



Difficult Conversations: Top Ten Tips and Tricks for Turning Around Any Situation

By Anna Rappaport

It is possible to say anything to anyone and strengthen the relationship—yes I do mean anything. When a person truly sees that it is possible to communicate anything effectively, he or she gains access to a whole new level of freedom, self-expression, and intimacy. It also saves a lot of time and energy.

Is there someone in your life who is driving you nuts? A colleague, spouse, friend, boss, staff member, child? I'm going to share my simple strategy for dealing with any difficult conversation—in a way that actually improves the existing relationship. Coaching is about clarity and authenticity, which is the focus here, rather than strategy. You can use the following questions to prepare for virtually any difficult conversation (except maybe asking someone out—you are on your own for that one). I strongly recommend writing out your answers and/or discussing them with a friend or coach. The most challenging aspect of difficult conversations is the preparation. Once that is complete, it is relatively easy to tailor the structure of the conversation to your specific circumstances.

- 1) If you were being 100% straightforward and not worried about the other person being upset, liking you or firing you, what would you say? Feel free to use profanity. Be as rude as you like when sorting this out. Often, we spend so much energy trying to repress what we really think and feel that we never fully identify it. I'm not suggesting that you actually say this to the person, but there is value in getting to the core or what you **want** to say.
- 2) Once you know what you want to say, how can you say it in a way that is direct but not abrasive or offensive? This is not nearly as difficult as some people think. One very effective method is to tell the person your experience rather than your judgments. "I have noticed that I feel resentful when you come to work late" goes over a lot better than, "Arriving late for work is irresponsible and unprofessional." If you say the latter, the other person will likely become defensive. It's a lot harder to argue with "I feel..." though admittedly, some may try. Personally, I often say something like, "It may not be reasonable for me to feel this way, but..." Some people are concerned that it is unprofessional to express feelings at work, or that their office environment is manipulative and cutthroat and they don't want to show weakness. At this point, I could go in about ten different directions as a coach, but for the moment I will just say this: It takes courage to try something new, but this approach really does work. And frankly, the more challenging you find this, the more likely it is that the conversation will create a huge shift in your work environment. Try it, and call me if it creates a mess. I'll help you clean it up.
- 3) What do you want from the other person? Do you want a raise? Do you want him to leave you alone? Do you want him to admit that you are right? Do you want a change in

behavior? If you were to form this as a request what would it be? Requests are most likely to lead to positive change if they include specific actions. “I want you to improve your writing” may be clear to you, but the odds are it won’t be clear to the other person. “Improve” is open to interpretation, whereas “I want you to have a colleague edit your work before you give it to me” is more objective and therefore more likely to yield positive results.

- 4) What is your intention in raising the issue? Setting an intention is probably the single most valuable thing you can do prior to beginning a difficult conversation. If the reason you are broaching the subject is that you want to improve your relationship with the other person or to achieve a goal that you both value, such as providing excellent client service, then the conversation will almost certainly be productive. Where most of us get into trouble is that we are uncertain how to approach a difficult conversation and so we avoid dealing with it until we get really angry—at which point our intention is probably to show the other person she is wrong. Obviously that doesn’t go over too well. The other person knows that it takes courage to raise uncomfortable issues. So, if you do address the subject in a way that is respectful and results-oriented, the other person usually will be appreciative and the conversation productive. Speaking of respect....
- 5) What do you like or respect about the other person? Even if you think he is a self-centered jerk, there will be something that you like or admire. Perhaps he is very hard-working and committed. Maybe he tells good jokes or is well organized. Whether you choose to mention these things in the conversation is up to you, but getting clear about the person’s good qualities will shift the way you interact with him. People can sense respect. There is no faking it. Find a quality you genuinely value and focus on that when preparing for the conversation.
- 6) What is predictable if this issue is not addressed? What would be the impact on you, the other person, the relationship, and others? Will you grow further and further apart until the kids go to college and you get divorced? Will you continue to work together in a state of quiet misery and resentment for the next two to ten years until one of you gets a new job? This is the time to look at the consequences of not addressing the issue. You might decide not to address it because you would rather be angry than effective. That’s fine—just get clear for yourself what you are choosing.
- 7) How have you contributed to the situation? Even if the other person is 99% at fault, there is inevitably some small action or failure to act for which you can take responsibility. Even something as simple as ignoring a behavior the first few times it manifests is something for which you could apologize. If you had addressed the issue earlier, before the situation deteriorated, you could have avoided the weeks or months of hurt feelings, tension, etc. I would strongly suggest expressing regret for whatever part you played in the problem. If you say you are sorry, the other person will realize that you are not attacking her, but rather genuinely trying to improve the situation. Also, we all want to be right. So, if the other person actually is 99% at fault, she may tend to be defensive. If you apologize, it removes her concern that she will be blamed and creates the space for a productive conversation. Note of warning—apologizing in order to get the other person to respond in kind will only

lead to trouble. An apology will often beget an apology, but if you **expect** it, you will probably be disappointed.

- 8) What reaction are you scared of? Are you worried he will yell at you? Be angry with you? Fire you? Turn others in the office against you? Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to determine if this reaction is actually likely or if it's just fear talking. If you were in his shoes, what would you do? Could your anticipation of dire consequences emanate from judgments you made about him? If you see that the fear may not be justified, can you accept that it is a normal reaction when trying something new and that it doesn't actually mean anything except that you are human? Friends of mine created a useful distinction between terrified and petrified. Petrified is being scared and not taking action. Terrified is when you are scared but take action anyway.
- 9) Can you be okay with it, if the other person gets upset? Human beings want to be heard and accepted, but we often think others shouldn't feel sad, hurt, angry, etc. There is a lot of power in remembering that both of you are human. Your reactions may not be rational, but that is okay. Very often, if you just let the other person vent her feelings and don't react in a negative way, it will allow her to move through the feelings, and she will be grateful to you for accepting her without judgment. I realize that it is easy enough to say this, but for many people it may be challenging to stay calm in the face of another person's anger, sadness or frustration. One approach is to look at the positive side of the person expressing those feelings. First of all, if she didn't care, she would not be upset. Intense feelings can be seen as evidence of commitment and caring. Also, if emotions do not come out directly, they will be expressed another way—one that will probably be much more destructive. So, finding out what the other person is thinking and feeling is actually a gift because it provides an opportunity to address the issue. It's almost impossible to improve a situation if you don't know how the other person is feeling about it.
- 10) Would you rather be right or find a way to resolve this? Consider that being right is the booby prize. What do you want in life? To be loved? To make money? To achieve? To make a difference? None of these require being right all the time, and in many cases an apology or admitting to a mistake is a far more effective method for achieving your goals. Try not to confuse the decision to take responsibility for your part in a situation with forgiveness as a moral imperative. Consider forgiveness as just a practical way of making your life easier and more pleasant—like a microwave oven. It is no fun to feel angry and resentful. Generally, the other person is not affected significantly by your emotional state, so the person who benefits the most from forgiveness is you.

If you would like further information or coaching on this subject, please contact Anna Rappaport at (301) 588-3947 or Anna@ExcellerationCoaching.com