

Difficult Conversations

4 Things to Do Before a Tough Conversation

by Joseph Grenny

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Summary. Difficult conversations are, well, difficult. And we all crave tactical advice about how to handle them, what to say, and what not to. But the primary predictor of success in a crucial conversation has less to do with how you use your mouth, and much more to do with what you do before you open it. There are several things you can do to prepare for any type of tricky conversation, whether it's delivering tough feedback or negotiating a new role. First, connect with your real motives. Ask yourself: What do I really want for me? For the other person? For the relationship? For other stakeholders? Then, recognize and challenge the stories you tell yourself. Turn yourself from a victim to an actor. Turn the other person from a villain to a human. Also, gather the facts about the situation and don't by sharing your conclusion. Share the facts and premises that led you to your conclusion. Lay out your data. Explain out the logic you used to arrive where you did. Lastly, be

curious. Think through your position enough to have confidence that it has merit. But also muster enough humility to be interested in any facts or logic that might improve your conclusion. close

I was in denial for about a year and a half before I admitted that I needed to fire Randy.

His work performance had made the conclusion inescapable for years, but he was so darned nice and likeable that I gave him the benefit of the doubt. Not only did I like him, I also knew his income was crucial to his family. Furthermore, over the nine years he worked for me, his income had grown to the point that he would find it difficult to get comparable compensation. I hated the thought of the hardship that letting him go might cause. And yet Randy (which is not his real name) had shown himself to be entirely incompetent at managing people and projects. He completed projects based on whoever was nagging him the most not on the importance to the business of the commitments he'd made. You knew he would agree to anything, but you never knew if you'd actually get it. His team was in a constant state of whiplash as his panicked phone calls would often reset their entire agenda.

Eighteen months earlier, I had communicated the serious nature of this chronic pattern. I was certain he could make the changes he agreed to. In subsequent months I fooled myself into believing his random successes demonstrated a pattern of improvement.

But after such a long time — and a perfectly harmonized chorus of complaints from his coworkers — I could no longer elude my responsibility. Randy had to go.

I lived in dread of our Friday 2:00 PM appointment until the moment it arrived.

My colleagues and I have spent 30 years studying best practices for dealing with just this kind of moment of emotional or political risk. We've learned that how we deal with these kinds of crucial conversations predicts the magnitude of our influence, the health of our teams, the consistency of innovation, the strength of customer relationships, and even the durability of marriages and friendship. We've spent many thousands of hours observing how people manage these moments, and our recurring observation is that, unfortunately, when it matters most, we do our worst. We cower or coerce, obfuscate or exaggerate, contend or defend.

It's no surprise that books on these topics (like ours) fly off the shelves. We all crave tactical advice about mastering the verbal ordeal. How should I compose my opening sentence? How do I present my concerns? How can I be sure the other person is forthcoming? How do I stay focused and get to a solution?

While these are all valid questions, our research shows the primary predictor of your success in a crucial conversation has less to do with how you use your mouth, and much more to do

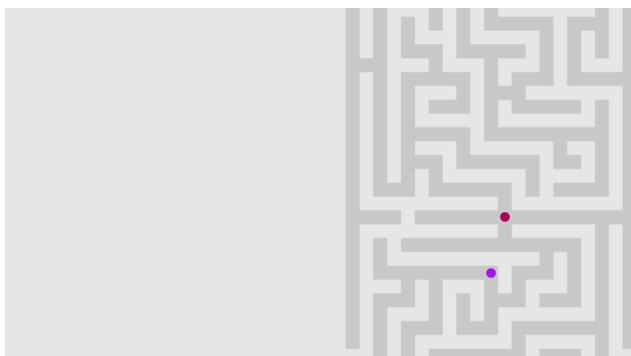
with what you do *before* you open it. What I did Friday at 1:30 PM mattered more than what happened at 2:00 PM.

Here are the four things you must do to prepare. If you do them well, the odds your conversation will go well improve dramatically.

Get your motives right. Under conditions of stress and threat, our motives become short-term and selfish. We worry about whether others will like us, whether we'll look good, be right, win, or avoid conflict. For 18 months, my motive with Randy had been to keep the peace. I wanted to smooth things over and make it all better. The problem with short-term motives is that they preserve the present by mortgaging the future. By avoiding conflict with Randy, I compromised his ability to save his job; I hurt our customers; I frustrated his teammates — and even risked losing some of them. But under conditions of stress and threat, I think escape, not long-term. Each time Randy would violate a commitment, my chest would tighten and I would think, “How do I patch this?” rather than “What’s the *real* problem?”

