

# How to Discuss Difficult Issues

By Judith Filek — President,  
Impact Communications, Inc.

*Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.*

— Ambrose Bierce

I recently had lunch with an old colleague. She arrived upset and spent the next thirty minutes talking about a difficult conversation she needed to have with someone at her office. She was anticipating the worse, and even fearing for her job if things went wrong. Sensitive issues are never easy to discuss, but there are things that you can do that will make them more likely to be successful. The key is to plan out what you are going to say and how you are going to say it.

As you consider having any difficult conversation, first think about what is upsetting about this situation. Has the other person pushed your hot buttons? If so, why? Then consider **both** your long term and short term goals. The short term goal may actually jeopardize the long term goal. Identify the difference between what you **want** from the situation and what you **need**. Obviously, **wants** are different than **needs**. Writing things out on a sheet of paper can be a big help. It can help you to see if you are being unreasonable.

Look at things from the other person's perspective. What do you think that person wants or needs? People change behavior when it fills their needs. What would make them willing to change their behavior? What's in it for them? Also, people often disagree on just what the problem is. Would their version of the story be the same as yours? If not, why?

How is this person likely to react when you do talk to him or her? Will he get defensive and threaten? Will she cry? Will he be stoical and have no visible reaction? Why will they have the reaction you are anticipating? People rarely have the intense reaction we anticipate unless we push their hot buttons or exacerbate their fears? What might they be afraid of?

What are the hot buttons we push? Really, look at things from their perspective.

Examine how you interact with them. What might you do differently? Do you interrupt? Do you belittle? Are you attentive when they talk, or do you typically multi-task because you are so busy? What does your body language say? Are you open or closed? How about the tone of your voice? Does it sound annoyed?

People hate lectures or orders. Some of us use words like "should," "never," "always," "unprofessional," or "wrong" without thinking much about them. Do you choose your words carefully, or do you get so upset that anything spills out of your mouth? Avoid any possibility of negative connotations by stripping negatively charged words from your vocabulary.

Also, consider how the person processes information? Do they care more about feelings or do they concentrate on proof? Consider their beliefs and values. How do they make their decisions? Is it different from yours? How do you accommodate their preferences?

Practice and rehearse your difficult conversation in front of your bathroom mirror or, better yet, with another person so that your voice sounds confident and you get some idea of what the other person's responses are likely to be. Make sure when you practice, you use "I" messages instead of "you" messages. People are more likely to be receptive when you tell them something from your perspective. Sentences that begin with "you" sound accusatory and make people defensive. If possible, tell the person any good things you notice about their efforts. When you do discuss the problem, do it from the third person point of view. Give just the facts, devoid of opinions. *ABC Pharmaceuticals wants to cancel their contract because deliveries have been late four out of six times in seven months.* Finally, invite the person to help you solve the problem. *Can you shed some light on what is happening and suggest some ways to save this customer?* Because you have not laid blame, you make the person receptive to problem solving.

When you have your actual conversation, be sure to utilize active listening skills. Do not focus on

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what you are going to respond. Simply listen. Do not interrupt, argue, put down or gloss over. Focus on solving the problem if the other person begins to push your hot buttons. When something is not clear, ask questions, but do not make the person feel interrogated. Make sure you understand the situation from the other person's perspective before you jointly try to figure out what to do. Periodically, paraphrase what you have heard and summarize anything that either of you will do to fix the situation. As you conclude, thank the person for allowing you to discuss and resolve a difficult topic.

Good work relationships require effort. They are important to your team's effectiveness. Take the time to plan out your difficult conversations instead of just shooting from the hip. It will help you to change face-to-face confrontations to side-by-side problem solving.

*Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. To reach us, phone (847) 438-4480 or contact our web site, [www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com](http://www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com).*