

Difficult Conversations

Exercises to help you practice difficult conversations

A) Reread the Dashman case from Mr. Larson's perspective. Suppose he really wanted to help Ms. Post. Or suppose that his continued employment hinges upon her success, and the positive relationship between them. What might he have done differently? Might he have prepared a "background" memo she could have read prior to committing to her decision. Might he have talked to her about his willingness to help her in any way, particularly in terms of "company culture." Might he have offered to introduce her around a bit? In general, he might have done more to convince her he would be part of the team, and inform her in ways that were helpful and NOT challenging

B) Reread the Sacramento case from Hausman's point of view, with the assumption that the protagonist is the son of the president of the company. What might Hausman have done to forestall the problem now on his hands?? Might he have gone over his assignment with the protagonist, making sure he understood the new expectations? Might he have talked with him about his experience with Compton, and use that opportunity to highlight differences in managerial style? In general, might he have spent more time preventing a flap from happening, thereby saving the HUGE amount of time that will be spent explaining himself to the president?

Guidelines for Managing Difficult Conversations

These situations are difficult because they involve a direct threat to the person's career. The same type of threat is involved in, for example, seeking a raise or a promotion, resolving a conflict with another employee, or arguing against a company strategy or policy. "Going along" is sometimes good advice, but not always; there are times when you can and must stand your ground. Different situations will require different approaches, but there are some general rules to keep in mind.

1. BE STRATEGIC—Who is your audience? When is the best time to talk to this person? What is his/her attitude toward you? What is the best way to frame your argument for this audience? Who are you? What do you want to achieve? What is the context in which this request is being made? *Example:* If the company is reporting a loss for the quarter, budgets are being slashed, and your performance is way below last year's, there is no strategy other than dumb luck that will work in getting you a raise. But that might be a good time to bring up the cost-savings ideas that got no attention last year.

2. **PICK YOUR GROUND**—Never let yourself be pushed into a confrontation. Taking on an issue demands a strategy, and a good strategy involves a good time and a good place. Picking your ground also means only going to the wall for things that really matter. Remember the saying “Act in haste, repent at leisure”? It’s true.
3. **KEEP IT PRIVATE**—Never have it out with a superior in public; you will not win. No matter how right you are, your superior will be thinking about how he/she looks in front of the other employees rather than about what you are saying. Keeping it private also means not trying to use others as leverage. Saying, “The other managers agree with me on this” sounds good to you, but sounds like mutiny to your superior. The better plan is to talk with the other managers about the issue to get an idea of where they stand, and then volunteer to “find out” what they think if your superior demands that you do so.
4. **MAKE IT PART OF SOMETHING GOOD**—It’s not your brilliance or someone else’s stupidity you want to talk about; rather, it’s how you implement the company’s plan, follow the CEO’s lead, build teamwork, meet the demands of the marketplace, answer the needs of the customer, etc. *Example:* “I’m sorry Doug sees it that way. From my standpoint, I am just doing everything I can to make last year’s record performance by my group even better this year.”
5. **BE ANTI-CONFRONTATIONAL**—By this we mean **AVOID** confrontation by practicing good communication. It takes time, but it works. And it doesn’t take anywhere near as much time, effort, worry and stress as confrontation does. If you deserve a pay increase or a promotion, and you don’t get one, maybe nobody knows the reasons you deserve it. If you have disputes with another employee, maybe it’s in your interest to resolve them together rather than have a superior come in and do it. Note that in the two cases we read, it is the **ANTICIPATION** of a problem that leads to some possible solutions; waiting for the problem to arrive means it **IS** a problem.
6. **BE A TEAM PLAYER**—You did everything right, you got the chance to deliver your well-thought-out message and...nothing. Still no sale. OK, accept the decision, thank the person for his/her time, and **SEEK ADVICE**. If it’s salary or promotion, ask what you would have had to do to qualify. If it’s a dispute, ask the person how he/she would have handled it.

These situations are always challenging, but they always hold within them some kind of opportunity. Go into such situations as few times as possible, but get something out of every one. Remember, these are stressful for your audience as well. If you are successful in getting what you sought, make sure you also have the resources/ authorization or whatever else you need to get it done **BEFORE** you leave. You really don’t want to go back for at least a little while! If you don’t get what you want, seek advice on how to get it the next time. Remember, this lets you “make it part of something good”—the boss’s sound advice! Finally, be aware that right after the boss

says “No” to one of your requests, he/she may be looking to say yes to something else, particularly if it’s small relative to what you originally asked for. WWII bombers always had secondary targets in case they couldn’t get the primary ones, and so should you. No raise?-- How about an early salary review? No changes in the marketing plan?—How about including you in the early planning stages next time?

In the end, though, nothing works as well as NOT having to get into confrontations. With the right strategy, you can succeed, but there are always risks. Using good communication skills allows you to anticipate many confrontations, and defuse them before they can develop into real threats.

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