

Wake-up call: Learn to dive into those tough talks

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Focus on what you're hearing, not what you're saying

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Talking with people honestly and with respect creates mutually rewarding relationships

Avoiding or delaying a [difficult conversation](#) can hurt your relationships and create other negative outcomes. It may not feel natural at first, especially if you dread discord, but you can learn to dive into these tough talks by reframing your thoughts.

– **Begin from a place of curiosity and respect, and stop worrying about being liked:** Conflict avoiders are often worried about their likability. While it's natural to want to be liked, that's not always the most important thing. Lean into the conversation with an open attitude and a genuine desire to learn.

Start from a place of curiosity and respect – for both yourself and the other person. Genuine respect and vulnerability typically produce more of the same: mutual respect and shared vulnerability.

– **Focus on what you're hearing, not what you're saying:** People who shy away from conflict often spend a huge amount of time mentally rewording their thoughts. Although it might feel like useful preparation, ruminating over what to say can hijack your mind for the entire workday and sometimes even late into the night. And tough conversations rarely go as planned anyway.

So take the pressure off yourself. You don't actually need to talk that much during a difficult conversation. Instead, focus on listening, reflecting and observing. Gather as much detail as possible. Ask follow-up questions without blame.

Your genuine attention and neutrality encourage people to elaborate. For every statement the other person makes, mirror back what they've said, to validate that you understand them correctly.

– **Be direct:** Address uncomfortable situations head-on by getting right to the point. Have a frank, respectful discussion where both parties speak frankly about the details of an issue. Talking with people honestly and with respect creates mutually rewarding relationships, even when conversations are difficult.

– **Don't put it off:** Instead of putting off a conversation for some ideal future time, when it can be more easily dealt with, tackle it right away. Get your cards on the table so you can resolve the issue and move on.

– **Expect a positive outcome:** You'll struggle to follow this advice if you continue to go into a conflict telling yourself: "This is going to be a disaster." Instead, tell yourself: "This will result in an improved relationship."

Focus on the long-term gains that the conversation will create for the relationship. When your attention is focused on positive outcomes and benefits, it will shift your thinking process and inner dialogue to a more constructive place. As a result, you will grow more comfortable approaching the co-worker who constantly criticises and complains, or the subordinate who keeps underperforming.

When the opportunity presents itself to provide unsolicited negative feedback to a difficult colleague or give a less-than-positive performance evaluation, summon the courage to address the conflict head-on. – Copyright Harvard Business Review 2017

Joel Garfinkle is an executive leadership coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level* and *Difficult Conversations: Practical Tactics for Crucial Communication*