

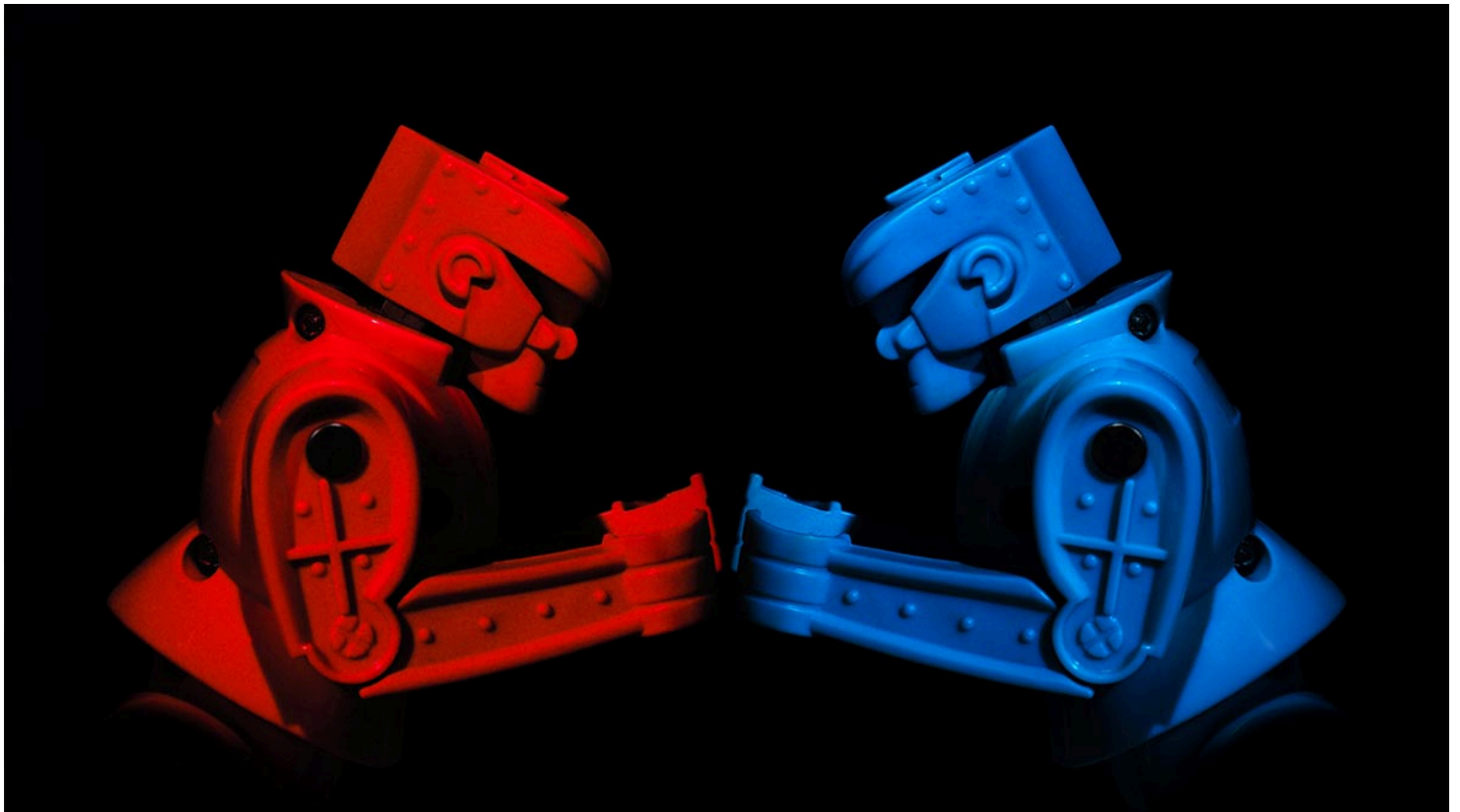
**Harvard
Business
Review**

Difficult Conversations

How to Have Difficult Conversations When You Don't Like Conflict

by Joel Garfinkle

May 24, 2017



Summary. If you dread discord, it can be natural to avoid or delay a difficult conversation. But this can hurt your relationships, and have other negative outcomes. You can learn to dive into these tough talks by reframing your thoughts. Begin from a place of curiosity and... [more](#)

Avoiding or delaying a difficult conversation can hurt your relationships and create other negative outcomes. It may not feel natural at first, especially if you dread discord, but you can learn to dive into these tough talks by reframing your thoughts.

