



Quick Guide

To Having difficult conversations

Why it matters..

Having difficult conversations are an unavoidable part of workplace life and how they are handled can have a big impact on the outcome and how we feel about ourselves. A difficult conversation is anything that we don't want to talk about, for example raising performance issues with an employee, confronting an injustice from your line manager or dealing with a criticism. Having a difficult conversation involves emotions, but by learning how to have that conversation in an assertive and respectful way will have positive benefits for ourselves and others.

What do I need to do?

If during a conversation we notice that we are experiencing negative feelings e.g. we become anxious, upset, stressed, angry, frustrated its usually because something has been said that threatens our interests or that our beliefs or values are being challenged. When this happens it is our alert that we need to address the problem.

Alternatively there are times when we need to initiate a difficult conversation.

In both cases we need to proceed carefully if we are to maintain positive working relationships.

How it works

1. Identify what the exact issue is

- What specifically has made you have those negative feelings during a conversation?
- Why/when do you need to initiate a difficult conversation?
- Think about the other person's story. Remember its likely to be a difficult conversation for them too.

2. Take action

- Keep calm. Think about your body language and tone of voice.
- Ask questions in order to understand how the other person sees the situation. Don't make assumptions.
- Listen to what they are saying. It can be difficult to listen properly if the other person is expressing strong views especially if you disagree with them but you should quieten your mind and really show that you are listening.
- Demonstrate that you understand their position by summarising back to them. This will give them the opportunity to correct you if you have misunderstood.
- Explain your point of view. What you think (and if appropriate – feel) about the situation.
- Say specifically what you would like to happen.
- Work out a joint solution. If possible, it should be a solution that pleases both of you.

3. Review

- Review how the conversation went. What could you do differently the next time you need to have a difficult conversation.

How will I know if I have got it right?

Having difficult conversations are not easy, but you will know if you've got it right if you:

- Have reached a joint solution.
- Avoided becoming angry or upset during the conversation.
- Managed to state clearly what you wanted the outcome to be.
- Remembered to be respectful to yourself and the other person.
- Feel happy with how you feel about the situation (even if you didn't get your own way).

How might someone react?

The fight or flight syndrome may explain how we and others react to difficult conversations.

Our bodies have evolved to help us deal with physical danger when we are faced with a difficult situation. We instinctively respond by putting ourselves into a physical state of alert (i.e. heart pounding, adrenaline flowing) which enables us to either fight or run away.

If our instinct is to fight then we can become aggressive and unreasonable. If our instinct is to run away then we can become passive in order to avoid conflict, and go along with things we don't like or agree with.

Top tips for managing a difficult conversation

- Remain calm.
- Plan what you want the outcome to be.
- Listen actively.
- Don't make assumptions about the other person.
- Use assertive open body language.
- Keep a calm tone of voice.
- Choose your words carefully.
- Have self-respect and respect for others.

Contact Develop@essex.ac.uk for further support. For more Quick Guides go to the [webpage](#).