

Challenging conversations: A strategy for tough talks

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Every organization has challenging conversations. When they are ineffective, we miss the opportunity to address critical hazards, unsafe behaviors, poor tools, and inadequate training and policies. Effective conversations are also crucial in building trust and developing strong and healthy relationships, both of which contribute to a strong safety culture.

Leaders who take time to develop these skills can have a big impact on their organization as well as their personal relationships.

What are challenging conversations?

A challenging conversation is a conversation where at least one of the people involved perceives the interaction to be uncomfortable or is likely to have strong emotions about what's being discussed. These strong feelings can come from differing opinions or perceptions, incompatible needs or wants, a lack of knowledge about the situation, or fear of what could happen if the topic is discussed. A challenging conversation often involves someone in a leadership role where the outcome may have an impact on those involved. An example could be an employee's conversation with a supervisor about a safety hazard not yet addressed by the company.

Why challenging conversations are avoided or are ineffective

Many people aren't comfortable with challenging conversations and tend to be unsuccessful navigating them or they avoid

them altogether. Challenging or difficult conversations involve emotions. We may be afraid of hurting the other person's feelings or we could struggle with how we'll be perceived.

Unfortunately, emotions sometimes get in the way and we communicate ineffectively. Examples of emotionally driven behaviors during a conversation include cutting the other person off, not hearing them out, or forcing your opinion. Our emotions may lead us to postpone critical discussions, which can give the perception that we don't care about others or their safety. Here are some strategies to avoid this behavior:

Self-reflection. Take the time to think about a situation, disagreement, or challenge. Do you have all the information, or is it possible that there is a lack of understanding? What are your assumptions, feelings, and perceptions about the situation? We often create stories about a situation that drive our emotions. Take the time to examine your story about the situation. What do you really want and what is the desired outcome? By taking the time to understand our own motives, stories, and feelings you can be in a better position to have a healthy conversation. Once you have reflected on yourself it's time to focus on understanding the other person's perspective.

Seek to understand. We usually believe we are right; we know exactly what's going on and why. That's often wrong, and lacking knowledge and understanding, it's unlikely we'll have an effective and productive

“Companies with employees who are skilled at crucial conversations are two-thirds more likely to avoid injury and death due to unsafe conditions.”

– *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High* by Kerry Patterson and Joseph Grenny

discussion. It's crucial for us to first seek to understand the other person's perception of the situation. Focus on what the other person is saying and don't draw any conclusions or color the story with your own thoughts. It might be helpful to approach the situation as if you have no information at all. Seeking to understand is not the same as agreeing or solving the problem. It's just a chance to understand the other person.

Tips for success:

- Ask open ended questions
- Work to understand the other person's reality
- Create a safe space for both parties to exchange ideas
- Actively listen to the other person

Seeking to understand the other person demonstrates that you care, and you respect them. This will build goodwill, trust, and respect, all of which are needed for a healthy and productive conversation. One way to ensure that you understood what the other

person said is to follow up with a statement like: "What I heard you say is ..." or repeating statements back to the other person. This gives them a chance to clarify and avoid any misunderstandings.

Solve the Problem

Just talking about the issue doesn't decide the outcome, but the goal should be to have a plan at the end. The problem may be solved during the conversation, or there may be a plan to address it later. Either way, make sure there's enough time to create a climate of trust and respect so everyone can understand (not necessarily agree with) both sides. When solving the problem, it's important to remember that the goal isn't being right, driving your agenda, or getting your way. Instead, it's ensuring a productive and effective outcome that benefits the organization.

A good way to draw out another person's ideas is to ask them: "In a perfect world, what would be the best solution in your opinion?" or "What would it take for this to work for you?"

“Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values.”

– *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen



Activity ideas

- Challenging conversations take practice, so consider setting a meeting with employees to discuss issues from your organization. It can be a role-playing session, or simply an open discussion about how you plan to have challenging conversations with co-workers.
- Share success stories of challenging conversations held with customers, clients, coworkers, friends, or family members at team meetings.
- Start a book club to learn more. You can choose your own book, or use one of these suggestions:

Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High by Kerry Patterson and Joseph Grenny

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen