

# Tips for Tough Conversations: Resolving Issues and Moving On

*Difficult issues must be addressed head-on so everyone can focus on positive productivity.*

By Scott Herrmann, Ed.D., and Margaret Clauson, Ed.D.

**Y**ou just received a complaint about Judy, a staff member in your department. Apparently, Judy was rude and abrupt when responding to another employee's question. This complaint was not the first you have received about her. On occasion, you have even witnessed this behavior yourself. You always assumed that her outbursts were isolated incidents or you simply chalked it up to her having a bad day.

Although you have been concerned about Judy's behavior, you have never discussed it with her. You admit to yourself that you hoped the problem would just go away. Who can blame you? No one really likes conflict and confrontation.

When faced with this type of situation, we often worry about damaging relationships or worsening the situation. We also weigh the cost of dealing with the other person's defensiveness and hostility against the



likelihood that the problem is . . . well . . . really a problem.

As is often the case, the problem has not fixed itself, and Judy's behavior has not changed. In fact, it has worsened lately and the complaints have increased. You know that you need to have a conversation with Judy, and you know it will be difficult.

## There is no “typical” difficult conversation.

As leaders, we are frequently called on to engage in tough conversations. Such conversations can take various forms. They can be about the behavior or job performance of an employee. Sometimes, we have to deliver bad news.

There is no “typical” difficult conversation. Often, it depends on the topic, the timing, and the relationship of the people involved. When we find ourselves avoiding the subject or we feel that knot growing in our stomach, we know the conversation will be difficult.

### Avoiding vs. Having the Conversation

Avoiding a difficult conversation comes at a cost. The longer we avoid it, the longer we live with the problem and delay the solution. The reasons for such conversations often do not go away. Left unaddressed, they may even worsen.

As time goes on, a problem left unaddressed may affect more people. Staff members who are not directly involved may become disillusioned or frustrated with what they view as someone “getting away with” undesirable or counterproductive behavior. Coworkers learn to accept, ignore, or avoid dealing with each other. Either way, the overall climate and productivity of the department or organization suffer.

Despite our initial reluctance, effectively engaging in a difficult conversation has tangible benefits. Communication is enhanced and relationships are improved. Dealing with issues openly and honestly can lead to increased productivity and an improved climate as resources are refocused on department goals and the organization's mission. By engaging in a meaningful conversation, participants come to a shared understanding not only of the issue itself but also of a mutual commitment to a solution.

### Setting the Conversation's Goals

People tend to assume that everyone views things the same way that they do. We are often surprised when others have a very different standpoint from our own. What seems obvious to us can be foreign to other people. Truth is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, two people

can experience the same situation and come away with very different versions of the “truth.”

When individuals hold very different truths about the same situation, the resulting conversation will likely be difficult. Therefore, a primary goal of a difficult conversation is to create a shared truth or perspective. We must seek first to understand before we can make ourselves understood.

Another goal of the difficult conversation is to ensure that both parties have the opportunity to express their feelings and viewpoints. Too often we claim, “It's not personal.” In reality, it is often very personal to at least one of the participants. Our identity is tied directly to our work and how others view us. Thus, when confronted with less-than-positive feedback, we tend to connect that feedback not just with our jobs but with ourselves as people.

### Planning the Conversation

In preparing for the conversation, it is important to have a clear vision of why the conversation is necessary. What is the core issue? What problems are created by the current situation? Identifying the core issue helps frame the next steps.

Where and when you have the conversation are important considerations. You must allocate enough time to adequately conduct the conversation, allowing for genuine dialogue and thoughtful processing of information. The hallway or department lounge is not the place, nor is “oh, by the way” the appropriate conversation starter. Once the meeting is scheduled, it should not be canceled unless extraordinary circumstances arise. Avoid interruptions.

## Where and when you have the conversation are important considerations.

Before the conversation, do your homework. Gather the facts and background information related to the concern. Be sure to have a few specific examples of the behavior or issue to share with the employee.

As the conversation approaches, keep in mind that you may not know the whole story. The employee will likely have additional information, and will even more likely have an entirely different perspective resulting in conflicting truths. Dealing with these conflicting truths openly and honestly enables us to shift from the mindset of “delivering a message” to understanding each other's perspective and cooperatively developing a solution.

