

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS



Challenging Conversations

A challenging conversation is anything you find it hard to talk about due to fear of the consequences.



The ABC Dilemma: Avoid, Back-down or Confront?

If we avoid or back-down from the problem, we feel taken advantage of, our feelings fester, or we wonder why we didn't stick up for ourselves, and we'll rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things.



But if we confront the problem, things may get worse. There is no such thing as a diplomatic hand – delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. There's no way to throw it with tact or to outrun the consequences.

Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to hand grenade once you've pulled the pin. Challenging conversations are a normal part of life.

*"The greatest conflicts are not between two people but between one person and himself.
The problem isn't in your actions, it's in your thinking".*

What Makes Conversations Challenging?

Research done by Sue Clark or Mel Myers found that the difficult conversations people reported in the workplace had a number of recurring features and negative feelings associated with them.

Intractability

Problems seem intractable because they have a long history. Just about everything has been tried and failed in an effort to resolve them. In these situations people enter the conversation with a great deal of baggage from the past which they find almost impossible to put to one side.

Taboo

The issues concerned seem so delicate or sensitive that it is impossible to mention them, let alone discuss them in any open and objective way.

Threat

People feel threatened, harassed or bullied by perceived criticism of their behaviour, competence or judgement.



Aggression

Opinions are put forward and judgements made in an aggressive or dogmatic way. Alternatives to the point of view being expressed are dismissed with no genuine consideration of their merit.

Evasion

People employ very effective and socially acceptable techniques to evade or deny the discussion of difficult issues. In doing so, they also evade accountability.

*"One of the greatest arts in life is learning how to disagree without being disagreeable.
Making the un-discussable, discussable".*

William Ury

The 3 Difficult Conversations

All difficult conversations share a common structure. Understanding the structure is essential to improving how you handle your most challenging conversations.

There's more here than meets the ear...

We need to understand not only what is said, but what is not said. We need to understand what we are thinking and feeling but not saying to each other. The gap between what you are both thinking that you are saying is part of what makes a conversation difficult.

Each difficult conversation is really 3 conversations...

❶ The "What Happened?" Conversation	Disagreement about what happened.
❷ The "Feelings" Conversation	Each conversation asks and answers questions about feelings. Even if they are not addressed, they leak in.
❸ The "Identity" Conversation	The conversation we each have with ourselves about what the situation means to us. This determines if we are off-centre and anxious or if we feel "balanced".

What we **can** change is the way we respond to each of these challenges. We can explore what information the other person has, and we can examine our own inner issues.

❶ The "What Happened?" Conversation

What's the Story Here?

The Truth Assumption – we often fail to question one key assumption – I am right, you are wrong. There's only one hitch: I am not always right! Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what is true, but about what is important.

The Intention Invention – the error we make is simple: we assume we know the intention of others when we don't. Intentions are invisible. We make them up.

The Blame Game – the third error we make is that most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who's to blame for the mess we're in. Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong and how we might correct them going forward.

❷ The Feelings Conversation

What Should We Do with Our Emotions?

An Opera Without Music – difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings. They are an integral part of the conflict. Understanding feelings, talking about feelings and managing feelings are among the greatest challenges of being human. Talking about feelings is a skill that can be learned.

❸ The Identity Conversation

What Does This Say About Me?

This conversation offers us significant leverage in managing our anxiety and improving our skills in the other two conversations. The identity conversation is about what I am saying to myself – about me. Something beyond the apparent substance of the conversation is at stake for you.

Keeping Your Balance – as you begin to sense the implications of the conversation for your self-image, you may begin to lose your balance. This may cause us to lose confidence in ourselves, lose concentration, or forget what we were going to say.

The CLOSED vs OPEN Approach?

Those conversations that we already view as being 'difficult' will become even more challenging if we adopt the typical CLOSED approach.

CLOSED ☒	OPEN ☑
• <i>Encourages competition, defensiveness</i>	• <i>Encourages collaboration, openness</i>
I am right, you are wrong	Let's resolve our differences
I'm going to argue from my 'story'	I'm going to find out your 'story'
I know your intentions	I'm going to explore your intentions
I know who to blame here	I'm going to focus on the future
It's you who is making me feel bad	I'm responsible for how I feel, not you
It's you who needs to change	I'm open to accept I'm not perfect
I assume you see things in the same way that I do	I'm going to explore how you see things
I'm going to have you understand me	I'm wanting to try to understand you
I'm going to tell you what I think/feel	I'm going to listen to what you think/feel
I'm going to be led by my emotions	I'm going to manage my emotions

Moving to an 'OPEN' Conversation



Once you understand the challenges inherent in these 3 conversations and the common mistakes we make in each, you are likely to find that your purpose for having a particular conversation will need to shift to the 'OPEN' approach.

