



Managing Difficult Conversations

Communication has to start with telling the truth, even when it's painful.

—Lee Iacocca

Whether the topic is a client putting your business up for bid, the termination of a current employee, or the lack of a raise, an assertive yet compassionate delivery will help make challenging communication easier for all parties. This is not to say such conversations can ever be made easy—especially since strong emotions will be involved.

Here are some guidelines to manage difficult conversations effectively:

1. **Be direct.** Don't make the mistake of spending too much time on small talk before delivering your difficult news. Otherwise it will look like you are stalling or afraid to address the subject at hand.
2. **Provide context.** People will want to know who made the decision, why it was made, and what led to it. Take the time to clearly explain the details so there is no confusion as to its cause.
3. **Time it right.** Many people make it harder than necessary to deliver difficult news because they wait too long to do it. If you screwed up, admit it. If your calculations were off, own up to it. Don't delay the inevitable and don't dole out bad news in drips and drabs. Be honest and forthcoming. People will more readily accept bad news if the messenger is upfront and candid.
4. **Don't make assumptions.** You can't know how an employee or client will handle bad news. People are different and the ways they process challenges are different as well. Consider the personalities involved as well as the various reactions they could have, stay open during the conversation, and listen actively.
5. **Be prepared for questions.** Before you deliver the difficult news, take some time to anticipate what questions might be asked. Why did you do it that way? How could you let this happen? Whose fault is this? These are all questions that are likely to arise. Think about how you will handle each of these questions ahead of time.



6. **Don't minimize the event.** Try to understand the emotions someone is experiencing as a result of hearing the news you have just given them. Because they are reading your body language as you deliver it, be careful not to appear too casual or flippant.
7. **Show empathy.** If this news were being delivered to you, what reaction would you have? What emotions would you be feeling? Considering these questions will give rise to empathy, and your listener may pick up on it. Be conscious of what your voice and body language might be conveying and make sure they support your intention at all times.
8. **Do it in person.** While it is sometimes easier to simply compose an e-mail and deliver bad news to an employee electronically, this is not an effective way to handle this type of communication. Being assertive means sitting down with the person face-to-face to share the news and discuss the situation.
9. **Don't let emotions get in the way.** It is important that you remain calm and collected during the delivery of difficult news, even if the other person becomes angry or emotional. Resist the urge to strike back or be insulting. Simply present the facts in a clear and honest way. This will help strip the exchange of emotional heat.
10. **Apologize.** If you have made a mistake that has caused the problem being discussed, own it. Take responsibility. Offer a sincere apology and assure the other party that a problem such as this will not happen again. Detail specifically how you are going to correct the situation or what steps you are going to take to prevent it from occurring in the future.

The motive power that puts ideas in operation and gives them determinate existence is the passion of man.

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel