



Communicating through Conflict: 4 steps to handling a difficult conversation without confrontation

Loud voices. Accusing words. Cold shoulders. Heated discussions.

These are just a few signs of relationships and conversations that are on the verge of explosion. How we deal with these tough moments, in our actions and our language is important – not only to our ability to maintain healthy relationships with others, but also to preserve our own peace of mind and self-esteem. Here are four crucial communication skills and steps on how to manage a difficult conversation without detrimental confrontation.

Speak directly (with the person)

- ♦ **Practice with a supportive person**
- ♦ **Notice body language and tone**

Let's say you have had a disagreement, a misunderstanding, or even an argumentative fight with someone, and you want to resolve it. It is best to speak directly with the other person involved. Ask for a time that is convenient for them, and agree to talk in person. It may take some courage to speak up and have a difficult conversation with someone, so practicing with a supportive friend may be helpful. Be convincing with your body language and your words. Remember that 80 percent of your communication will be non-verbal. Practice being calm, as your tone of voice is also crucial in keeping a difficult conversation from heading toward a heated confrontation.

Soften the conversation

- ♦ **Don't Blame**
- ♦ **Use "I" statements**

When discussions lead off in a negative and accusatory way, it has begun with a harsh start up. Psychologist, John Gottman, Ph.D., suggests using a "soft start up" to prevent major arguments when differences are present, by bringing up problems gently and without blame. His research reveals that 96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a fifteen-minute conversation based on the first three minutes of the interaction . Making a critical remark off the bat will only cause the other person to be defensive. Also, when sharing your opinion or request, use "I" statements, as opposed to "You" statements, which only point out the problems and bad behavior you feel the other person has. For example, instead of saying, "You never listen to me" or "You always do (this or that)," say something like, "I feel frustrated/confused/not appreciated when (this) happens." Being sarcastic and using the terms "always" or "never" are likely to cause immediate defensiveness. Soften your next oppositional conversation, and if possible, begin it on a positive note. Discussions invariably end on the same note they begin.

Be a good listener

- ♦ **Don't interrupt**
- ♦ **Check for understanding**

Perhaps one of the most precious and powerful gifts we can give another person is to really listen to them, to listen with quiet, fascinated attention, with our whole being, fully present. Try to withhold any judgment and do not interrupt when listening to another other person, while you are hearing all the facts and understanding his (or her) perspective. Ask questions to clarify his position or opinion. Don't get caught up in the trap of his games, by going around and around trying to prove who is right. Sometimes agreeing to disagree is the only option. Working toward mutual understanding and respect is the goal, in the midst of differing opinions. Being listened to and more importantly, being heard is a fundamental need we all have.

Be solution-focused

- ♦ **Focus on one issue**
- ♦ **Remember the value of the relationship**

In resolving conflicts, focus on one issue, one complaint, at a time. Try to agree on what the specific problem is, and then explore options to meet both people's needs. Avoiding conversations that may be difficult – because of hurt feelings or angry words spoken, may cause more problems. Each day that passes causes detachment for those involved and is a breeding ground for further misunderstandings. Also, remember the value of the relationship. Whether it is with a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor or a family member, focusing on the benefits of reconciliation may give you the boost you need to work through the problems.

Calm communication during chaos, conflict, or crisis is a skill everyone needs. Communication is what connects all relationships. The words and actions we use can reveal a variety of thoughts and emotions, from love or excitement to anger and resentment. Practice today these four steps to having a difficult conversation without confrontation. Greater peace in your relationships, improved health for yourself- and less stress will result!

¹ *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by John M. Gottman, Ph.D. & Nan Silver.

About Centerstone

Centerstone (www.centerstone.org), celebrating 50 years of service in 2006, is the largest behavioral healthcare provider in Tennessee and the ninth largest in the nation. A not-for-profit organization, Centerstone provides a full range of behavioral health and related educational services to individuals of all ages and their families. Centerstone is devoted to research that seeks to identify, treat and eliminate mental illness. Each year, the organization provides services to more than 50,000 individuals. Children, adolescents, adults, seniors, and families all receive help from a multitude of different programs at more than 65 facilities and 140 partnership locations throughout the region. For more information about Centerstone, please call (615) 460-4357 or toll free at (888) 291-4357.

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Susan Gillpatrick, Centerstone Crisis Management Specialist, primarily works in the field with clients in critical incident response situations, and in Centerstone's wellness trainings and presentations. She is also responsible for planning and implementing marketing and growth strategies for Centerstone's Crisis Management Strategies.

In recent years, Ms. Gillpatrick worked for the Shelby County Government Victims Assistance Center in Memphis. There, she co-developed a model program for the state of Tennessee entitled, "Homicide Response." Her work in this area received the 2000 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

Ms. Gillpatrick is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Trauma Specialist, Certified Workplace Conflict Mediator, and Mental Health Service Provider in the state of Tennessee and a National Certified Counselor. She is also a member the American Counseling Association, the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, the Tennessee Mental Health Counseling Association, and the Middle Tennessee Employee Assistance Professionals Association. She is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences, and has had numerous articles published. She received her Master of Education degree in Human Development Counseling from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.