

TOOLS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Why are difficult conversations so difficult? The answer hinges on emotions. When we discuss sensitive topics such as religion, politics, or workplace fairness with those who disagree with us, we are not merely presenting objective facts, but revealing our values and most deeply-held beliefs. Strong emotions often get in the way of us listening openly and expressing our feelings calmly.

We found the six tools provided in the New York Times bestseller, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, particularly useful for broaching an uncomfortable topic:

- **Create a safe space for conversation.** Offer mutual respect and care about the interests and feelings of the person with whom you are conversing.
- **Listen.** “Seek first to understand and then to be understood.” Really listen with interest and empathy. Rephrase, acknowledge the other person’s feelings, and ask open-ended questions.
- **Yes, and...** Continue to build on what has been said before. Respect the other person’s ideas and express your own. Discuss how you came to hold your beliefs.
- **Question your assumptions.** Consider the three questions:
 - What did this person actually say or do?
 - How did it impact me?
 - What am I assuming about the other person’s intentions?
- **Use “I” messages.** Instead of making accusations or putting the other person on the defensive, talk about how you think and feel.
- **Focus on the problem, avoid blame.** Ask: “How can we work together and learn from this conversation to be more productive in the future?”

Need a hand improving communications on your board or staff team?

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