

Fact-File 15: 7 Steps to Deal with Difficult Discussions better...



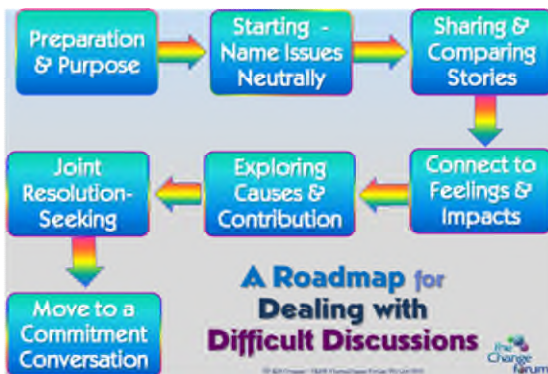
Extracts from our Guide - Dealing with Difficult Discussions

A Difficult Discussions Road-map?

If you were going on a trip where the roads were rough and the chances of getting bogged high, you'd want a road-map to help avoid, or at least alert you to, the hazards.

Difficult discussions are pretty rough-and-tough roads for most of us – and a map would come in handy here too. The biggest fear most of us have with challenging conversations is not knowing how they'll go – where the best place is to start and where the potholes and pitfalls are.

While difficult discussions always have a degree of uncertainty, there are some predictable steps you need to work through in most of them.



Our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinic takes you through some steps and tools to help you traverse this tough terrain with more confidence. Here's an overview of 7 steps that make difficult discussion road-trips a bit more comfortable...

Step 1: Preparation and Purpose

If it's one that matters, you'll want to prepare for this difficult discussion. This means mentally practising the conversation you're going to have: think through the issue from your perspective and theirs, work out what the purpose is and what would be a good outcome for both of you.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare a mutual purpose statement – one or two sentences on what you both might want Write out how you plan to start this conversation Think of how the ugly story you've made up about the other person may make you act Distinguish between facts and assumptions you may be making? Is there another interpretation? Centre yourself – identify the feelings you'll have and the feelings you want to express in this conversation – and think of their feelings too

Step 2: Starting: Name issues neutrally

Yes, this only covers the first 20 seconds or so of a difficult discussion, but it's crucial to get it right.

The key thing is to *name the topic neutrally* in a way that doesn't escalate defensiveness – and avoids the urge to blame, judge, act offended, use inflammatory or provocative language or try to attack or corner them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't start with your version of the story – no matter how right you feel. Just name the issue as neutrally as you can – with no blame and no judgemental words Don't try to cushion or discount the issue but don't exaggerate or inflame the issue either Don't suggest solutions or tell the other person what you want them to do or why they're wrong For a stronger start, add a few facts you've noticed, outline what's at stake and the impact

Step 3: Sharing & Comparing Stories

Most difficult discussions get bogged down here arguing over what happened, who did or said what, who's right or wrong and who's to blame. It turns up the conversational heat but goes nowhere in terms of resolution.

People become defensive, evasive or get aggressive and the discussion degenerates into an adversarial, win-lose debate. The way out of this cycle is to share and compare each other's stories as objectively as you can *without* attributing blame or malign intentions.

Difficult conversations are really a case of clashing stories, Agree to listen to each other's stories. The idea is to clarify your story without minimising theirs. Then compare them to see how they differ.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Let them tell their story first. Expect it to be different to yours – don't be surprised by this Ask questions but only to seek clarification/help you understand; not to argue or correct their story You go second. Expect them to interrupt or argue – acknowledge their story and return to your story. Invite them to join you to sort out differences in your stories. Repeat each other's stories. Compare stories – start with what you agree on Share your assumptions and ask about theirs too

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Step 4: Connect to Feelings & Impacts

Unexpressed or unacknowledged feelings are at the core of most difficult discussions. No matter how tightly you try to control, conceal, deny or restrain feelings, they have a sneaky way of leaking back into the discussion.