You come to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved, the reality of joint contribution to the problem, the central role feelings play, and what the issues mean to each person's self-esteem and identity.

Instead of wanting to persuade and get your own way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your own point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward.

Let's now consider how we can move towards a more 'OPEN' conversation...

① The "What Happened?" Conversation

Stop arguing about who's right: explore each other's 'stories'

We think they are the problem – they think we are the problem!

We each make sense in our 'story' of what happened – difficult conversations arise at precisely those points where important parts of our story collide with another person's story. The collision is a result of our stories simply being different, with neither of us realising it.



Arguing blocks us from exploring each other's stories – it inhibits our ability to learn how the other person sees the world. We tend to trade conclusions but neither conclusion makes sense in the other person's story.

Arguing without understanding is unpersuasive – it inhibits change. People almost never change without first feeling understood. To get anywhere in a disagreement, we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within it. And we need to help them understand the story in which our conclusions make sense. *To move forward, first understand where you are.*

Don't assume they meant it: separate intent from impact – the question of who intended what, is central to our own story about what's happening in a difficult situation. Intentions strongly influence our judgements of others. We assume their intentions from the impact they have on us – often assuming the worst and treating ourselves more favourably!



Abandon the blame game – in our story, who to blame seems clear. Blaming is about judging and looks backwards. It creates defensiveness, reduces openness and inhibits problem solving. When blame is the goal, understanding is the casualty.

② The Feelings Conversation

Have your feelings (or they will have you!)

Feelings matter – they are often at the heart of difficult conversations. Our failure to acknowledge and discuss feelings derails a startling number of difficult conversations. And the inability to deal openly and well with feelings can undermine the quality and health of our relationships.

Screening out – we try to frame feelings out of the problem. Solving problems seems easier than talking about emotions. The problem is that when feelings are at the heart of what's going on, they are the business at hand and ignoring them is nearly impossible. In many difficult conversations, it is really only at the level of feelings that the problem can be addressed.



Unexpressed feelings leak into the conversation – they can alter your manner and tone of voice. They express themselves through your body language or facial expressions.

Unexpressed feelings burst into the conversation – for some people, the problem is not that they are unable to express feelings, but they are unable not to!

Unexpressed feelings make it difficult to listen – good listening requires an open and honest curiosity about the other person. Buried emotions draw the spotlight back to us. It's hard to hear someone when we are feeling unheard. Our listening ability often increases remarkably once we have expressed our own strong feelings.

Learn that your feelings are as important as theirs – when you are more concerned about others' feelings than your own, you teach others to ignore your feelings too.



***Beware:** One of the reasons you haven't already raised the issue may be that you don't want to jeopardise the relationship. Yet by not raising it, the resentment you feel will grow and slowly erode the relationship anyway.*

Acknowledge feelings – each side must have their feelings acknowledged. Let people know that what they have said has made an impression on you, that their feelings matter to you, and that you are working to understand them.

③ The Identity Conversation

Ground your identity – ask yourself what's at stake.

Difficult conversations threaten our identity – our anxiety results not just from facing the other person, but having to face ourselves. The conversation threatens our identity – the 'story' we tell ourselves about ourselves – and having our identity threatened can be very disturbing.

Three core identity issues seem particularly common, and often underlie what concerns us most during difficult conversations.

- Am I Competent?
- Am I a Good Person?
- Am I Worthy?



Vulnerable Identities:

All-or-nothing – the main problem with all-or-nothing thinking is that it leaves our identity extremely unstable, making us oversensitive to feedback.

Denial – Clinging to a purely positive identity leaves no place in our self-concept for negative feedback. The only way to keep my identity intact is to deny feedback – to figure out why it's not really true, why it doesn't really matter, or why what I did wasn't actually a mistake.

Denial requires a huge amount of energy, and sooner or later the story we're telling ourselves is going to become untenable. The bigger the gap between what we hope is true and what we fear is true, the easier it is for us to lose our balance.

Exaggeration – is the alternative to denial. In negative feedback we not only adjust our self-image but we flip it. When we exaggerate, we let their feedback define who we are – we act as if the other person's feedback is the only information we have about ourselves.



Fight or Flight?

