



A SEVEN-STEP GUIDE TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: HOW TO GET THE ELEPHANT OUT OF THE ROOM WITHOUT GETTING CRUSHED

"Honest communication is built on truth and integrity and upon respect one for the other."

Benjamin E. Mays

The first time I heard the words, "You're fired", I ran home crying. I was five years old. I had asked our neighbor where their housekeeper/nanny was and the actual response was "we fired her". I was horrified by the thought – interpreted quite literally in the mind of a child.

To this day, terminating an employee is on my Top Five List of dreaded conversations. Difficult conversations are almost always uncomfortable. Often, it's because the outcome can be life-changing. It's easy to procrastinate talking about hard things.

As a recovering people-pleaser, I have tried the strategy of avoidance and can attest that method is totally ineffective. With a life-long goal to become a Master Communicator, it has been vital to learn how to initiate difficult conversations.

One of the first rules for difficult conversations is "just do it". Procrastination is the natural tendency and the reasons are many. It might be anxiety over the outcome, uncertainty about timing, or doubt if you're the right person to initiate the conversation. You may be just hoping if you ignore the problem, it will go away.

Ignoring a problem is how it can grow into an elephant-sized obstacle. The phrase, "elephant in the room", is an idiom for an obvious problem that goes unaddressed.

I used to be the elephant keeper. Diplomacy is a strong part of my personality and I tend to avoid confrontation. My husband can testify that in the early days of our marriage, we would be sailing along as if everything was fine until one day, I would have what seemed like a volcanic eruption. All of my pent-up frustrations would come spewing out at once. This violates all the guidelines for good communication.

The difficult conversation you dread the most is very likely to result in significant, positive results. Even if the outcome is not exactly what you envision. If the relationship matters, then investing the time to talk about the hard things will always have rewards.

The Seven Steps to Difficult Conversations

- 1** Don't procrastinate – delay is your enemy. The average difficult conversation lasts 10 minutes. It might be as short as 3 minutes, but the maximum time is 15 minutes. Some people have held their tongue for years, allowing problems to escalate to irreparable levels. Ask me how I know.
- 2** Plan the conversation, don't launch into it when emotions are high. Wait until you are not angry or upset. Pick a place to talk where you will be uninterrupted and not overheard. Face to face is ideal. Phone calls are second best and sometimes necessary because of distance. Never try to have a difficult conversation via email or text. This is not negotiable! In fact, put away your cell phone during a difficult conversation.
- 3** Prepare what you are going to say and practice. It's one thing to have an idea in your head and a whole different matter for it to come out of your mouth clearly without placing blame on the other person.



- 4 Check your motives. It is vital that you are empathetic and actually care about how the other person is feeling. If you go in with the idea that you need to win, this conversation won't go well. This is not an arm-wrestling contest. Your goal should be to have a win/win outcome.
- 5 Address one main issue and have an outcome in mind. Set a goal for what you want to change after engaging in conversation on this matter. Don't bring out a laundry list of everything that has gone wrong over the past three months. Stay focused and keep it under 15 minutes.
- 6 Listen more than you talk. Ask open-ended questions that engage the other person in helping to find a solution. An example of a wording you might use is, "When I saw you doing a-b-c, I didn't know what to think. Can you help me understand what was going on?" Then wait for their response. Don't talk – listen!
- 7 Conclude in a timely manner by avoiding repetitiveness. There's an old saying that applies to difficult conversations. Get in, get it over with and get out. Clearly state a plan of action that will help prevent this issue from reoccurring. Think in terms of setting up some boundaries. Be specific in establishing a time frame around your expectations.

In a business context, it is advisable to follow up a difficult conversation with an employee with an email. Documenting issues and how they were handled is always a good practice. In addition, it allows you to review what was discussed and clarify your expectations.

**Any long-term relationship
will require difficult conversations.
Learning how to navigate them well will improve the quality
of your life.**

"Our relationships succeed or fail one conversation at a time."

