

## Difficult Conversations

### Instructions for the Preparation Worksheet

Every conflict and difficult conversation is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all advice. Even so, there tend to be patterns to what goes wrong, and what helps. To assist you as you prepare for a conversation you are concerned about, consider using the preparation worksheet below. It is drawn from some of the ideas we present in the book *Difficult Conversations*.

While no amount of preparation can guarantee that the conversation will go smoothly or that you will get what you want, most people we work with report that thinking about these matters in advance helps them decide whether to have the conversation, gives them some ideas for how to go about engaging in it if they choose to, and lowers their anxiety level, at least somewhat, in the meantime. And if a conversation has already gone badly, you can use this worksheet to help you think through what you might try differently next time.

Every difficult conversation operates at three levels. We call these levels the “Three Conversations.” As a basic introduction to our method of managing difficult conversations, this worksheet will ask you to reflect on questions about each conversation.

1. **The “What Happened?” Conversation.** The first conversation is about the *substance*. Who said what, who did what? Who intended what? What did you each contribute to the problem? This section of the worksheet focuses on three main areas:

- **Understand each other’s stories.** We often get stuck thinking that our story is “right” and their story is “wrong,” when in fact there is almost always some reasonable basis for both sides’ stories. Explore each other’s stories, instead of attacking theirs and defending yours. Your goal in each column on the worksheet is to tell the story in such a way that a friend or third party might say, “Wow, that view makes a lot of sense.”

*Note: As you try to do this, you’ll notice yourself thinking things like, “Yeah, but they’re wrong,” or “That’s their view, but it’s not justified.” Those kinds of thoughts are natural. But remember, they don’t think they’re wrong. Your goal is to understand their view as they understand it. Understanding their view doesn’t mean you agree with it, or that you have to give up your view.*

- **Sort out contributions.** Just as it takes two to tango, most problems stem from things both sides said or did. With a few important exceptions, it is rarely helpful to assign blame for what went wrong. What is more helpful is to explore what each side contributed to the problem at hand. The purpose of exploring what each person has contributed is to better understand the past, and plan ways to change interactions the future.
- **Disentangle intent and impact.** We are in the habit of demonizing others’ intentions and sanitizing our own: “If they did something that hurt me, it’s because they meant to. If I did something that hurt them, it was an unintended consequence - I had good intentions!” Instead, use this part of the worksheet to disentangle intent and impact.

2. **The Feelings Conversation.** The second conversation involves the feelings each person in the conversation is grappling with. What should you do with these feelings? Should you tell them how you feel? And what about their feelings? What if they become angry, or start to cry? What will you do then?

- **My feelings.** Make a list of some of your feelings regarding what has happened. Common feelings include anger, frustration, hurt, shame, confusion, fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Many conversations also involve feelings that are considered positive, but which are nonetheless difficult to manage or express. These include joy, pride, and love. Which feelings are hardest for you to express, and why?
- **Their feelings.** Make a list of what you imagine the other person might be feeling. Which of these feelings are hardest for you to hear, and why?

*Note: Being aware of your feelings doesn’t mean you have to express your feelings. Simply being aware of Worksheet Instructions them is helpful to how you think about the situation and the conversation. If you do choose to share your feelings, be careful to express feelings and not your judgments about the other person. For example, if you feel lonely, say, “I feel lonely,” instead of*

*“Why are you so inconsiderate?” The difference between the two is crucial: the first invites conversation, the second invites an argument.*

3. **The Identity Conversation.** This is the conversation you have with yourself, about yourself. It’s the conversation that asks, “What does this all say about me? Am I a good person? Loveable? Competent?”
  - **My self-image.** Conversations are difficult because they often threaten some part of our identity. We see ourselves as competent, generous, or fair, so anything that challenges that notion of ourselves knocks us off balance. Recognize what’s at stake for you, but also “complexify” your image of yourself so that all does not hang in the balance of this one conversation (i.e. even if in this situation you have in fact behaved irresponsibly, it doesn’t necessarily make you an irresponsible person. Think of other times when you have acted responsibly).
  - **Their self-image.** What identity issues might you be triggering for them in the conversation? Are they reacting because they hear you calling them an incompetent professional, insensitive spouse, or bad parent? Once you have gotten your arms around the three conversations, the last part of the preparation worksheet will help give you direction as you go into the difficult conversation.
4. **Choosing My Purposes.** Too often, we enter difficult conversations without a clear purpose, or we adopt purposes we can’t control - like changing them or persuading them. Only they can decide to change or be persuaded, so this sets us up to be frustrated.
  - **My purposes for having a conversation.** Make a list of those things you’d like to get out of the conversation. In doing so, consider three purposes that are helpful for almost all difficult conversations:
 

**Learning: Listen first to understand, then to be understood.** You almost never know everything you need to know about the situation. Seek out the pieces of the puzzle you don’t have.

**Expression: You are an unparalleled expert on you.** So, speak for yourself and how you are experiencing the problem. Consider sharing your perspective, interests, feelings, and requests.

**Problem-Solving: You take the lead.** Once you have listened to their views and expressed your own, then you should proceed to problem solving. Ask: “Can we find a way to move forward that works for both of us?”
  - **Prepare an opening line.** Think in advance about how you might begin the conversation. One useful way to go is to set forth your purposes, so you might say: “I’d like to hear your thoughts on this problem and to express my own. Then I think we should take some time to problem solve. Does that make sense to you as a way to spend the conversation?”

**A final reminder: difficult conversations will always be part of life.** Even if your difficult conversation doesn’t go well, you can review this worksheet and ask yourself what you might try differently next time. Many difficult conversations are held over a period of time. While there will be ups and downs, eventually - with some thought and preparation - mutual understanding often increases and some learning takes place. This gives you the best chance for relationships to deepen and for problems to be well-managed.