

How to Begin a Delicate Conversation



We have all been in the situation of attempting to engage someone in a conversation of a delicate nature. Sometimes, we hesitate, uncertain about how to begin. Other times, we forge ahead with good intentions but quickly find ourselves backtracking when our words do not come out the way we mean and further alienate the person with whom we are speaking. Our confidence crumbles as a genuine effort to be assertive seems to go terribly astray.

We often search for the right words when approaching someone to offer constructive criticism, express a contradictory opinion, or make a request that is likely not to be well-received. To increase our effectiveness, we should first consider the *why* behind our message. Are we clear as to why we need to discuss the topic? Do we have a distinct purpose, such as to find a solution, raise awareness of an issue, or clarify a need? Or are we speaking in haste, using our words merely to defend ourselves, retaliate against someone, or simply criticize? Taking a moment to reflect before we speak will verify that our intentions are pure and help assure ourselves about the need to attempt the dialogue.

How we say things and *what* we say are also important with challenging conversations. How we come across when we are communicating is largely influenced by how we feel. Therefore, it is a good idea to check our emotional state before speaking. When we are feeling angry, anger will likely be conveyed through our words and our non-verbal messages. When we are feeling attacked, we will likely respond in a defensive manner. So when experiencing negative emotions, we may want to delay talking with the other person. Allowing ourselves time to regain control will ultimately prove beneficial to us and those with whom we wish to speak.

What we say when in conversation with others can often make or break a conversation. Being selective with our words can help the message be better received. Consider these different strategies for effectively opening a conversation:

- **Start with something positive.** Beginning a conversation with a compliment or affirming statement is a good way to put another person at ease and build a connection. The key, however, is to make it specific and genuine, and pause a moment to let the person absorb the positive statement before having to hear a message he/she may find more challenging. For example, instead of saying, “You did a good job, but I don’t think you



included...” say, “I really like how you made separate notations of the projects in your summary. The separation made it very easy for me to understand the total cost of each project, which will be very helpful for future planning. I’d also like to see an expense breakdown...”

- **Speak from your own position.** Opening a conversation with an “I” statement clarifies your perspective and prevents the other person from feeling attacked. For example, instead of saying, “You are late...” say, “I was expecting you earlier...” Choose your words carefully to convey what you are feeling and thinking, instead of beginning with assumptions about the other person’s feelings and thoughts. Say things such as, “As I understand it...”, “I could be mistaken but...”, or “It seems to me that...”
- **Solicit their assistance or opinion.** Inviting the other person’s participation immediately upon beginning the conversation gives him/her a sense of control. Offering them an opportunity of some sort helps to position the conversation as a partnership and a true dialogue, not a monologue. Consider openers such as, “I need your help with xyz. Do you have a few minutes to talk?” Or, “I’d like your feedback on an idea that I feel may help us work together more effectively...” “I’d like to hear your thinking on xyz, because I believe we may have different opinions on it.” “Do you have time to talk about xyz, because I’d like to see if we can reach an understanding on...” Or simply, “How do you feel about xyz...”



We may find it helpful to rehearse a particularly sensitive conversation with an objective third party who can give us pointers before we make the actual attempt. Or we may wish to jot down affirming messages and key points we want to convey during the dialogue. Whatever strategy we use, our chances of having productive dialogues with others are increased when we are thoughtful and deliberate in our words and manner. Be considerate, be confident, and converse away!

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