"Sometimes when we're under stress, we forget to think, and that's the time when we most need to think"

Bill Clinton

The human body has an inborn, "pre-wired" response for dealing with the situations we perceive as being challenging or dangerous – the "fight or flight" response.



This response is our body's own protective response to danger and, in essence, it is a mechanism designed to protect us. It triggers psychological and physical changes in our bodies.



The release of chemicals can give very real physical symptoms such as rapid heart rate and breathing, dry mouth, sweating etc. These symptoms are designed to give us the ability to 'fight or flee' when faced with a perceived challenging or difficult situation.

By itself, this response is normal and healthy. However, it is when the "fight/flight" response occurs too frequently or is greatly prolonged that we begin to experience the negative effects of stress.

By their very nature challenging conversations (or even just the prospect of one) can trigger us into the fight/flight response – and thereby lead us to an unproductive discussion.

Coping Strategies

As we face our challenging conversations, we all develop coping strategies to deal with them. Noticing when we are utilising our coping strategies is a great way of identifying when a conversation is becoming challenging – and we are entering fight/flight mode.

SILENCE (Flight)

Any act to purposefully withhold information from the pool of meaning...

- **Masking:** understating or selectively showing true opinion – sarcasm, sugar-coating
- **Avoiding:** steering completely away from sensitive topics – we may talk but we avoid the subject
- **Withdrawing:** pulling out of conversation altogether – we exit the conversation or room



VIOLENCE (Fight)

Any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control or compel others to your own point of view...

- **Controlling:** Cutting others off, overstating your facts, changing subjects, direct questioning
- **Labelling:** Putting a label on people or ideas so we can dismiss them as a category/stereotype
- **Attacking:** Moving from the argument to making the person suffer – belittling, threatening



The Ladder of Inference

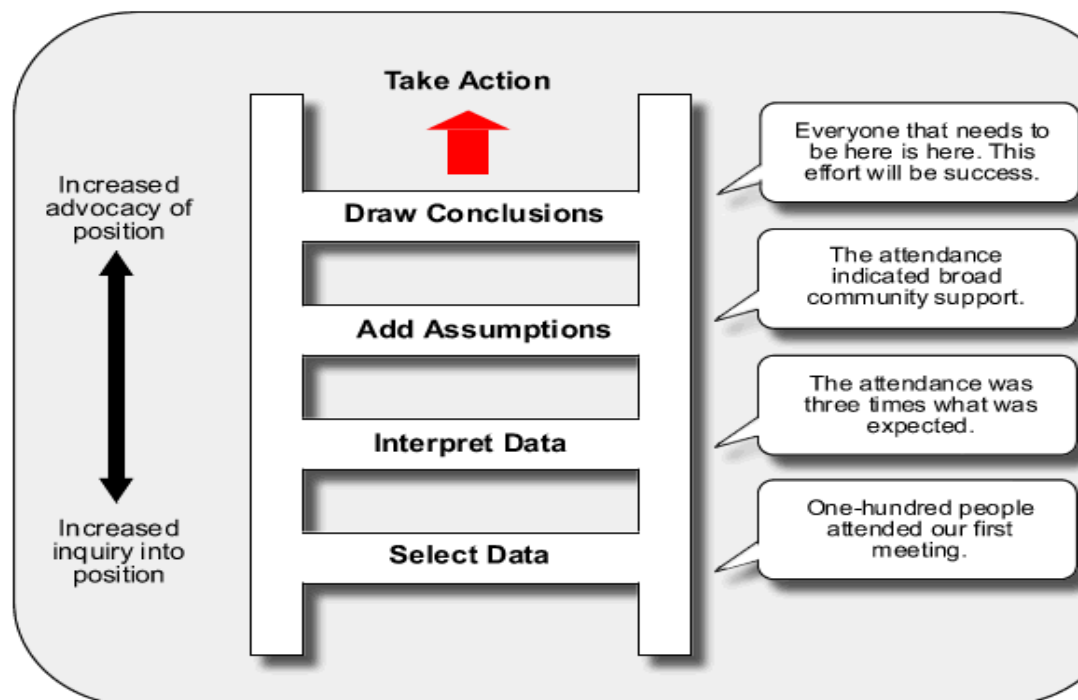
*"It's not our differences that separate us,
it's our judgments of each other that do."*

The Ladder of Inference, created by Chris Argyris and expanded by Peter Senge, is a useful tool for effective communication and learning. This tool encourages us to examine our "self-generating beliefs," which result from interpretations and conclusions based on our past observations and experiences.

