

Engaging in Difficult Conversations

“Where Do I Start?” Preparing for a difficult conversation is the key to a successful outcome.

Prepare Yourself - Answer Key Questions (E.A.C.H.)

- E - EVENTS What are the events that have happened? (Facts - Specific, observable data)
- A - ASSUMPTIONS What am I assuming?
- C - CONCERNS What are my concerns about the current situation?
- H - HOPES What do I hope will change as a result of the conversation?

Prepare to be ASSERTIVE

Assertiveness is the art of speaking in a way that respects your own needs while being respectful towards those whom you are speaking with.

Prepare to LISTEN to UNDERSTAND...Acknowledge, Accept and Ask (A. A. A.)

Rather than listening to argue or defend, aim to listen in a way that simply **acknowledges** and **accepts** their point of view. What questions can you **ask** to gain a deeper understanding of the situation?

Prepare by getting CURIOUS

What could the other person be thinking? What might be their intention? What might their expectation be? What could they be assuming? What might they be concerned about? What might they be hoping for? During the conversation, the challenge will be to stay open to learning about what is happening for the other person and take their perspective into account, even when it differs from yours.

Prepare a F.I.R.M. Script

1. F - FACTS

What happened? What events occurred? Be specific, factual and concise. Speak from your own perspective, and how you are experiencing the situation. Avoid criticism, blame, or judgment.

“I am noticing...” “I have observed...” “On (x) day, (y) happened...”

2. I - IMPACT

Express how you interpret the situation and how it is affecting you. Use I-statements. This is an opportunity to check your assumptions to see if they are true.

“I am feeling...” “I am thinking...” “The story I am telling myself is...”

3. R – REQUEST

Think about what you need to improve the situation. Remember – this is a request, not a demand.

“I would like to find out more about what your intention was/is”

“Would you be willing to...?” “Can we work together to find a way to...” “I need...”

4. M – MOTIVATION

What is motivating you to have this conversation?

“If we can resolve/improve/change, then...” “My hope is that...” (**Positive** consequence of change)

“If we don’t address this, my concern is...” (**Negative** consequence of status quo)

When you are ready, request the conversation...

...at a time and place that works for both of you (respectful of privacy and confidentiality)

Express yourself **F.I.R.M.**ly, while being open to **listening to understand (Acknowledge, Accept, Ask)**

TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- **Intention versus Impact** Intention may be very different than the impact.

Find out what their intention was and share what the impact was on you. Explain your intention that led up to this situation, and find out what the impact was on them.

- **Assumptions** Discuss them. Assess them. Are they accurate? Do they need to be revised? Are there misunderstandings around expectations that need to be cleared up?
- **Triggers** Know what you get triggered by.

What upsets you? What makes you angry? What brings up a strong reaction? How will you know if things are escalating versus de-escalating? Develop a plan to manage yourself if you get triggered. What can you do to stay **assertive** (respect the other person while respecting yourself). Is it time to take a break from the conversation?

- **Notice Emotions** Feeling emotions is normal. What we do with them is critical.

Notice them. Just notice, without criticism or judgment. What's coming up? What is being said in your head? What are you saying out loud? What sensations are you feeling in the body? (Headache, clenched fists, stomach upset, tense shoulders, short breath?) Are you "emotionally hijacked" from being able to have a respectful conversation?

Name the emotions. By describing and calling emotions out, we can shrink their intensity and loosen their hold on our ability to think and act assertively. Emotions give us critical information about what we care about.

"I am...frustrated/furious/disappointed/scared/uncomfortable/angry/sad/shocked/surprised/overwhelmed/(other)..."

Let the emotions pass. Everyone is different as far as what they need to do to effectively manage their emotions. Learn what it takes for you to recover from a strong emotion. Develop strategies to calm intense emotions. Be aware of when strong emotions are getting in the way of your ability to think, listen and have constructive conversation. If it's getting too intense, take a break to recover.

- **Avoid labels** Labelling creates identity.

Fingerpointing, labelling and name-calling escalate strong emotions. Instead of creating identity (by labelling), focus on identifying and addressing problematic behaviour. Labels get stuck. Behaviours can change.

- **Request versus Demand**

Keep in mind that you can *ask* for a change, but you can't force someone to make a change. For someone to want make a change, they need to be motivated to do so. Discuss the benefits (to them) of making a change. If they still aren't willing to consider changing a situation, then discuss the potential negative consequences of continuing with the status quo.

- **Agree to Disagree**

You may discover that you still disagree on some things as you progress through your conversation. What is important is to decide on what needs to be resolved, stay focused on that, and come up with a solution/plan that addresses the problem in ways that you can both agree to. Build solutions that address both of your needs, expectations, concerns and hopes.