

Ten Tips for Having Successful Conflict Conversations

Tip 1: Face having the conversation

Do you tell yourself that you do not have time to schedule your difficult engagements? Have you rescheduled an awkward discussion once or twice, or more? Are you more comfortable reaching goals than building relationships? No matter your reason, avoiding the conflict conversation is seldom the answer (and might lead to more problems). Stop wasting time and face that conversation head-on!

Suggestions

- Determine the source of your avoidance (what are you worried about?).
- Develop strategies to minimize and address the source.
- Create an outline of your conversation (with strategies).
- Practice with a conflict coach or someone else you trust.

Tip 2: Prepare, prepare, prepare

Preparation for success is imperative, whether it is your first or hundredth conflict conversation. Consider that a lack of preparation may be an avoidance tactic, and that winging it means you can easily come unglued if the conversation starts to deteriorate.

Suggestions

- Prepare key messages beforehand.
- Imagine all the ways (positive and negative) the conversation could unfold.
- Plan how you would respond to each possibility.

Tip 3: Develop realistic expectations

Do you have 10+ things to cover? Trying to address too much can lead to failure. If after six months, only 40 per cent of people follow through with their **own** new year's resolutions, how much can you reasonably expect to change as a result of a single conversation?

Suggestions

- Focus on addressing or improving one issue at a time.
- Aim for rewards (opportunity, recognition, success) as opposed to fear of failure or rejection.
- Consider using a behavioral change model: **stop** (what will I stop doing?), **start** (what will I start doing?), and **continue** (what will I continue doing?).

Note: Research shows that it takes between 20 and 40 hours to become good at a skill and 10,000 hours to become an expert.

Tip 4: Manage strong emotional reactions

You are knee-deep in a conflict conversation and your counterpart has a strong emotional reaction. This may elicit discomfort for you as you try to figure out what to do. Refrain from bulldozing through or ignoring the behaviour. Instead, notice and address the behaviour. Your role in high emotion is to gradually decrease the intensity so that you can continue to have a meaningful conversation.

Suggestions

- **Mention the behaviour (your perception).**
- **Ask questions to achieve mutual understanding.**
- **Notice their reaction (and yours).**
- **Ask how you can help or how the situation can be managed differently.**
- **Get the conversation back on track.**
- **End the conversation.**

Tip 5: Know when you are triggered

Everyone has a weak spot. When someone finds our triggers, whether inadvertently or not, it becomes even harder to remain our best self. When you engage in a conflict conversation and the other party dismisses, minimizes or disagrees with you, be aware that you might just get hooked. Just knowing where you're vulnerable will help you stay in control when someone pokes you there.

Suggestions

When you are triggered, try:

- **Stop.**
- **Take a deep breath.**
- **Observe body, emotions and thoughts.**
- **Proceed with discussion from a place of professionalism and integrity.**

Tip 6: Keep the goal in sight

When a conflict conversation turns crucial, it is sometimes hard to stay on track. You might fall into a conversation rabbit hole, finding yourself managing emotions, explaining, or defending yourself, or focusing on inconsequential details. Pull yourself out of that vortex and get the conversation back on track!

Suggestions

- **Determine a clear, realistic and preferred outcome (i.e., to resolve x, y and z).**
- **Consider conversation obstacles (how it could go off track).**
- **Develop an anchor (something you draw on, e.g., an image, mantra, or quote, to help bring you back to the goal of the conversation.**

Tip 7: Listen

A conflict resolution conversation is a two-way conversation where you give feedback and listen to the other party's perspective. When you spend too much time talking, you miss critical information, and the other person may not feel heard or feel free to express their perspective. **Nature gave us one mouth and two ears so we could listen twice as much as we speak.** If your voice is the only voice you hear in the room, it's time to be **silent!**

Suggestions

- **Remain curious.**
- **Ask open-ended questions.**
- **Allow silence.**

- Reflect (name the emotion).
- Summarize.

Tip 8: Give clear messages

Do you sugar-coat, drop hints, or talk in circles when you need to have tough conversation? These strategies may be a result of your discomfort and reduce the other person's understanding of what you need to address, leading to more uncomfortable conversations (exactly what you didn't want) and little improvement.

Suggestions

- Practice being specific (use examples) and concise.
- Be prepared, direct and compassionately fearless.
- Say your piece and notice how it lands.
- Validate their understanding of what you have said.

Tip 9: Create a joint agreement - and follow up

You've had the conversation and agreed that the status quo is not desirable. You close the conversation feeling satisfied with your collective efforts to rebuild what was broken. But wait, your counterpart does not know what exactly needs to happen differently (how to change behaviors, attitudes, or what supports are being offered), or when follow-up will happen. Accountability (both you and the other person) is a necessity!

Suggestions

- Avoid disappointment! Determine what needs to happen (action), who will do what (people), when it will be done (deadlines), and how it will be done (process by which it will happen).
- Always, always follow up on your part of any agreement. Consistent follow-up will normalize tough conversations for you both and meeting commitments demonstrates integrity, resulting in increased trust.

Tip 10: Reflect for well-being

A day (or week) after the conflict resolution conversation, take note of how you are feeling about the situation or about the other person. What is your head (and stomach) saying to you? Are you still nauseous every time you see the person, or think about your next encounter with them? Or do you have a sense of peace when you reflect on how the conversation went? Your mind and body have an incredible capacity to be instructive when it comes to relationships

Suggestions

- Make a note in your calendar for a few days after the conversation to take 15 minutes of quiet time to reflect on how things went, and how things are.
- If you're unsatisfied with the results of the conversation, consider what could have happened better (and what your part in that was) and how you can reach out to the other person for a "part 2".
- If you feel the process went well, consider sending a note or personally reaching out to the other person to express your positivity and thank them for their part in a successful dialogue.