

When You're Getting Ready to Talk...is the Problem in Getting Ready?

Try as we might to avoid them at work, uncomfortable and challenging conversations happen.

Fortunately, sometimes, we have the opportunity to prepare ourselves. Unfortunately, our well-intended preparations can take us down the unwanted path of more conflict and misunderstanding. It's a disheartening experience but also an opportunity to reflect on what went wrong and how to prepare differently next time.

How do you prepare for a difficult conversation?

Perhaps you write out your thoughts, fine-tune the points you want to make, and rehearse responses to anticipated reactions? Schedule the conversation for a time when you think the other person will be receptive?

These are all good practices. And, unfortunately, they don't necessarily produce a meaningful conversation that results in greater understanding, less conflict and more creative solutions. Why?

An important question to ask yourself as you prepare is what do you truly want out of this conversation? Be honest.

Are you attempting to convince the person of the rightness of your perspective? Is your goal to get the other to comply with what you see as the reasonable and correct action or decision? Are you hoping the person will admit to some behavior you find annoying?

If you've answered yes to any of these, you may very well be disappointed with your results. Here are 8 tips to reducing conflict, tension and misunderstanding:

1. **Assume that it may take several conversations.** Approaching it as a longer-term process takes the pressure off each individual conversation. Expecting immediate results may only be a set-up for failure.
2. **Reflect on your own contributions to the conflict.** What might you be doing in your interactions with the other person or within your work group that have resulted in the undesirable behavior?
3. **Tap into empathy.** Recognize that others have their own struggles, fears, worries and concerns and assume they're doing their best. If the other person is truly difficult for many people to work with, then work is probably not that easy for them either.
4. **Approach with humility.** Start by acknowledging anything that you may be doing in the situation that is contributing to the breakdown. Even if it's just to say, "I noticed that we haven't be communicating well lately. I'm sorry for how I may have been contributing to that difficulty. I'd like to talk about it and see if we can improve things."
5. **LISTEN FIRST.** Invite the other person to talk about how they see the situation and what the impact has been on them. If the other person is reluctant to talk, offer an example by stating the facts in simple, neutral terms and then making a genuine inquiry. e.g.: "When you thought I'd made a mistake and missed your deadline, you went to our boss about it instead of coming to me. I'm curious about that. Can you tell me what led you to that choice?"
6. **Enter with the goal of building meaning and understanding.** Too often, we enter conversations with the goal of creating agreement, solving a problem or reaching resolution. When the stakes and emotions are running high those goals

may be too ambitious at the start. We may need to build a much better understanding of one another's perspective and experience first.

7. **Pause and breathe and notice.** Any time you find yourself becoming reactive and wanting to jump in with an attack or defensiveness, try instead to pause and breathe and notice what's going on under the surface. Try to simply name what you are feeling (e.g., fear, anger, resentment). This is a mindfulness-based practice that helps calm your brain's reactivity. Now you can create the space needed to find another way to keep the communication as open and positive as possible.

8. **Take a break.** Sometimes the best choice is to draw the conversation to a close as respectfully as possible with the intent of picking it up another time when you're feeling calm again.

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