



Working on Yourself: How to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Before going into a difficult conversation, ask yourself some questions:

1. What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? Watch for hidden purposes. You may think you have honorable goals, like educating someone or increasing connection with the person, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.
2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized, but be cautious about assuming that this was the person's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
3. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
4. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.
5. Who is the opponent? What might they be thinking about this situation? Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are their needs and fears? What solution do you think they would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as partner.
6. What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
7. How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?

Four Steps to a Successful Outcome

1. **Inquiry** - Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don't know anything (you really don't), and try to learn as much as possible about the person's point of view. Notice any urge you have to defend, reprimand, or shut off from the person. Exhale your stress and recall feelings of respect and care for the person as best you can in order to listen to what they are saying.
2. **Acknowledgment** – This means showing that you've heard and understood. Try to understand the other person so well you can make their argument for them. Then do it. Explain back to them what you think they're really going for. Guess at their hopes and honor their position. This doesn't mean you agree or will go along with their position, but people will not change unless they see that you see where they stand. Then they might. No guarantees.
3. **Advocacy** – When you sense your opponent/partner has expressed all their energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that they might be missing? Help clarify your position without minimizing theirs.
4. **Problem-Solving** – Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here. Ask your opponent/partner what they think might help. Find something you like about the solution and build on it. If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage. If you've been successful in centering, adjusting your attitude, and engaging with inquiry and useful purpose, building sustainable solutions will be possible. Be willing to ask for what you need and hear what they might also need.

Tips and Suggestions

- A successful outcome will depend on two things: how you are and what you say. How you are (centered, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.
- Acknowledge emotional energy—yours and your partner's—and direct it toward a useful purpose. It's okay to say how you are feeling or acknowledge that you are feeling defensive.
- Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.
- Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help your opponent/partner come back to center.
- Don't assume your opponent/partner can see things from your point of view.
- Practice the conversation with a friend before holding the real one.
- Mentally practice the conversation. See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you are hoping for.