

Course Transcript

How to Manage Difficult Conversations

Course Overview

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How to Handle Tough Conversations

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Course Overview

[Course: How to Manage Difficult Conversations.] **HOST:** Managers sometimes need to have unpleasant conversations. You might have to address performance issues, give bad news, or even let an employee go. These conversations can be stressful – and it takes real skill to handle them well. In this course, you'll learn when and where to have difficult conversations, how to manage the stress, and how to prepare properly beforehand. You'll also learn how to conduct this kind of discussion so that it has the best possible outcome.

When to Have a Difficult Conversation

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *identify guidelines on when it's appropriate to have a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: When to Have a Difficult Conversation.] **HOST:** As a manager, you'll sometimes need to have difficult conversations.

RYAN: I'll never forget the time I had to let three of our employees go. I mean, I knew these people...liked them. But we're a small company. We hit a rough patch, and we had no other choice.

HOST: Other examples of tough conversations? You may have to address the poor quality of someone's work. Perhaps your team can't meet a deadline and you have to let the client know. Or you might have to tell a hard-working employee that a promotion is going to someone else. Difficult conversations involve strong emotions. They can lead to confrontation. And, if they're not handled the right way, they can permanently damage relationships, or even put your company at risk. Knowing when and where to have difficult conversations...that's one of the keys to ensuring they go smoothly and have the right results.

SOFIA: I know Andrea isn't a good fit for the new position...but I don't want to upset her now. And the office outing is this Friday. I'll just wait a bit...

HOST: But what if the time never seems right? The first rule of thumb – never avoid difficult conversations. When something's stressful, it's natural to procrastinate. But this is where you need to step up as a manager. Just sending an e-mail – or worse, not taking any action at all – could mean that unresolved issues escalate into more serious problems. That doesn't mean you should discuss every issue. Instead work out whether a discussion will be productive. Could it change the situation or behavior that's a problem? Is it necessary for some other reason? Before going ahead, make sure you have a clear, realistic, and relevant goal.

RYAN: If all you do is tell people what they're doing wrong, it never goes well. But if you can suggest a clear way forward – something achievable – often that's a turning point. That's where you start working together to solve the problem.

HOST: Once you've decided that having a conversation is the best approach, set the scene for a productive discussion. Do this by scheduling it for the right time and place. Wait until you're calm and collected, but not so long that the issue becomes "stale." Make sure there's enough time to prepare beforehand, and choose a time of day that suits you both. Also make sure you schedule enough time for the meeting. That includes time for the other person to ask questions or raise objections to what you have to say. Finally, choose a comfortable, private setting – one where no one will be distracted or interrupted.

HOST: Knowing when and where to have difficult discussions...that's the starting point for making sure these conversations have the best possible results, for you and the person you're talking to.

Managing the Stress of a Difficult Conversation

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *recognize examples of four steps for managing the stress of a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: Managing the Stress of a Difficult Conversation.] **HOST:** Have you ever had to fire someone? Deliver a negative performance review, maybe, or counsel an employee whose behavior is upsetting other people? Most managers would agree – one of the most stressful aspects of the job is having difficult conversations like these.

HOST: There are steps you can take to manage the stress though. And that means you'll handle the conversations better too. First, make yourself aware of your negative internal monologue. What's that voice in your head saying?

SOFIA: Andrea is going to hate me. She might make a big scene. Might cry, even! I wish I didn't have to do this...She's probably going to argue...It's not going to go well...

HOST: That kind of negative thinking fuels the stress you're feeling. It can eat away at your confidence in your abilities. But once you tune in to what you're telling yourself, you can challenge your negative thoughts. The next step – consider all the possible results the negative conversation could have, negative and positive. Imagine the conversation and how it might go. You'll be more confident if you prepare for different possible reactions.

SOFIA: If I don't deal with this now, Andrea's performance problems are going to keep making extra work for the rest of the team. She might get upset, angry – might argue with me. Or she might recognize that I'm giving her a chance to improve...

HOST: Once you've considered possible outcomes, identify the goal of the conversation. That gives you a clear purpose. It frames the discussion, and gives it direction. And that makes it much less scary.

SOFIA: My goal for meeting with Andrea? It's to get her where she needs to be if she wants to keep her job.

HOST: The final step is to reframe your thinking – change what you're telling yourself about a difficult conversation to something constructive and positive. Sometimes you can do this by figuring out what your inner voice is trying to achieve. For example, are you telling yourself you won't succeed? That's a way your brain helps protect you from failure – by preparing you, just in case. Now instead of being negative, consider positive ways to achieve the same thing. Think "Here's what I can achieve." Sofia, the manager who has to deliver a negative performance appraisal, started by thinking things like, "This isn't going to go well." Let's compare that with what she's thinking now...

