

7 Tips for Navigating Difficult Conversations

A team member is chronically late. A supplier sent the wrong order – again. A client texts you at all hours. When a situation like one of these needs addressing, just follow our tips to find a fix without damaging the relationship.

TIP 1

Schedule a Time

Unless it's an emergency, schedule a specific time to talk with your contact and tee up the topic so they're not caught off guard. Then, be sure to have the conversation as soon as possible so important details are still fresh for both of you and they don't spiral into speculation.

TIP 2

Talk Face-to-Face

Body language and other nonverbal cues can soften a hard-to-hear message. Whenever possible, meet in person or host a video call – especially when discussing a sensitive topic. Be mindful of your facial expressions so they reinforce (rather than contradict) what you're saying.

TIP 3

Script It Out

It may feel awkward, but you're less likely to forget what you want to say if you write everything out in advance. Then, practise before you meet so you can maintain eye contact. Just remember, it's still a two-way conversation so allow space for them to process and respond.

TIP 4

Set the Tone

A firm yet respectful tone can head off negative reactions so the other person is better able to hear what you have to say. Volume, clarity, and pacing are also important, so don't rush or raise your voice. And as always, staying focused on the solution will help keep things positive.

TIP 5

Lead with Empathy

As difficult as it may be for you, being on the receiving end is even harder. Try to actively listen to the other person by acknowledging their experience and respecting their feelings – even if you disagree. Reassurance can defuse an argument and lead to a favourable outcome.

TIP 6

Outline Next Steps

Once you address the issue, discuss a plan for moving forward to end on a productive note. This is especially important if the issue isn't resolved on the call, which is often the case. After your talk, send an email to recap the main points and confirm next steps to keep things moving in the right direction.

TIP 7

Keep Your Cool

If things get heated or personal, take a deep breath and say, "I know this is a difficult topic, but I'd like to keep our conversation productive." Then, steer the discussion toward common goals. By staying calm, open, and collaborative, you'll make it easier for the other person to do the same.