

7 tips for difficult conversations

Our biggest problem with communication is that we think everyone understands us

Tip 1: intention vs impact

We think that the person we're trying to communicate with understands our *intention*.

But what they actually understand is the *impact* that our communication has on *them*. This impact may or may not be what we intended:

- We judge ourselves on the intention.
- They judge us on the impact.

So, when you want to communicate something important, before you open your mouth, ask yourself: 'What is the impact that I want to make with this communication?'

And then check: 'Will what I am about to say have that impact?'

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Tip 2: assertive vs aggressive

Being aggressive is pushing to get your own way without thinking about other people's rights, wants, and needs.

Being assertive is about stating what you need, while considering the wants and needs of others.

You may not always get your way when you're assertive, but you stand a better chance of getting it, or of reaching a compromise, because you've been clear about your needs. Assertiveness also means saying no when you need to while still maintaining good relationships.

When you need to assert yourself to get what you need, try some of the following:

- 'I like/understand/appreciate...' or 'I don't like/don't appreciate...'
- 'What I want is...' or 'What I don't want is...'
- 'If you can do this for me...' or 'If you can't do this for me...'

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Tip 3: Situation, behaviour, impact

It's tempting to avoid having difficult conversations, but small issues can grow into further problems.

Keep the conversation specific and focused, for example:

- Situation: 'Yesterday morning when you were presenting to the board...'
- Behaviour: '...you were rather dismissive of John's ideas...'
- Impact: '...I was a bit embarrassed because it made us seem unreceptive, and I really want to keep John on board.'

Then you are in a position to discuss what your colleague can do to change the way they behave the next time this situation arises, or what they could do to make amends.

Situation, behaviour, impact also works well when giving positive feedback, for example:

- Situation: 'Yesterday morning when you were presenting to the board...'
- Behaviour: '...you were appreciative of John's ideas...'
- Impact: '...I was very pleased because I think he really values being included like that, and he does have some good ideas so I'd like to keep him involved.'

When you do this, the behaviour you have been positive about is more likely to be repeated.

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Tip 4: Always and never

Beware using the words 'always' and 'never'.

Absolutes are unlikely to be true.

When you tell someone that they 'always' do something, they think 'that's not true' and then they're likely to think that other things you say won't be true either: so other things you say will be invalidated.

- Instead of 'always' try 'often'
- Instead of 'never' try 'rarely'

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Tip 5: Replace 'but' with 'and'

'But' is a powerful little word. It has the potential to diminish or kill whatever idea, thought or experience immediately precedes it. We tend to immediately decide that everything that came before the 'but' is unimportant and is merely a lead-in to the next part – which comes across as the main point of the communication. The receiver of this communication is put on the defensive as soon as they hear the 'but'.

Look at the effect of 'but' in these sentences:

- You did a great job with this... but I think we could do it differently

(Likely to be heard as: 'You got it wrong. We should have done it my way')

- I see what you're getting at...but I believe we should try it this way"

(Likely to be heard as: 'I don't know where you were going with that. We should have done it my way')

Now read the same sentence aloud with the word 'and' instead of but:

- You did a great job with this... and I think we could do it differently

(Heard as: 'I did ok. They have an idea about how they think I could have done it better)

- 'I see what you're getting at...and I believe we should try it this way"

(Heard as: 'I can understand why you tackled it this way. Let's try another way to see what the effect is.)

'And' softens the blow a bit, giving a sense of being on the same team.

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Tip 6: Make the other person feel 'heard'

Much conflict is the consequence of misunderstanding. Sometimes it can be most quickly resolved by each party really listening carefully to the other's concerns.

Invite the other person to tell you exactly how they see the situation. Let them speak uninterrupted for as long as they need. Pay complete attention. Make eye contact and nod to indicate that you're listening and you understand.

When they finish, summarise what they have said, *entirely from their perspective*. Ask if you have got anything wrong.

Hopefully they will give you the same opportunity to put your case.

Whatever your response, the other person will know that they got their message across.

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Tip 7: Use 'clean' language

Clean Language (see: bit.ly/1OqKlQC) helps people to convey their own meaning, free of emotional or other distracting interpretation from others. You can explore things that the person you're having a difficult conversation with says without putting your own slant on it.

- So, if the other person says: 'It was so annoying at the party when Dave arrived when we were just about to leave'. Instead of answering with an assumption or a guess, such as: 'Annoying because you wanted to catch the last bus home?' you simply answer:

'What would you have liked to happen?'

- Or, if the other person says: 'I'm so stressed out – I haven't finished doing anything I wanted to do today and we have to go out soon.' Instead of offering advice about when it could be finished or what could have happened to have allowed them to get it finished, simply ask:

'What needs to happen?'

A good 'clean' question is: 'What kind of X?' (where X is the words the other person has used).

So, if someone says 'I feel strange', you could answer: 'What kind of strange?'