

Five-Step Process for Difficult Conversations

Adapted from Melissa Brodrick, Harvard Medical School Ombuds and David Michael, NIH Ombuds

Step 1: Invitation and finding a time to talk

- Emotional readiness: address your emotions
- If the timing is right, invite the other to join you in a dialogue. Seek agreement to meet.
- Offer a date/time that is mutually convenient and sufficient
- Find a place that is neutral, quiet and confidential

Step 2: Cognitive preparation & conflict analysis

- What is this conflict about? Who is involved?
 - Clarify values, beliefs, interests and concerns
 - Underlying issues (e.g., respect, recognition, trust, style)?
- Consider what will happen if we fail to manage this conflict?
 - Impact on parties involved
 - Impact on others
- Think through possible successful solutions

Step 3: Defining and discussing the problem

- The opening
 - Express appreciation and optimism
 - Establish privacy or confidentiality if appropriate
 - Briefly state your understanding of the issue
 - Invite the other to tell you how they see the situation
- The dialogue
 - Take turns stating issues and feelings
 - When speaking
 - Use “I-messages” and collaborative language¹
 - When listening:
 - Don’t interrupt the speaker
 - Use active listening skills²: reflections, open questions
 - Throughout:
 - Pay attention to non-verbal communication
- Depersonalize the conflict through reframing: shift from “me versus you” to “us against the problem”
 - Recognize intention versus impact
 - Focus on behavior or issue and not the person
 - Identify interests versus positions
 - Identify common ground, interests and goals
 - Summarize new understandings/progress

Step 4: Finding solutions (I)

- Brainstorm together with creativity and without judgment
- Problem-solve with a focus on common goals, issues at hand
- Agree on a mutually satisfactory solution or on individual-specific solutions, ensuring that the solution is specific and balanced
- Perform a reality-check: Will the proposed solution work for the present and the future?

Step 4: Finding solutions (II)

- What if you reach impasse?
 - Try for small gains; break it down
 - Acknowledge commitment and progress made in understanding
 - Consider whether to re-engage in the process

Step 5: Follow-up

- If agreement has been reached, meet to review and refine if necessary



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1 Confrontational Language suggests you are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unwilling to consider the other person's position• Absolutely certain you are right• Primed to argue and blame• Not allowing the other person to save face	Collaborative language suggests that you are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Willing to consider the other person's position• Recognizing you could be wrong• Seeking to address the problem together• Helping the other person save face
2 Active Listening <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Validating – to acknowledge the worth of the person: “ I see this is an important issue for you...”• Reflecting – to show you understand how the other person feels: “ You seem to feel strongly...”• Encouraging – to convey interest and encourage the person to talk: “ Can you tell me more?”• Clarifying – to help clarify what was said and to get more information: “Let me see if I understand the situation, you are saying...”• Restating – to show that you are listening and understanding: “So you want the behavior to stop immediately, is that right?”• Summarizing: to pull together key points and facts to establish where to go next: “These seem to be the main things you've said...,” “And this is what you want done...”	

Key Skills

- Increase self-awareness about conflict styles
- Engage early – don't avoid, especially if that's your style
- Set up the conversation to succeed: goal is to get on the same side of the table
- Practice active listening
- Use collaborative language
- Depersonalize the conflict through reframing
- Shift from blaming to problem-solving
- Shift from position (the what) to interests (the why)
- Affirm the partnership in finding a solution
- Commit to reviewing the outcome