



## **Challenging Conversations: Eight Steps to Mastery** by Sally Ward, Ward Leadership [www.leadership.com](http://www.leadership.com)

One of the concerns that my clients frequently bring to the table is how to hold a difficult conversation that has been looming. Much as we might prefer to avoid discussing poor performance, delivering bad news, or confronting someone's unwanted behavior, choosing short-term comfort over collaborative resolution of a problem situation is practically guaranteed to escalate it.

Feeling awkward and uncomfortable in a difficult conversation is very common. If you've ever put one off or emerged from one thinking, "Arrgh! It just got worse!", you have plenty of company.

Common mistakes that derail these conversations include: Blaming ("I'm right/you're wrong"); Sugarcoating ("It's not really that big a deal, but..."); Avoiding ("Maybe it will get better on its own"); Judging (attributing negative intent to the other party); and Failure to ask questions (assuming you have all the facts).

Difficult conversations require a straightforward approach that is well-planned and thought out. Here is how to get started:

**Set a time and an agenda for the conversation.** It's best to give the person a heads up about what you'd like to discuss, so there are no unpleasant surprises. State the problem neutrally, using "I" language rather than "you" language that assigns blame.

*"John, I'd like to meet with you about how we might improve communications. What's a time this week when we can get together?" (Not "John, we need to talk. Your failure to keep me informed is creating problems.")*

**Seven additional steps** will help you foster better relationships and outcomes:

**Hold the conversation in person, if possible.** Use the phone as a second choice and avoid e-mail at all cost.

**Begin with supportive purpose.** Show sincere concern for the other party and express your desire for a good outcome.

*"John, when I'm not up to date on the plans to increase sales, I feel concerned that things may not be moving forward, and then I have a tendency to step in and look over your shoulder. I'd like to resolve this in a way that meets your need for autonomy and the company's need to see progress."*

**Ask questions.** Choose open ended questions that begin with "what" or "how". Find out what is contributing to the situation. Get the other party's perspective and demonstrate respect by listening without interrupting. Listening does not connote that you agree, but that you are willing to give the other person the courtesy of being heard. Bear in mind that disagreements are often rooted in a difference of values.

**Stay in charge of yourself.** Never initiate a difficult conversation when you're steaming mad. Maintain a calm voice and demeanor. Think about what reactions the other person might have that could throw you off, and be prepared to manage your emotions. If the other party becomes angry or defensive, don't respond in kind. Their anger is theirs to own; don't take it personally. If necessary, reschedule the conversation when emotions have cooled down.

**Plan and write out what you'll say in advance.** This will help you choose language that keeps the conversation moving in a positive direction. Continue to emphasize your desire to improve the situation.

**Problem solve.** Search for mutually acceptable options or solutions. The best decisions are those that have been reached jointly so that both parties have some skin in the game.

**Agree on next steps.** Summarize the conversation and get in writing what each of you has agreed to do. How will you know that progress has been made? Choose specific targets so you can track results. Finally, set a follow-up meeting to activate accountability.

The next time you need to have a difficult conversation, don't be like the ostrich who puts its head in the sand and hopes the danger goes away. Take charge, think about what you want for the relationship, and plan an approach that is straightforward and demonstrates respect and concern for the other party.

Like all skills, the art of holding a difficult conversation become easier the more you practice.