

Feedback and Challenging Conversations

Holding conversations that one or both parties think are going to be difficult is a major challenge—one we know tends to be avoided. Some conversations are always going to be stressful, but it helps to have some ways to think about them, and plan for them, in advance

To put these into practical steps, here is some advice. All of it assumes that you do actually want the conversation to go well. Consider using these to have a conversation before the conversation.

1. Don't think of a difficult conversation as a difficult conversation. Thinking of it that way is part of what makes it difficult. As Senge points out, how you see the problem is the problem. Think of it as a learning conversation—the connotation is that learning is challenging but worthwhile and rewarding, and part of our professional ethos.
2. Make it as easy as possible for the other person to have the conversation. Provide reassurance if you can. Don't summon the person, go to her. Partly this is about making the conversation less onerous, partly it is just good manners.
3. Establish at the beginning of the conversation what both parties want to get out of it. Don't take it as given that the intended outcomes are clear. Circle back around to this at the end of the conversation—did the two parties both get what they needed?
4. Don't be surprised when people get defensive. Of course they get defensive. Does anyone ever actually believe that "it's not personal"? Argyris and Schön wrote that defensive routines come into play when people are exposed to threat or embarrassment—which may be unavoidable in some conversations. Don't make it worse by saying "you shouldn't take it personally!" As Stone, Patton and Heen point out, there is no such thing as a diplomatic hand grenade. Sometimes, no matter how tactful you try to be, your message is going to do damage. And, when the other person talks, don't take it personally.
5. Practice listening. This is harder than it sounds. The goal is to listen to the other person, not to wait until they've finished talking so that you can have your turn. People sometimes try to demonstrate that they're listening by interjecting comments like "so what I'm hearing you say is..." It may be better just to actually listen. Save those comments and questions for when you genuinely need to clarify what the other person is saying.
6. Ask respectful questions. The goal is to understand where the other person is coming from. Stephen Covey framed it as "seek first to understand, then to be understood". Ed Schein calls it "humble inquiry." Avoid asking questions to make a point (rhetorical questions). Avoid asking questions because you have a theory that the other person will realize from the answer that you are right (leading questions). Avoid asking questions just so you will have enough information to give advice (loaded questions).

7. Don't jump to advice-giving. Even when people say they want advice, it doesn't actually mean that they want it or will do anything with it, and they may actively resent it. They may be insulted that you think they need advice, and that you are not giving them credit for having thought of something themselves.
8. Don't assume that your intent is going to show up in how the other person receives the conversation. All sorts of other considerations can come between your intent and how you are perceived. And likewise, don't assume that you can infer the other person's intent from what she does.
9. The feedback we give ourselves is more powerful than the feedback we get from other people. This only makes sense—you have to be able to trust your own judgment, otherwise you would be dependent on others to tell you what to do. We should not be surprised, then, when the feedback others give themselves outweighs the feedback that we try to give them and our feedback is ignored or downplayed.
10. Feedback is not about the delivery. We hold the false belief that getting other people to believe our point of view over their own is a matter of getting good at how we convey the message. This is what is known as the Giver's Fantasy. Feedback, unless we are really thoughtful and practiced in providing it AND both parties have a shared understanding of the goal, is highly influenced by our own experiences and beliefs. Furthermore, feedback is not the best way to build that shared understanding.
11. Rank matters. People in more powerful positions tend to under-estimate how much the power difference matters to the other person. If you are the senior person in a conversation, don't think for a minute that the other person is going to put that aside. People in positions of power consistently over-estimate the strength of the relationships they have with the people with less status, who are much more skeptical about many different aspects of the conversation.
12. People take pride in what they do and are highly motivated to be competent. This applies to almost everybody, and should be the starting point of your conversations. If it is not your default belief about people then you probably shouldn't be in a leadership position.
13. Check in frequently. Instead of stringing a lot of sentences together, ask questions like "does that make sense?" or "do you see it the same way?" See #14.
14. When you ask a question, stop talking and make time for the other person to answer.
15. Don't assume that you have a lock on truth. See ladder of inference.