SOFIA: Given the situation, this is the best way to help everyone involved. It could help Andrea and my team.

HOST: Reframe your thinking like this and you'll find a lot of the stress you feel in the lead-up to a difficult conversation fades away. Instead, you can be objective and focus on making the conversation as productive and helpful as possible.

Assessing the Facts

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *identify examples of how to analyze the facts when preparing for a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: Assessing the Facts.] **HOST:** As a manager, you'll likely have to deal with employee performance problems. You may have to deliver bad news, discuss complaints you've received...even terminate someone's employment.

HOST: Especially when you have a difficult message to deliver, a conversation can easily derail. Emotions can escalate, and misunderstandings can ensue. You can't control how another person will react. But you can make sure you prepare properly beforehand. Often, that makes all the difference – you end up having a conversation that's constructive...that helps...instead of one that makes a bad situation worse. The best way to get started? Spend some time making sure you understand the situation as fully as possible.

RYAN: I couldn't believe it ... security told me they saw Tim leaving the building with a company laptop. I knew I'd have to talk to him first thing. But then I considered that, maybe Tim needed it for work...maybe he just didn't understand the rules.

HOST: That's a vital part of assessing the situation – consider the other person's views and perspectives. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and think how they might understand the situation. Once you've done that, think about your own view of the situation, too. Identify your assumptions and how they affect your thinking. Then address any bias in your judgment of the situation.

RYAN: I had a problem with staff theft in my last position. It was really upsetting for me. But I realized I shouldn't let that influence my reaction to Tim. I shouldn't jump to conclusions.

HOST: That leads to another good rule. Don't assign blame. Instead, look for the real causes of the problem. Maybe there was a gap in someone's training, for example. Or a misunderstanding about what's expected. Another good strategy is to mentally reverse roles. Think to yourself, "If our roles were reversed, what would I say? How would I react, and how would I feel?" As part of this process, also assess your contribution to the situation, and admit your own mistakes. Is there anything you could have done differently as a manager?

RYAN: I handled Tim's training when he joined the company last year. I realized...I never specifically mentioned company policy about not removing equipment from the premises.

HOST: Finally, prepare for a difficult discussion by making sure you have a deep understanding of the issue. Confirm all the facts, and get advice from a third party if necessary.

RYAN: I spoke to our chief of security. He checked, and Tim didn't try to hide the laptop. He carried it out the building in full sight...not like he thought he was doing anything wrong.

HOST: Discussing sensitive issues is never easy. But prepare properly – think about and investigate all the facts – and that'll help ensure a difficult conversation has the best possible outcome.

Assessing Emotions

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *recognize examples of how to analyze emotions when preparing for a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: Assessing Emotions.] **HOST:** Preparing for a difficult conversation – it's not just about looking at the facts. This kind of conversation involves emotions too.

SOFIA: All those emotions! That's my main fear. What if the other person gets angry, shouts at me...or cries! How will I handle that?

HOST: It can be hard to know how to react when someone else shows emotion. And feeling strong emotions yourself, that can be uncomfortable. But when you have a sensitive or difficult message to deliver, managing emotions is vital. Otherwise, you or the person you're talking to could lose control...and nothing productive comes from lashing out, or being too upset to respond properly. The best approach is to prepare beforehand. Think about emotions. Analyze them. And plan how best to handle them. The first step for managing your own emotions is acknowledging you have them. That's not always easy. Maybe you associate being professional with being completely calm and rational...with not expressing feelings. Or maybe you have a tendency to lose your temper, acting on emotions before you've had a chance to analyze what you're feeling. You'll need to overcome this. Start by naming your emotions. Once you've acknowledged them, you can think about whether they're valid, and you can deal with them constructively.

SOFIA: I guess I'm disappointed in Andrea. I'm frustrated by the mistakes she's making...and I'm angry she doesn't seem to take what I say seriously. Oh, and I'm scared she'll react badly when I talk to her.

HOST: After you've identified what you're feeling, decide what you'll share with the other person. Usually, the best approach is to start by finding a middle ground between sharing emotions and protecting yourself. Then as the conversation continues, you'll be ready to step back or share more, based on how the other person reacts.

SOFIA: I'll start by telling Andrea I'm disappointed in her performance so far...then give some objective examples.

