

Guide to having Difficult Conversations by Faye Reynolds

What makes a conversation difficult? When there are opposing values being put forth by two or more parties; when the overall outcome for peace is desired by both/all, but the path to peace is seen to compromise one's values; and when there is a strongly held value that holds even deeper emotional investment in the conflict.

What are some of the values that may inform both sides of the conversation?

1. S.C.A.R.F. – A brain-based model for human motivation, designed as an acronym of personal needs for *status* (a person of worth) *certainty* (movement from the unknown to the known) *autonomy* (independence) *relatedness* (love for others and community) *fairness* (unbiased equal treatment)
2. Spiritual, moral, ethical, or civil
3. Overall health and well-being of self and others

The goal of a difficult conversation is not to “win”, but to better understand the values of both parties which feel threatened, and to come to the best solution to protect the values of both parties. Power is shared.

Looking Inward Before the Conversation

1. How much do I value this relationship: If there is high value of the other person then this conflict must be resolved; low value of the other – a breakdown may be non-consequential.
2. Self-awareness: Am I in a fight or flee, freeze, or appease response mode?
 - a. Fight – the underlying emotion is anger and the desired outcome is to defeat the threat to my values (High Value, Low Relationship)
 - b. Flee/Freeze – the underlying emotion is anxiety and I would rather avoid this conversation at all costs and hope the threat will just go away if ignored (Low value, Low Relationship)
 - c. Appease – the underlying emotion is fear of loss. I will just give into the other for the higher value of peace. (Low value, High relationship)
 - d. Invest – High Value and High Relationship to work for the best outcome for both.
3. Investment: What is the best motivation for having this conversation and desired outcome?
 - a. Who will benefit from resolution?
 - b. How will the “other” be honoured by the conversation?
 - c. How will power be shared at the end of the process (High value, High Relationship)
 - i. What is the personal power that I hold right now? Do I hold the advantage or feel in a deficit position? How does the other perceive their power? Will the outcome create a better balance?
4. Risk/Benefits Analysis: Create a grid of four squares and write in each square what could occur if we have this conversation.

Risk to me	Benefit to me
Risk to them	Benefit to them

Looking Outward at the Issue

1. Is the problem simple or complex?
 - a. If simple, find the heart of the conflict and name it as clearly as possible so the conversation is focused and stays on topic. Do not drift into other secondary or old issues.
 - b. If complex, the problem needs to be broken down into parts and addressed over several conversations. Deal with one aspect at a time.
2. Research – expand your knowledge of the situation and what resources will be helpful for the conversation. Learn the “other side” and the values supporting their argument.
3. Name the values at stake. What is your primary value that you feel is threatened in this conflict? Secondary Values? What do you believe is the primary value that the other person feels is being threatened? Secondary Values? Decide upon the questions will you ask to clarify and honour their values, so that you have not assumed incorrectly the drivers behind their behaviour.
4. State the issue as an “observation” rather than an “evaluation”. What is the actual behavior that has been observed (I see that you have arrived to work after 9:10 am every day last week) rather than the evaluative (you are always late for work!) Have clarity before the conversation of what are the observed behaviours or spoken words that have led to this conflict.

Six Steps to Engaging the Conversation

1. Establish Connection – state best positive intention for having the conversation in a calm tone, expressing value for the person with gratitude. (*You are a valuable employer who has much to contribute to our work environment*)
2. Introduce the problem with stating your specific observations/facts. Listen with an open body posture to their response and note their emotions. (*I noticed that you consistently arrive after 9:10 am when we start the workday at 9:00 am*)
3. State your value that you believe is being violated by the other’s action. (*Punctuality and readiness for the day; disciplined employees - Your action feels disrespectful to these values.*)
4. Ask: Is this an accurate perception of your behavior? What do you value? (*Flexibility – it is the work accomplished not the time frame; Practicality – that is when my bus gets here; Family – that way I can see my kids off to school*)
5. Ask good questions for the most clarity possible, always with a posture to listen and understand.
6. Innovate and Problem Solve: Is there a way to honour both values? What behaviour changes are necessary; Record any reached agreements of what will change. Establish a follow-up process. What is the outcome if no agreement can be reached?
7. Express appreciation and reinforce best intentions of both parties to work well going forward.