Begin from a place of curiosity and respect, and stop worrying about being liked. Conflict avoiders are often worried about their *likability*. While it's natural to want to be liked, that's not always the most important thing. Lean into the conversation with an open attitude and a genuine desire to learn. Start from a place of curiosity and respect — for both yourself and the other person. Genuine respect and vulnerability typically produce more of the same: mutual respect and shared vulnerability. Even when the subject matter is difficult, conversations can remain mutually supportive. Respect the other person's point of view, and expect them to respect yours.

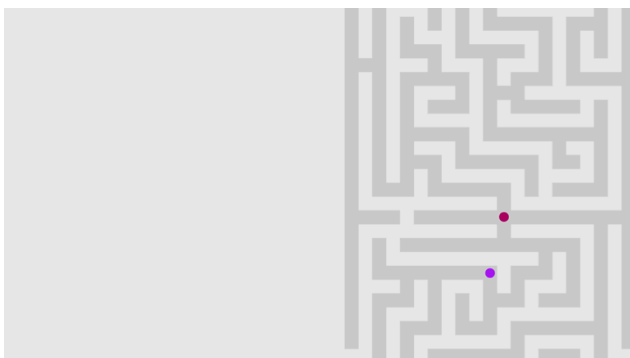
Focus on what you're hearing, not what you're saying. People who shy away from conflict often spend a huge amount of time mentally rewording their thoughts. Although it might feel like useful preparation, ruminating over what to say can hijack your mind for the entire workday and sometimes even late into the night. And tough conversations rarely go as planned anyway.

So take the pressure off yourself. You don't actually need to talk that much during a difficult conversation. Instead, focus on listening, reflecting, and observing. For example, if a team member has missed another deadline, approach them by asking neutral, supportive questions: "I see the project is behind schedule. Tell me about the challenges you're facing." Then listen. Pause. Be interested and proactive. Gather as much detail as possible. Ask follow-up questions without blame.

Your genuine attention and neutrality encourage people to elaborate. For every statement the other person makes, mirror back what they've said, to validate that you understand them correctly.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

Difficult Conversations



7 Things to Say When a Conversation Turns Negative
by Kathleen Kelley Reardon

How to Handle Difficult Conversations at Work
by Rebecca Knight

Create a Culture Where Difficult Conversations Aren't So Hard

Be direct. Address uncomfortable situations head-on by getting right to the point. Have a frank, respectful discussion where both parties speak frankly about the details of an issue. Talking with people honestly and with respect creates mutually rewarding relationships, even when conversations are difficult.

There are situations, however, where cultural or personality differences should be considered. If your culture is conflict avoidant or doesn't value directness, you can still engage in challenging conversations. In these cases, shift your approach from overly direct to a respectful, affirming back-and-forth conversation. For instance, if the person you are talking with seems to not be picking up on what you are saying, ask them to repeat their understanding of what you've shared. As they reflect back what they've heard, you can adjust your message to make sure the conflict is moving toward resolution. This communication style is open and less threatening.

Don't put it off. How often is your response to conflict something like, "I don't want to talk about it" or "It's not that big a deal" or "It's not worth arguing about"? If you're always promising yourself that you'll "bring it up next time it happens," well, now's the time. Instead of putting off a conversation for some ideal future time, when it can be more easily dealt with, tackle it right away. Get your cards on the table so you can resolve the issue and move on.

It might seem risky to come right out and say something, but often that's just what is needed. Give yourself or your counterpart a little bit of time to cool down, if necessary, and plan the general outline of what you want to convey and the outcome you desire. But then have the conversation, and make a plan to move on.

After all the mental gymnastics of endlessly practicing conversations in your head, actually engaging in a two-way conversation can be inspiring, respectful, and productive.

Expect a positive outcome. You'll struggle to follow this advice if you continue to go into a conflict telling yourself, "This is going to be a disaster." Instead, tell yourself, "This will result in an improved relationship."

Focus on the long-term gains that the conversation will create for the relationship. When your attention is focused on positive outcomes and benefits, it will shift your thinking process and inner dialogue to a more constructive place. As a result, you will grow more comfortable approaching the coworker who constantly criticizes and complains, or the subordinate who keeps underperforming.

Don't ignore the tough situations you are aware of today. When the opportunity presents itself to provide unsolicited negative feedback to a difficult colleague or give a less-than-positive performance evaluation, summon the courage to address the conflict head-on.

JG

Joel Garfinkle is an executive leadership coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps*

to Take Your Career to the Next Level and Difficult Conversations: Practical Tactics for Crucial Communication. Follow Joel at his FulfillmentATwork newsletter.

Recommended For You

PODCAST

How to Become More Persuasive at Work



8 Ways to Get a Difficult Conversation Back on Track



4 Things to Do Before a Tough Conversation



7 Things to Say When a Conversation Turns Negative