HOST: Once you've got a handle on your own emotions, work on planning how you'll manage the other person's emotions. Anticipate the person's likely reaction to what you'll say, and plan how to handle this. Is the person likely to be surprised? Angry? Embarrassed? Finally, plan to acknowledge the other person's feelings. That doesn't mean you have to agree with what the person says. But show you understand their emotions...that you empathize. For example, you might say "I understand you're upset" or "I know this is difficult."

HOST: Remember, any difficult conversation is only partly about facts. Prepare properly for its emotional content, and the conversation is much more likely to be constructive.

Planning a Difficult Conversation

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *select examples of how to identify your goal and plan a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: Planning a Difficult Conversation.] **HOST:** By nature, difficult conversations are stressful. They trigger emotions. And especially when someone is angry, hurt, or upset, it can be hard to communicate.

HOST: Handling a difficult conversation well...steering it so it has a constructive outcome...that doesn't usually happen by accident. It takes planning. Once you've assessed the facts and emotions surrounding an issue, you need to plan how you want the conversation to go – and how you'll make that happen.

First, identify the goal of the conversation. What do you want to achieve?

SOFIA: My goal for talking to Andrea? To make sure that by our next review in a month's time, her reports don't have mistakes and are up to our standards. We'll have Noel edit them for now. We can't have any more complaints from clients.

HOST: Sofia needs to be prepared for some negotiation. For example, what if Andrea says she's getting faulty data from someone else? What if she argues she isn't given enough time – that she's always asked to put reports together at the last minute? Expect to make some compromises. But decide beforehand what your key purpose is...what isn't negotiable. Once you know the goal, you can start planning how to achieve it. To do this, outline the structure of the conversation. Decide on a starting point for the discussion. And identify key points you need to talk about.

SOFIA: I'll start by saying we're concerned about mistakes in her reports. Then, I'll give her concrete examples. And I'll talk about the complaints we've had and what Andrea has to do...what improvements she has to make, and how...over the next month.

HOST: Finally, rehearse your approach. Practice what you want to say. Also practice ways to respond if the conversation starts going off track.

[Sofia practices by speaking to an empty chair as if Andrea is there.] **SOFIA:** Hi Andrea. Please have a seat. I'd like to talk to you about the quality of your reports. We're concerned about the number of mistakes – not just spelling mistakes, grammar, and so on, but inaccuracies in the data. I've got some examples here...

HOST: You can't predict exactly how the other person will react, and you don't want to sound like you're reading from a script. But rehearsing key parts of the conversation can help ensure that in the heat of the real discussion, you'll cover all your points clearly. It can also help prevent emotional responses – yours or the other person's – from throwing you off course. Do your homework...do the right planning...and you'll be prepared to manage even the most difficult conversation. You'll know what the goal is and how to get there. And you'll be flexible enough to handle the other person's responses, without getting steered off course.

Demonstrating the Right Mindset

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *recognize ways to demonstrate the appropriate mindset during a difficult conversation*

1.

[Topic: Demonstrating the Right Mindset.] **HOST:** In a difficult conversation, it's not just what you say that makes a difference. It's also how you say it...how you come across to the other person. To steer the discussion in the right direction, you need to demonstrate the right mindset. So how do you do this? You can't predict exactly how the other person will react, or what they might say. But you can follow some general principles. First, have an open mind – demonstrate this by listening more than you speak. Don't approach the conversation from the perspective of who's right or wrong. Instead give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Consider how Sofia handles this when she has to give an employee, Andrea, some negative feedback.

SOFIA: This is what I know so far. Our editor has picked up several mistakes in your last three reports. And most recently, one of our clients contacted me. He was upset – he said you misreported facts about his company. I'd like to get your side of the story. What's been happening?

HOST: Sofia used neutral language when presenting the facts. She acknowledged that Andrea might have a different perspective, and she made it clear she was ready to listen. That's a good way to start. Another guideline – be collaborative. Focus on the goal, and make it clear you want to work with the other person to achieve it. And look for progress, not perfection. You'll get a much better response if you give the other person a role in managing the issue. For example, you might ask a question like "What do you think you could do to prevent this from happening again?" In any difficult discussion, it's also important to be empathetic. Show you understand what the other person is feeling, and show compassion. Consider some of the ways you might do this.

SOFIA: I know this is difficult... I can understand this is disappointing for you... I think you're probably feeling a little shocked...

HOST: If you have bad news, you also can convey your own feelings about it. You might say, "I'm sorry you didn't get the job" or "I hate to have to tell you this."

As a final guideline, make sure you engage in the conversation. Take time to listen, and show genuine interest in the other person's views.

