How to Have the Conversations You're Avoiding

By Elinor Whitmore

There are conversations we all wish we didn't have to have. While we can choose to avoid the conversation, we don't let the issue go. We avoid these topics because we know they will be difficult and we fear that talking about them will only make things worse.

So while having these conversations could make matters worse, avoiding them doesn't work either. The only solution is to develop the communication skills we need to discuss these difficult issues effectively.

Conversations can become difficult when:
• there are different opinions as to the facts;
• the issues are important to us;
• emotions run high;
• the impact on us or the other person is too personal.

So, to discuss difficult issues effectively, we need to:

• distinguish facts from conclusions;
• recognize we may not have the full picture;
• define our goals;
• look at how the situation developed and how it could be changed rather than who is at fault;
• recognize when a conversation may impact on our sense of self or that of the other person.
• recognize that emotions are an important part of these conversations and learn how to handle them;
• focus on developing mutual understanding rather than being "right";
• spend as much time listening as we would like to spend talking.

When you prepare for a difficult conversation or find yourself in the midst of one, make sure you separate facts from conclusions. For example, your assistant may have been late for work three days in a row. This strikes you as a sign he lacks commitment and is unprofessional.

The fact is that he was late for work on three consecutive days. Your view that this

is unprofessional is a conclusion you have drawn based on your interpretation of the facts. If you say he is unprofessional, he will likely argue with you. He is no longer listening because he is too busy defending himself. The problem is that the conversation is taking place at the level of conclusions. It may be that your assistant defines professionalism differently from you or there may be other facts you didn't know about. Ask yourself: "What reasons might a reasonable, professional and committed person have for coming in late three days in a row?" Be open to the possibility that your original conclusions may not be accurate. Separate the facts from your conclusions. Begin with your understanding of the facts. Let him know that you have concerns but that you are open to hearing other relevant information or interpretations from him. Rather than looking to find fault, you should ask yourself how the situation developed, including how you may have contributed.

When preparing for a difficult conversation, define your goals, but not too narrowly. Think about your goals for the relationship as a whole as well as your goals for the particular conversation.

Conversations can also become difficult when people take issues too personally. For example, when meeting with a colleague to provide feedback on a report she wrote you mention that the report "lacks focus" and she appears unduly upset. When you recognize that a conversation might trigger identity issues, you can think about how to deal with them effectively. You can start the conversation by praising your colleague's strong research abilities and clarifying that your comments relate only to this one report.

Conversations can become difficult when emotions run high. When this happens, people often try to ignore the emotions and focus on the "facts". This can be a mistake. People can't listen or respond as effectively when they are upset. How you deal with your emotional response will depend on your personal style and the circumstances. You may want to take a break from the conversation or you may want to name the emotion.

In a tough conversation, one of the best things you can do is actively listen. Instead, it involves asking open-ended questions, summarizing what you have heard to check your understanding, and acknowledging feelings. Listening demonstrates respect. If you listen to them, it will be harder for them not to listen to you.

Learning to discuss difficult issues effectively takes time and practice but it is worth the effort.
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Elinor Whitmore is Vice-President of ADR at the Stitt Feld Handy Group, a division of ADR Chambers, and is a mediator, facilitator, trainer, and certified professional coach.

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