As a result, our conversations — especially among highly diverse people — tend to be less than productive, because we simply don't really know or understand why we say and believe what we do.

3 ways you can improve your challenging conversations:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Become more aware of your own thinking and reasoning | ⇒ ⇒ ⇒ Reflection |
| 2. Make your thinking and reasoning more visible to others | ⇒ ⇒ ⇒ Advocacy |
| 3. Learn more about others' thinking and reasoning | ⇒ ⇒ ⇒ Inquiry |



How the Ladder of Inference Works

The Ladder is a graphical representation of how we form our most fundamental beliefs. It starts below the first rung with the things we see, experience and are exposed to.

From there, we **select** relevant pieces of information that we will choose to focus on. Next, we **interpret** what we've just seen. Then we tap our memory of past experiences and add our **assumptions** and meanings. This leads on to us drawing **conclusions** about the data – forming new beliefs or affirming old ones. Finally, we take **action** based on our new beliefs.





All this happens almost automatically, subconsciously and instantly. Each time we are confronted with the same or similar circumstances (e.g. situation, problem, person etc), we merely repeat the process.

Over time, our thoughts lead to action, become habits, and evolve into beliefs. However, this is an invisible cycle in which others around us can only guess why we act or speak as we do!

The Ladder in Action...



Two days have passed and Susie still hasn't returned your phone call.

You figure that she's ignoring you and assume that she isn't interested in what you have to say. You conclude that there's no point in doing business with her, believing that people who want to work with you will be prompt. You act by crossing Susie off your consultants list.

Trapped by what's blindingly obvious — yet incorrect!

The Ladder of Inference is quite easy climb! We all take in data, and apply our personal filters (beliefs, values, past experiences, etc) to make sense of what's happening. What we have to remember is that this is a one-person climb. While the conclusion we jumped to seems blindingly obvious to us, there was just one set of data points — our own!

To assure that you're reaching the right conclusions:

- **Test the observable data.** *Could there be something wrong with my phone or Susie's? Did I call the right number? Could Susie be out of the office and have forgotten to change her voicemail message?*
- **Ask for more data.** *A follow-up phone call or email to Susie: I see you haven't returned my call and wanted to check in to see if everything is OK. Ask others if they know where Susie might be.*
- **Test your assumptions.** *Why would Susie not want to do business with me after that great introductory meeting we had? Could I be over-reacting?*



How the ladder of inference impacts on communication...

In conversations, our use of the Ladder of Inference is manifested in the way we continuously express ourselves by "advocating" our position. Unfortunately, this closes out opportunities for us to reflect and challenge our own thinking, hear and respond effectively to what others need to know about our thinking, and allow others to influence our thinking.

The result can be confusion or misunderstanding, and occasionally outright resistance to our position. Resistance, of course, reduces the likelihood of finding common ground to work more closely together.

Simply put, moving up the ladder is all about "advocacy," while moving down the ladder promotes "inquiry."



Having a productive conversation involves balancing and managing the process of advocacy and inquiry, so each party in the conversation has a better understanding and appreciation for other points of view.

By **reflecting** on what we want to say, and working to enhance our ability to balance **both advocacy and inquiry**, we can hone the skills necessary for productive conversations.

How to Apply the Ladder of Inference

REFLECTION: To reflect on what you say or think

When...	You might say...
Strong views are expressed without reasoning or illustrations...	"You may be right, but I'd like to understand more. What leads you to believe...?"
The discussion goes off on an apparent tangent...	"I'm unclear how that connects to what we've been saying. Can you say how you see it as relevant?"
You doubt the relevance of your own thoughts...	"This may not be relevant now. If so, let me know and I will wait."
You perceive a negative reaction in others...	"When you said [give illustration], I had the impression you were feeling [fill in the emotion]. If so, I'd like to understand what upset you. Is there something I've said or done?"
You perceive a negative reaction in others...	"This may be more my problem than yours, but when you said [give illustration], I felt... Am I misunderstanding what you said or intended?"
Others appear unwilling to change their opinion...	"Is there anything that I can say or do that would convince you otherwise?"



ADVOCACY: To make your thinking process more visible, and improve "advocacy" (climbing slowly UP the Ladder of Inference):

What to do	What to say...
State your assumptions, and describe the data that lead to them.	"Here's what I think, and here's how I got there."
Explain your assumptions.	"I assumed that..."
Make your reasoning explicit.	"I came to this conclusion because..."
Give examples of what you propose, even if they're hypothetical.	"To get a clear picture of what I'm talking about, imagine that you're the customer who will be affected..."
<i>Publicly test your conclusions and assumptions...</i>	
Encourage others to explore your story, your assumptions and your data.	"What do you think about what I just said?" or "Do you see any flaws in my reasoning?" or "What can you add?"
Reveal where you are least clear in your thinking. Rather than making you vulnerable, it defuses the force of advocates who are opposed to you, and invites improvement.	"Here's one aspect which you might help me think through..."
Even when advocating listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.	"Do you see it differently?"
<i>Compare your assumptions to theirs...</i>	
Test what they say by asking for broader contexts, or for examples.	"How would your proposal affect...?" "Is this similar to...?" "Can you describe a typical example...?"
Check your understanding of what they have said.	"Am I correct that you're saying...?"



INQUIRY: To make the thinking of others more visible, and improve “inquiry” (climbing slowly DOWN the Ladder of Inference):

What to do	What to say...
Gently walk others down the Ladder of Inference and find out what data they are operating from.	“What leads you to conclude that?” “What data do you have for that?” “What causes you to say that?”
Use non-aggressive language, particularly with people who are not familiar with these skills. Ask in a way which does not provoke defensiveness or “lead the witness.”	Instead of “What do you mean?” or “What’s your proof?” say, “Can you help me understand your thinking here?”
Draw out their reasoning. Find out as much as you can about why they are saying what they’re saying.	“What is the significance of that?” “How does this relate to your other concerns?” “Where does your reasoning go next?”
Explain your reasons for inquiring, and how your inquiry related to your own concerns, hopes and needs.	“I’m asking you about your assumptions here because...”



To deal with disagreements:

What to do	What to say...
Again, inquire about what has led the person to that view.	“How did you arrive at this view?” “Are you taking into account data that I have not considered?”
Make sure you truly understand the view.	“If I understand you correctly, you’re saying that...”
Explore, listen and offer your own views in an open way.	“Have you considered...”
Raise your concerns and state what is leading you to have them.	“I have a hard time seeing that, because of this reasoning...”



To resolve an impasse:

What to do	What to say...
Embrace the impasse, and tease apart the current thinking. (You may discover that focusing on “data” brings you all down the Ladder of Inference).	“What do we know for a fact?” “What do we sense is true, but have no data for yet?” “What don’t we know?” “What is unknowable?”
Look for information that will help people move forward.	“What do we agree upon, and what do we disagree on?”
Consider each person’s mental model as a piece of a larger puzzle.	“Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here? Where do they come from?”
Ask what data or logic might change their views.	“What, then, would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?”
Don’t let conversation stop with an “agreement to disagree.”	“I don’t understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement.”



A Step by Step Checklist

You know you should talk to someone, but you don't. Maybe you've tried before and it went badly. Or maybe you fear that talking will only make the situation worse. Still, there's a feeling of being stuck, and you'd like to free up that stuck energy for more useful purposes.

Think of a challenging conversation you've been putting off. Got it? Great. Then let's go!

What you have here is a brief synopsis of best practice strategies: a checklist of action items to think about before going into the conversation; some useful concepts to practice during the conversation; and some top tips and suggestions to help your energy stay focused and flowing, including possible conversational openings.

You'll notice one key theme throughout: you have more power than you think!

How to Prepare for the Conversation

Before going into the conversation, honestly ask yourself some key questions:

1. Your Purpose?

- Why are you choosing to have this conversation?
- What are your expectations?
- What would be an ideal outcome?



You may think you have honourable goals, like educating an employee or increasing connection with your boss, only to notice that your proposed language is excessively critical or condescending. You may want to support, but you may end up punishing. Some **purposes** are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive, OPEN purpose.

2. Your Assumptions?

- What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions?

You may well feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or compromised, but be very cautious about assuming that this was actually their intention.

★ *Impact does not necessarily equal intent.*

3. Your Emotions?

- What "buttons" of yours are being pushed?
- Are you more emotional than the situation warrants?

Take a look at your "back-story," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with YOU.

4. Your Attitude?

- How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it?

If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, then it probably will be! If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, then it likely will be. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.

5. Your 'Challenging' Person?

- What might they be thinking about this situation?
- Are they already aware of the problem? How do you know this?
- If so, how do you think they perceive it?
- What are their needs and fears?
- Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
- How have they contributed to the problem? How have you?
- What solution do you think they might suggest?



★ *The key here is to begin to reframe the other person as a partner in this conversation, not as your opponent.*

Four Steps to a Successful Outcome

The majority of the work in any conflict conversation is the work you do **on yourself**. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy.