Some simple ways to do this? When the other person talks, nod...say "I see" or "Okay"...give little signs to make it clear you're listening. Another good strategy – rephrase what the other person has said to show you understand. For example, you might start with a phrase like, "So what you're saying is..." Prepare properly beforehand, and know how to respond appropriately during a discussion, and you'll manage difficult conversations in just the right way.

Let's review what you learned in this course. To effectively manage difficult conversations with your employees, choose the right time and place to talk; manage your own stress and emotions; assess the facts of the situation beforehand, and consider the other person's perspective; plan and rehearse your conversation; and demonstrate the right mindset by being collaborative and empathetic.

Exercise: Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Learning Objective

After completing this topic, you should be able to

- *use techniques for handling difficult conversations*

1. Exercise Overview

In this exercise, you'll demonstrate your understanding of techniques to handle difficult conversations.

In this exercise, you'll demonstrate you can

- identify guidelines on when to have difficult conversations
- identify ways to deal with the stress of difficult conversations
- prepare for a difficult conversation, and
- use the right approach during a difficult conversation

2.

Question

Before having a difficult conversation with someone, what guidelines should you follow?

Options:

1. Don't avoid difficult conversations
2. Have a discussion goal that's clear, realistic, and relevant
3. Make sure it's the right time and place
4. Ensure the discussion won't interfere with your work day
5. Take the opportunity to have the conversation the next time you run into the person

Answer

Option 1: *This option is correct. Even when conversations are particularly risky or challenging, you shouldn't avoid having them.*

Option 2: *This option is correct. A serious discussion isn't necessary for every issue that comes up at work. Make sure you have a clear and appropriate goal before you initiate a difficult conversation.*

Option 3: *This option is correct. It's important to have the discussion at a time and place that will facilitate an effective outcome.*

Option 4: *This option is incorrect. A difficult discussion will involve more than one person. You should have the discussion at a time and place that is comfortable and appropriate for both*

parties.

Option 5: This option is incorrect. It's not effective to bring up an issue for discussion without preparation, or when the other party isn't expecting it.

Correct answer(s):

1. Don't avoid difficult conversations
2. Have a discussion goal that's clear, realistic, and relevant
3. Make sure it's the right time and place

Question

Kendra is preparing to have a talk with her boss, but she's worried it won't go well.

What are examples of steps to change Kendra's negative internal monologue to a positive one?

Options:

1. She tries to be conscious of thoughts that are impeding her ability to use her judgment in a productive way
2. She envisions the different ways the conversation might progress, and how she would deal with each situation
3. She makes sure she's clear about the purpose of the conversation
4. She reframes her thoughts so they have a positive intent
5. She focuses only on the positive possible outcomes of having the conversation
6. She ignores her negative thoughts so they won't cause fear and anxiety

Answer

Option 1: This option is correct. The first step in changing a negative internal monologue is to be aware of the negative inner voice.

Option 2: This option is correct. The second step in changing a negative internal monologue is to consider possible outcomes of having the conversation.

Option 3: This option is correct. The third step in changing a negative internal monologue is to focus on the goal of the conversation.

Option 4: This option is correct. The fourth step in changing a negative internal monologue is to develop a positive internal monologue. Reframing can help turn negative thoughts into positive intent.

Option 5: This option is incorrect. She'll be better prepared if she considers both positive and negative possible outcomes of having a difficult conversation.

Option 6: *This option is incorrect. Negative thoughts may have a reason behind them. Better to cope with emotions by reframing negative thoughts in a positive way.*

Correct answer(s):

1. She tries to be conscious of thoughts that are impeding her ability to use her judgment in a productive way
2. She envisions the different ways the conversation might progress, and how she would deal with each situation
3. She makes sure she's clear about the purpose of the conversation
4. She reframes her thoughts so they have a positive intent

Question

Mai's colleague, Tim, used her as a reference on a job application without asking. Mai doesn't think Tim is ready.

Identify examples of how Mai can prepare for a difficult conversation with Tim.