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I find it helpful to answer it at four levels: What do I really want for me? For the other person? For the relationship? For other stakeholders?

Something potent happened as I meditated on these questions

that Friday morning. A sense of focus, determination, and calm came as I connected with my real desires: to be a caring and ethical manager; to help Randy get a job where he could win; to ensure Randy knew I cared about him and his family; and to provide his team and customers with the support they deserved. Simply connecting to these motives changed my affect as I approached the conversation.

Get your emotions right. Unhelpful emotions are another second barrier to a productive conversation. We often come in angry, scared, hurt, or defensive. Surprisingly, our emotions have less to do with what the other person is doing, and more to do with the story we tell ourselves about what they are doing.

For example, prior to dismissing someone, managers will often tell themselves *victim* and *villain* stories. Their victim story helps them absolve themselves of responsibility for the problem at hand (“I did everything I possibly could for Randy. I have been

patient, supportive and kind. There's nothing more I could have done! He did this to himself!") A victim story makes us out to be innocent sufferers in the predicament.

A villain story helps us justify any negative action we take toward the other by attributing evil or malicious motives to them. We make the other person out to be deserving of suffering. ("I can't believe Randy hasn't fixed this. He has been lazy, unmotivated, and entitled. He had every opportunity but didn't care enough to address the crystal-clear feedback I gave him!").

Recognize and challenge the stories you tell yourself. Turn yourself from a *victim* to an *actor*. Turn the other person from a *villain* to a *human*. Ask yourself, "What am I pretending not to know about my role in this?" and "Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do what he's doing?"

As I asked these questions, I could see many ways I had minimized my feedback and enabled Randy. I could see that he had made valid efforts to change, but that the position did not play to his strengths. This was a good man in a wrong role. I felt a sense of respect and resolve rather than detachment and indignation.

Gather the facts. By definition, we enter a crucial conversation with opposing views. For example, Randy is likely to come to this conversation believing he is making reasonable progress and

deserves continued employment. I don't. Often, the conversation degenerates into contesting conclusions rather than shared information. I say what I think. You say what you think. Rinse and repeat.

Don't start a crucial conversation by sharing your conclusion. Share the facts and premises that led you to your conclusion. Lay out your data. Explain the logic you used to arrive where you did. Gathering the facts is required homework for a healthy conversation. If I think, "Randy is entirely incapable of managing people or projects," I owe it to him to build my case in a patient, honest, and vulnerable way. And I need to be willing to let him challenge my case as well, which leads to the fourth step.

Get curious. The most important attitude to bring to a crucial conversation is a blend of confidence and curiosity. I need to have thought through my position enough to have confidence that it has merit. And I need to muster enough humility to be interested in any facts or logic that might improve my conclusion. Many people resist curiosity because they think it weakens them. In fact, it does the opposite. It makes you more persuasive. As Dean Rusk once said, "The best way to persuade others is with your ears, by listening." When you listen deeply and sincerely, others feel less of a need to resist *you* in order to be heard.

As I walked into the room to meet with Randy, I felt confident of the decision I needed to share, but open to information that might persuade me otherwise. I felt a mix of compassion and determination. I was ready to share the basis from which my decision had been made. I wasn't happy. But I felt peaceful.

I wish I could say that everything turned out great. Randy had a tough time finding his next job. My colleagues and I rallied around him frequently in his search. Even though implementing the decision was painful, Randy supported it within minutes of our meeting. He said, "The past six months have been stressful. I have been drowning and can see I'm not cut out for this." When we finished our conversation, we hugged, something we have done periodically in subsequent years of our friendship.

Going into a tough conversation, it's understandable to be worried about what you're going to say. But it's important to focus first on your motives, assumptions, and thoughts. Crucial conversations are 60% getting your head, heart, and gut right, and 40% saying it right.

Joseph Grenny is the author of the New York Times bestselling book, *Crucial Conversations*. He is also the cofounder of Crucial Learning, a learning company that offers courses in the

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