Breathe and centre yourself. Continue to notice when you're moving to fight/flight mode – and choose to re-centre again. This is where your power lies. By choosing a calm, centred state, you'll also help the other person to be more balanced and receptive too.

★ *Centering is not a step; centering is **how you are** as you take the steps.*

Step #1: Inquiry

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Assume you don't know anything (you really don't), and try to learn as much as possible about the other person and their point of view.

Pretend you're entertaining a visitor from another planet, and find out how things look on that planet, how certain events affect them, and what the values and priorities are there.

If they really were from another planet, you'd be watching their body language and listening for the unspoken energy as well. Do that here.

What do they really want? What are they not saying?



Let them talk until they're finished. Don't interrupt except to acknowledge. Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you. Try to learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush it.

Step #2: Acknowledgment

Acknowledgment means to show that you've listened and understood. Try to understand them so well that you can make their argument for them.



Then do it. Explain back to them what you think they're really going for. Guess at their hopes and honour their position. They won't change unless they see that you see where they stand. Then they might. No guarantees.

Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up. For example, in an argument with a colleague I said: "I notice I'm becoming defensive, and I think it's because your voice just got louder and sounded angry. I just want to talk about this topic. I'm not trying to persuade you in either direction." The acknowledgment helped him (and me) to re-centre.

Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. My saying, "this sounds really important to you," doesn't mean I'm going to go along with your decision.

Step #3: Advocacy

When you sense that they've expressed all their energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that they've missed? Help clarify your position – without minimising theirs.

For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. And I think I am. When I give my concerns about the project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. I don't mean to be a critic, though perhaps I sound like one. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."

Step #4: Problem-Solving

Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Ask the person what they think would work. Whatever they say, find something that you like and build on it.

If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety, and they'll be far more willing to engage.



If you've been successful in centering, adjusting your attitude, and in engaging with inquiry and useful purpose – building sustainable solutions will become far easier.

Practice, Practice, Practice!

Conversation is like any art – with continued practice you acquire skill and ease.

You're on the way, and here are some additional hints:

Tips and Suggestions:

1. A successful outcome will depend on two things: *how* you are and *what* you say. How you are (open, centred, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.
2. Acknowledge emotional energy – yours and theirs – direct it towards a useful purpose.
3. Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.
4. Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help the other person come back to centre.
5. Never assume they can see things from your point of view.
6. Practice the conversation with a trusted colleague before holding the real one.
7. Prepare your opening message which should be:
 - o **Accurate** – share the message without shame or blame
 - o **Brief** – delivered two minutes or less
 - o **Clear** – deliver the message directly



Opening the Conversation

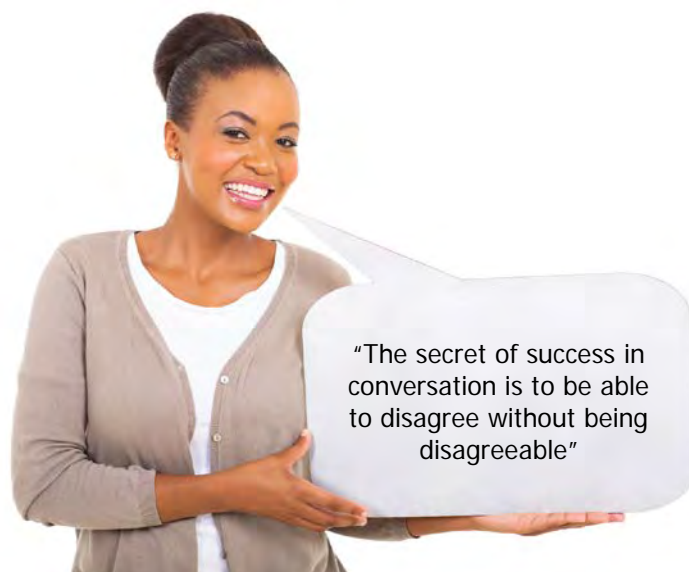
A common question is:

How do I begin this challenging conversation?



Here are a few conversation openers that work well...

- "I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively."
- "I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view."
- "I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"
- "I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?"
If they say, "Sure, let me get back to you," follow up with them.
- "I think we have different perceptions about _____.
I'd like to hear your thinking on this."
- "I need to speak with you about _____.
I think we may have different ideas on how to _____."
- "I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____.
I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well."



"The secret of success in conversation is to be able to disagree without being disagreeable"