Options:

1. Mai considers whether she may have inadvertently encouraged Tim to apply for the job by praising his work
2. Mai talks to her assistant and discovers that Tim had left a voicemail asking for a reference, but no one had called him back
3. Mai admits that she sometimes ignores her colleague's phone calls
4. Mai imagines the conversation and considers how she would react if she were Tim
5. Mai notes a number of reasons why Tim is doing the wrong thing by using her name as a reference
6. Mai plans to tell Tim that she'll never write a good reference for him because of his behavior

Answer

Option 1: *This option is correct. It's important to consider the other person's perspective when you're planning for a difficult conversation.*

Option 2: *This option is correct. By talking to her colleagues, Mai discovered a fact that might help her understand the situation.*

Option 3: *This option is correct. Admitting your mistakes is an important part of preparing for a conversation.*

Option 4: *This option is correct. Reversing roles can help you prepare for the other person's reactions during the conversation.*

Option 5: *This option is incorrect. Assigning blame isn't productive. Mai should look for the real cause of the issue.*

Option 6: *This option is incorrect. Mai should consider her colleague's perspective. He may not think there's anything wrong with his behavior. She's better off working on a positive solution to the issue.*

Correct answer(s):

1. Mai considers whether she may have inadvertently encouraged Tim to apply for the job by praising his work
2. Mai talks to her assistant and discovers that Tim had left a voicemail asking for a reference, but no one had called him back
3. Mai admits that she sometimes ignores her colleague's phone calls
4. Mai imagines the conversation and considers how she would react if she were Tim

Question

Kevin needs to explain to a temporary employee that her contract is not being renewed.

How can Kevin analyze the emotional level of this difficult conversation?

Options:

1. Name his emotions
2. Find an emotional middle ground
3. Acknowledge the employee's feelings
4. Anticipate the employee's reaction to the conversation
5. Plan to take responsibility for the employee's distress
6. Prepare to diffuse an emotional response from the employee by expressing agreement with her view

Answer

Option 1: *This option is correct. Naming his emotions will help Kevin determine that they're authentic emotions, rather than judgments or attributions.*

Option 2: *This option is correct. Starting in the middle will allow Kevin to either step back or move forward in sharing his emotions during the conversation.*

Option 3: *This option is correct. Being empathetic can show the employee that Kevin understands her feelings.*

Option 4: *This option is correct. Good preparation involves accepting that the other person may feel differently about the conversation and trying to anticipate the reaction.*

Option 5: *This option is incorrect. Being empathetic and understanding doesn't mean taking responsibility for the other person's reaction to the conversation.*

Option 6: This option is incorrect. The right response is to show empathy. Kevin doesn't have to accept or agree with his employee's side of the issue.

Correct answer(s):

1. Name his emotions
2. Find an emotional middle ground
3. Acknowledge the employee's feelings
4. Anticipate the employee's reaction to the conversation

Question

Curt, an architect, just found out that his assistant, Noel, has been leaving work early every time Curt is out on site. Curt needs to have a difficult conversation with Noel about this.

What are examples of how Curt can plan his approach to this conversation?

Options:

1. Curt drafts a strategy for progressing through to his goal
2. Curt rehearses the conversation with a colleague
3. Curt determines his goal is to tell Noel he will be put on probation
4. Curt decides to start the conversation by expressing his hurt and annoyance
5. Curt assumes Noel thought he wouldn't find out about the behavior

Answer

Option 1: This option is correct. Planning the conversation involves outlining the things you need to talk about and why they're important.

Option 2: This option is correct. Rehearsing the conversation will help Curt refine his conversational technique.

Option 3: This option is correct. By identifying the goal, Curt will determine the purpose of having the conversation.

Option 4: This option is incorrect. Curt should be concentrating on the purpose of the conversation, not unproductive emotion.

Option 5: This option is incorrect. Curt shouldn't assume he knows Noel's intentions.

Correct answer(s):

1. Curt drafts a strategy for progressing through to his goal
2. Curt rehearses the conversation with a colleague
3. Curt determines his goal is to tell Noel he will be put on probation

Question

Tam's co-worker Annika often uses expletives at work. She thinks it's funny, but Tam is concerned it could cause offense.

Match each mind set to the relevant quote. Not all quotes will have a match.

Options:

- A. Open minded
- B. Collaborative
- C. Empathetic
- D. Engaged

Targets:

1. "This conversation isn't about who's right and who's wrong."
2. "So what do you think you can do to make sure no one is offended?"
3. "I really do understand how this must make you feel."
4. "So what you're saying is that this wasn't intentional. Is that correct?"
5. "You're absolutely right to feel that way."

Answer

Being open minded means not judging right and wrong.

Being collaborative means creating the opportunity for the other person to help you reach the goal of the conversation.

Being empathetic means relating your own emotions to those of the other person.

Being engaged in the conversation means listening and demonstrating an understanding of what was said.

An appropriate mind set doesn't mean you must agree with or validate the other person's feelings. Instead, focus on showing empathy and understanding.

Correct answer(s):

Target 1 = Option A

Target 2 = Option B

Target 3 = Option C

Target 4 = Option D

Target 5 =No Option Specified.

