on your goal! Take time to prepare.
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- State what you need
- Request a response
- Listen (really listen) to their answer

Opening Statement
- Share views & discuss options

Collaborative Discussion

STRATEGIES
Questions at the End

- Did you accomplish your goal?
- Are you satisfied with the discussion outcome?
- Is everyone clear on the agreement?
- Are there any hard feelings?
Road Maps for Different Types of Talks

Tough Talk Roadmaps

- Coworkers
- Bosses
- Employees

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The Leverage Equation

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Giving Feedback to Coworkers

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Roadmap: Coworker Feedback

1. Make your request
2. Wait for response
3. Engage in problem-solving
4. Test for agreement
5. Explore their point of view
6. Reduce emotion
7. Refusal
8. Questioning
9. Defensive

Resolved

Escalate or Let it go

ROAD MAPS

Taking Problems to the Boss
**Roadmap: Complaint to the Boss**

Present the business problem (issue, outcome, & action) → Wait for response → Refusal → Come back later or Let it go → Refusal

Engage in problem-solving → Test for agreement → Refusal

Resolved ✅

Reduce emotion → Explore their point of view

Defensive

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**ROAD MAPS**

Employee Performance Discussions

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TOUGH TOPICS

Some other challenging conversations . . .

- Making amends & apologizing
- Asking for a raise
- Responding to a bad review
- Talking with top executives
TOUGH TOPICS

How to Work with Executives

- Acknowledge their power.
- But don’t be a wimp!
- Never tell them they “can’t” do anything.
- Don’t expect detailed instructions.
- Just make it happen. And be sure the details are perfect.
- Prepare for limited time and interruptions.
- Lose your ego. They have enough for both of you.
- Don’t take any abuse personally.
- Keep your self-confidence and sense of humor!

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