



## Difficult Conversations Mary Crane

In normal economic times, many professionals avoid difficult conversations out of fear that a client or colleague will react defensively to what needs to be said. When a crisis hits, however, those fears must be put aside. When two people confirm their understanding of a set of facts, speak with candor, and act with empathy, they are better able to solve problems and move forward.

I have outlined below a process that will help you navigate any difficult conversation.

**STEP ONE: Preparation.** Before you engage in a difficult conversation, it is essential to confirm your understanding of a series of facts and your purpose in talking to another about your perceptions. Ask yourself a series of questions, including:

*What is the situation/event that needs to be addressed? Who is involved? How long has it been an issue? Why have you not addressed it? What do you hope to accomplish by having the conversation?*

If the difficult conversation involves another's behavior, *what assumptions have you made about that person's intent?* You may feel angry, disrespected, belittled, intimidated, etc. Recognize that your feelings may not match the other person's intent.

*Have any of your "hot buttons" been pushed?* Hot buttons are behaviors that anger us and may cause us to react destructively. (Examples: A senior lawyer micro-manages assignments; a junior associate challenges a strategy; a peer takes credit for your suggestion.) Activated hot buttons are at the heart of many conflicts and can add emotional fuel to the fire.

*How do you feel about having the conversation?* If you anticipate that it will be a miserable experience, it probably will be. If you believe that some good will likely result, you enhance the chances that it will.

*How do you believe the other person would describe the same situation? What are his or her perceptions? What are his or her wants, needs and fears? What possible solutions (paths for moving forward) might he or she suggest?*

*What are your wants, needs and fears? Do you share any common concerns with the person with whom you should speak?*

**SPECIAL NOTE:** Please don't skip or rush through this step. The questions are intended to help engage your brain's prefrontal cortex—the portion of your brain where constructive, executive thinking occurs—and thereby counter emotional, fight-or-flight reactions to a particular event.

**STEP TWO: Develop an opening statement.** Create an opening statement that is clear, concise and concrete. Provide sufficient context that will help the other person understand your perspective. Emphasize that this is your perspective—how you have experienced a set of facts—without blame or judgment. Avoid using the following:

- “Should” or “shouldn't” statements;
- “You” statements;
- “Always” and “never”; and
- Inflammatory words or phrases.

**STEP THREE: Invite the other person to dialog.** Communicate that you wish to engage in a conversation. Invite the other person to share his or her own perceptions of the event as well as reactions to what you have said in your opening statement. Explain your desire to better understand a specific action or behavior. You may even wish to say, “I want you to feel free to speak honestly and openly with me. It's safe for you to do so.”

**STEP FOUR: Listen deeply.** Summarize what your co-participant has said and ask clarifying questions to ensure comprehension.

**STEP FIVE: Solve issues collaboratively.** Suggest potential next steps with a special focus on positive outcomes. Share these steps with your co-participant. Ask for his or her recommendations. To confirm mutual understanding, summarize and clarify ideas for moving forward.

**STEP SIX: Reality check.** Considering all possible alternatives, explore how well specific options work given time restrictions, other people involved, personality styles, etc.

**STEP SEVEN: Agreement.** If you've developed multiple options, together choose the most workable path forward.

**STEP EIGHT: Designate a check-in time.** Identify a time at which you'll confirm that the path forward upon which you've agreed will address your original concern. Will it work for everyone involved? Do you need to make adjustments?

**If you have been invited to participate in a difficult conversation:**

Be prepared to communicate your thoughts, actions and behaviors in a calm and logical manner. Listen to what the other party to the conversation says, which requires that you do so much more than just “hear” key messages. Confirm and clarify your understanding. Especially when a conversation focuses on a specific behavior or event, demonstrate that you are accountable for the decisions you made by explaining your thought processes.

As you respond, focus on five key concepts outlined by Kerry Patterson *et al.* in *Crucial Conversations, Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*, which is captured by the acronym STATE:

- Share** your facts, *the details that happened from your perspective*
- Tell** your story, *the assumptions you made based on your facts*
- Ask** for their view, *because you wish to create a shared understanding*
- Talk** tentatively, *remembering that your assumptions are not facts*
- Encourage** testing, *by asking questions that help clarify new understandings*

If you are completely blind-sided by an invitation to participate in a difficult conversation or by the other person’s opening statement, consider responding in the following manner: *I appreciate the information that you’ve shared with me. Can you give me one or two specific examples when my behavior, actions or statements didn’t meet your wants, needs or expectations? I’d like to take a day or two to process this information. May we schedule a follow-up meeting?*

**General ground rules for difficult conversations:**

- Take responsibility for your feelings; do not blame the other person for how you feel
- Drop any assumptions that you may have about what the other person thinks or feels
- Focus on facts
- Make problem-solving and moving forward your primary goal—not being “right”
- Position yourself so that both parties are at the same eye level
- Avoid interrupting each other throughout the conversation

**Some additional useful resources:**

If you must provide feedback, consider adapting this one-page “Planning a Feedback Session Worksheet” to fit your organization’s culture.

(<https://www.hbrfrance.fr/content/uploads/2020/03/planning-a-feedback-session-1.pdf>)

If changes in the economy mean that you or someone in your organization must deliver bad news to current employees or soon-to-be graduates who have accepted job offers, consider adapting protocols that the medical profession uses as summarized in “Delivering Bad News Well.”

(<https://www.lawpracticetoday.org/article/deliver-bad-news-well/>)

Because many difficult conversations will need to be conducted via Zoom or some other virtual meeting tool, you may wish to read “How to Look Your Best on a Webcam,” from the *New York Times*. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/realestate/coronavirus-webcam-appearance.html>)

If you need to keep little ones at home occupied throughout the duration of a difficult conversation, consider using these no-bake cookie recipes, which a grade schooler should be able to manage. ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/no-bake-dessert-recipes\\_1\\_5e8df38fc5b61ada15c10db9](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/no-bake-dessert-recipes_1_5e8df38fc5b61ada15c10db9)). There’s nothing healthy here, but at least you won’t need to worry about the house burning down while you speak.