

TALKING ABOUT TOUGH ISSUES

PRINCIPLED LEADERSHIP TOOLKIT



Introduction

It's easy to avoid uncomfortable conversations. Many business owners put off difficult topics, or delegate those discussions to others. But part of leadership is being willing to talk directly about uncomfortable subjects.

Principled leaders understand the value of confronting serious issues head-on. For their part, employees, customers, and business partners appreciate someone who is willing to bring up "the elephant in the room" and listen to all sides of the issue.

This Toolkit contains tips on preparation, conversation, and follow-up on difficult subjects.

**BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO START A
CONVERSATION THAT MATTERS**

Dau Voire

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FLOWCHART FOR TALKING ABOUT TOUGH ISSUES

This Toolkit covers four major steps to tackling difficult conversations.

1. Preparation

2. Maintaining open minds

3. Ending a difficult conversation

4. Following up



PREPARATION WORKSHEET

Preparation can make the difference between a hard conversation and a disastrous one. When difficult topics are on the table, it's easy to become distracted by side issues or to lose your temper. This worksheet will help you set goals for the conversation and ready yourself for possible reactions, while allowing you to keep an open mind as the conversation unfolds.

1. As clearly as possible, describe the topic of the conversation. For instance, it may be an instance of misconduct, failure to meet a standard, problems with the company, organizational responses to political or social issues, or something else.

2. What perspective do you bring to the topic? For instance, did you hear about the incident third hand? What emotions does it raise for you? Do you belong to a group that is particularly affected by the topic?

3. Describe how other parties might describe that topic from their perspective:

PREPARATION WORKSHEET, CONTINUED

4. Given the topic and your goals, what further detail do you need to have a productive conversation? Can you resolve those issues prior to the conversation (for instance, through investigation or research)?

5. Now that you better understand the topic, what are your goals for the conversation? Are those goals realistic (for instance, changing an opinion might not be possible, but changing a behavior might be)?

6. What are your "non-negotiables" that must be part of the outcome of the talk?

7. Based on the answers to the prior question, determine at least two possible outcomes that would satisfy your goals (while keeping an open mind to the possibility of a cooperative solution).

PREPARATION WORKSHEET, CONTINUED

8. What are two strategies you can use to stay calm and open-minded during the talk (deep breathing, taking a break, focusing on the goal, or another technique)?

9. In addition to attentive listening, what are two methods you can use to defuse tension that may arise?



**ALL PROBLEMS EXIST IN THE ABSENCE
OF A GOOD CONVERSATION**

Thomas Leonard

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND



It can be hard to keep an open mind, especially during a challenging conversation. But giving the other side a full hearing and using their perspective to craft a collaborative solution can make all the difference. Here are some techniques to keep your mind open.

- **JUST LISTEN**

Giving the other party your full attention is key to reaching a mutually workable solution. Remind yourself that you don't need to react yet; now is the time to simply listen.

- **PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE**

While the talk you are having may be irritating at the moment, it's still just a moment. Will you remember this conversation in five years? Will it upset you at that point? Take the long view on this single interaction.

- **DON'T WORRY**

Many people put off hard conversations because they are anticipating bad outcomes. But once you are prepared for a difficult talk, there's no point in anticipating a bad result. Just let the conversation unfold, trusting in your preparation and the other party's good will.

- **YOU DON'T NEED TO BE RIGHT**

Give up the need to be right. Life is made of gray areas, and it's worth embracing that reality. Focus on your goals, rather than a need to "win" the conversation.

**EDUCATION'S PURPOSE IS TO REPLACE
AN EMPTY MIND WITH AN OPEN ONE**

Malcolm Forbes

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ENDING DIFFICULT TALKS

If the conversation stalls:

- "I think we should take a break and pick this up later. Is that ok?"
- Make time to continue the conversation the next day or as soon as possible.

If the conversation reaches a natural end:

- "Thank you for taking the time to talk. I know this isn't the easiest conversation."
- Make a commitment to follow up with any to-do items.

If the conversation becomes emotional:

- "This is a tough issue, and I want to find a cooperative way forward."
- Suggest taking a break or picking the conversation up at a mutually agreed time on neutral ground.

**A CONVERSATION IS A DIALOGUE
NOT A MONOLOGUE**

Truman Capote

NEXT STEPS

Following Up

A tough conversation isn't really done when you stop talking. Difficult subjects are likely to continue to resonate with both parties for long after the talk itself. It's important to keep communication lines open to maintain trust for the next hard conversation. Here are some follow up steps:

- Take action!

A constructive conversation generally ends with to-dos for both parties. Show your good will by promptly taking steps on your list. Give updates on what you are doing.

- Check in.

Follow up the day after a difficult conversation. Ask the other person how they are feeling and whether they have anything else they'd like to share. Checking in shows that you care, and that the conversation was hard for you as well.

- Respect progress.

As you see the other party acting on the conversation, let the other person know that you notice. For example, if you talked to an employee about substandard work and the work improves, let them know that you see the change.



**EITHER YOU FOLLOW UP
OR YOU FOLD UP**

Bernard Kelvin Clive