### Starting the Conversation

The opening moments of a conversation need to be well planned. The issue needs to be identified in simple

language and supported with one or two specific examples. Do not get bogged down in discussing specific incidents. It is important to stress that they are simply examples of a broader concern.

Share your feelings about the issue. Why is it bothersome? What problems have been created? As concerns are discussed, providing an opportunity for the employee to give his or her perspective is equally important. Acknowledge his or her feelings.

Invite the employee to engage in collaborative problem solving. Listen carefully. A critical component of any conversation is listening. Listening is the key to understanding the other person's perspective and learning his or her truth. Remember, a primary goal is to find common ground and agreement on the truth. Although there will never be 100% agreement, focusing on the similarities rather than on the differences will help improve the communication and the chances for resolution.

### Having the Conversation

During the conversation, monitoring your body language and tone of voice is important. Body language communicates volumes about your openness to listening and your willingness to understand the employee's perspective. Tone of voice should be calm and even.

State your viewpoint of the situation firmly, clearly, and calmly. Use nonthreatening language such as "I have noticed . . ." or "I wonder. . ." Such language lessens the chance that the employee will feel under attack and react defensively.

Listen carefully to what that person says and look for ways to move toward a common truth. At the same time, be clear with expectations or suggested solutions. Identify what success will look like. Be ready to provide ideas and resources to support that person's efforts to address the concerns.

### Avoiding Pitfalls

**What's my next line?** Don't overprepare for the conversation. Avoid the temptation to develop a "script" and talk to, rather than with, the employee. Real listening and finding a "common truth" stop for both parties when an intended conversation turns into a lecture. If that happens, we lose the opportunity to engage in problem solving and to truly address the issue.

**You've got it all wrong.** Avoid threatening, accusing, blaming, or backing the employee into a corner. Phrases such as "you're wrong," "you'd better . . .," or "you have to . . ." almost guarantee a defensive response. He or she will feel attacked. As a result, he or she may respond either by arguing or by shutting down. Either way, the opportunity to find common ground and develop a true solution to the issue can quickly be lost.

**It's not your fault.** At times, in an effort to "soften the blow," we may tend to make light of the problem by providing excuses for the employee or soft-peddling the message. Efforts to be "kind" may backfire as that person hears a completely different message than intended. Phrases such as "I was hoping . . ." or "I know you did not intend . . ." communicate to that person that he or she does not have to assume personal responsibility for the issue.

## Look for ways to move toward a common truth.

**Wait, what concern?** If the message is too vague or nonspecific, or the conversation is allowed to wander, the employee may possibly walk away with no idea that there is even an issue, let alone a need to change. We need to listen and learn and help remove obstacles to positive change. At the same time, however, the core expectation that the employee assume responsibility for implementing the desired change cannot be obscured. Keep your message focused on the issue.

**You're great!** Except. . . . Another common mistake that people make when tackling a difficult conversation is to surround the concern with positive feedback. They follow the old (but ineffective) strategy of starting off with a positive, addressing the core problem or concern, and ending with a positive. This method has a couple of potential problems: It may confuse the listener about the true concern. It may also send the message that all positive feedback is followed by criticism, effectively diminishing the effect of positive feedback when you do give it.

### Taking the Steps to Resolution

One of the hardest parts of a difficult conversation is deciding to have it. Overcoming avoidance and tackling the issue head on are the first steps to resolving the concern. You may be direct and clear about concerns and expectations and still maintain positive relationships. When issues are addressed and the air is cleared in a professional, cooperative manner, everyone can focus on being more productive.

Oh . . . and remember Judy? Outside your door, you hear her being rude and abrasive on the phone yet again. It's time to have that conversation.

---

**Scott Herrmann, Ed.D.**, is superintendent of the Bannockburn School District in Bannockburn, Illinois. Email: [Sherrmann@bannockburnschool.org](mailto:Sherrmann@bannockburnschool.org)

**Margaret Clauson, Ed.D.**, is assistant superintendent of the Wilmette School District in Wilmette, Illinois. Email: [Clausonm@wilmette39.org](mailto:Clausonm@wilmette39.org)