As you share stories, name feelings that emerge for you without blaming the other person. Also name impacts but don't accuse them of bad intentions. You also need to connect with their feelings – not dispute or invalidate them – and acknowledge any impacts you've had on them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

- Express your feelings cleanly, concisely and clearly – without blame
- Say what the impact is on you or name the consequences or what's at stake
- Connect with their feelings using 2nd position
- If things get heated – ask a question or again. Connect. Don't escalate anger with more anger
- Say if you feel defensive/tense – it calms
- Talk over consequences/impacts for both of you

Step 5: Explore Cause & Contribution

Break-throughs occur when you both agree to explore causes and contributions without blaming each other. Often, you both see ways you've contributed. The aim here is to understand and mutually accept ownership for what happened - not heap it all onto one person.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

- Clarify where you have both assumed things and attributed intentions to each other
- Identify ways you have contributed – and talk about what you could have done differently
- Invite them to think how they've contributed
- Begin to talk over your picture of how this could have been handled differently and invite them to share their ideas too

Step 6: Joint Resolution-Seeking

Once some mutual understanding is reached and emotions have calmed, turn the discussion to looking at options for how to resolve the situation.

If you can't talk over options yet, explore what is stopping this. If you can, think together – don't impose solutions on each other – and relate

these back to mutual purpose. The turning point in many difficult conversations is when people start thinking together towards the future and leave the past behind.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

- Jointly explore barriers or ideas for doing things differently. Ask: *"What do you think it will take to fix this?"*
- Talk options: *"What options do you believe we have?"*, *"What other options are there?"*
- Look for missing factors: *"What have we both missed?"*
- Leave aside the event now and focus on *"What we could do differently in future?"*

Step 7: The Commitment Conversation

This is the important completion part. If you don't establish clearly what both of you will try to do differently and arrange to follow up on it, this difficult discussion is likely to arise again and again. Don't expect to always get to a commitment conversation inside the one difficult discussion. Sometimes it takes some thinking about.

WHAT YOU CAN DO...

- Be specific about actions or commitments
- Establish a timeframe for action and follow-up.
- Agree on actions and how to prevent this happening again next time.
- Take the time to summarise. Start with: *"Let's see if I've got this straight. You will..... etc")*

A Word of Warning...

So that's a brief overview of our road-map for managing difficult discussions better. The model is only indicative, mind you. Because difficult discussions aren't always predictable – yours may not always unfold in exactly this order.

There are no silver bullets or sure-fire remedies; no guarantee what turn they'll take next or that what you say or do will have the right effect.

As you move past the start, and start to negotiate some of the potholes in the rough road ahead, you may find yourself hopping back and forth a bit between stages as you go. For example:

- ❑ You may be in *Stage 3: Comparing Stories* but then realise you have to move forward to

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Stage 4 for a while to deal with some difficult feelings, before you can go back to stories...

OR

- You think you're in *Stage 6: Joint Resolution-Seeking* but suddenly sense the other person needs to explore contributions (*Stage 5*) or feelings (*Stage 4*) more before they move on.

Regardless of these shuffle steps you may have to do from time to time, having a rough mental map of stages in a difficult discussion to work through is better than having no map at all. It can help to ground you and give you a sense of direction, which can shore-up your confidence...




This Fact-file is drawn from our Learning Guide: **Dealing with Difficult Discussions: Converting Confrontation into Constructive Conversation** that supports our Conversational Coaching Master Class on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* © Copyright Bill Cropper, The Change Forum 2004-10. You are permitted to copy this FactFile in small quantities within your team or work unit for learning exchange, provided this acknowledgement appears on all copies and any materials derived from it.

The Change Forum conducts a 2-day program on **Dealing with Difficult Discussions** for people who want to:

- Be able to deal more confidently with difficult conversations
- Learn how to begin difficult discussions and get better outcomes from them
- Convert difficult discussions into constructive conversations
- Learn how to turn difficult discussions into problem-solving opportunities
- Reduce tension and take the heat out of difficult discussions
- Practise ways to defuse difficult discussions or control the damage
- Increase your resilience in the face of anger and hostility

More information, program brochure and registration available on-line or contact us direct:

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