

# HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

## CHEAT SHEET

### WHAT IS DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS?

In the workplace, a difficult conversation is one in which you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way, to deal with a workplace issue.

A difficult conversation may involve:

- topics you don't want to talk about
- situations where you're not sure what to say
- conflicting opinions
- circumstances where the outcome is uncertain
- discussions which make you feel uncomfortable.

### WHY HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS?

In order to change behaviours that disadvantage or discriminate against others, we need to think about how we are perpetuating inequality at work, ask questions, and encourage others to reflect on their behaviour. To focus on the lived experience and challenge yourself and your colleagues, you will need to give feedback and talk about difficult issues.

It can feel uncomfortable to engage in difficult conversations at work. However, acknowledging and confronting these kinds of issues can help you better understand and overcome challenges that would otherwise remain unresolved, buried, or unspoken.

It takes an understanding of one another's experiences and perspectives to create a workplace environment where diversity, inclusion and belonging can thrive. Engaging in healthy, respectful conversation is an important tool for making progress toward understanding the people around you.

### WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES / BARRIERS?

It's human nature to avoid difficult conversations, yet avoidance strategies don't make things better. In fact, they usually make the situation worse. Conversation roadblocks - assumptions, attitudes, or experiences that keep us from talking about our differences - can prevent us from connecting, collaborating, and countering stereotypes and exclusionary practices.

Common conversation roadblocks include:



**There isn't a problem**

(denial, you personally haven't experienced any problem)



**There will be negative consequences to my actions**

(it's not safe to speak up, I'll be viewed in a negative light, I'll say the wrong thing, I'll offend someone, people will think I'm overly sensitive, my feelings will be minimized)



**There's no benefit to talking**

(talking about our differences can only divide us further, talking won't solve anything)

# HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

<b>THE FIVE PRACTICES TO HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS</b>	<b>HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS</b>
<p><b>COME PREPARED</b></p> <p>Consider your assumptions and intentions before beginning a difficult conversation to allow you the best chance for a productive dialogue.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Set the talking point in advance:</b> Give the other person advance notice of what you'd like to discuss to allow them to prepare, too, and establish clear expectations for you both.</li> <li>• <b>Decide what you want to achieve:</b> Ensure that you have a clear understanding of the problem and what you want to achieve.</li> <li>• <b>Have a goal in mind, but be flexible:</b> Go into the conversation knowing your preferred outcome but be open to compromise once you have a deeper understanding of the other person's experience.</li> <li>• <b>Check your facts:</b> Pull up any key metrics/dates/incidents or other resources ahead of time and review the details. This can help you state your case clearly and ground a tough conversation.</li> <li>• <b>Get into a positive mindset:</b> Examine how you are feeling about the situation before you have the conversation, so your emotions don't surprise you. Assume that the conversation will go well and approach the situation with a positive frame of mind.</li> </ul>
<p><b>FOCUS ON FACTS, NOT FEELINGS</b></p> <p>Be direct in your communication, choose your words carefully, and stick to the facts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Be confident and direct:</b> Begin the conversation with confidence and get to your point quickly. Clearly state the issue and your observations supported with specific examples.</li> <li>• <b>Manage your emotions:</b> Ground yourself, breathe and keep it professional. Remind yourself that the more in control you are, the better you'll be able to communicate the message.</li> <li>• <b>Avoid emotional language:</b> Don't blame others for your feelings or focus exclusively on how you 'feel' – this makes it more about you than the issue you're discussing.</li> <li>• <b>Choose your words carefully:</b> Starting your sentence with "I" instead of "You" avoids put-downs and promotes positive communication.</li> </ul>
<p><b>INVITE DIALOGUE AND RESPOND WITH CURIOSITY</b></p> <p>Lean into the conversation with an open attitude and a genuine desire to learn. Engage with curiosity and respect the other person's point of view.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Make space for your colleague:</b> Be empathetic and give your colleague space to share their perspective and allow them to finish speaking. Don't interrupt except to acknowledge.</li> <li>• <b>Show acknowledgement:</b> After your colleague has expressed their side of the story, summarize what they have said and acknowledge their point of view.</li> <li>• <b>Be humble:</b> Feel confident in your point of view, but stay humble and accept that you don't have a monopoly on truth and new information might modify your perspective. Be respectful of alternate views and perspectives that do not align with your own.</li> <li>• <b>Stay curious:</b> Be curious and ask open questions to explore and understand your colleagues viewpoint and experience.</li> <li>• <b>Practice active listening:</b> Pay attention and actively focus on what your colleague is saying. Make an effort to listen to understand and not to formulate your response whilst they are sharing.</li> </ul>
<p><b>AIM FOR UNDERSTANDING ABOVE CONSENSUS</b></p> <p>Show empathy and give your team member space to share their perspective. Remain open and aim to find a shared truth in the situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Participate with an open mind:</b> Don't be set in your assumptions - you may have misread the situation. Be open to being challenged, accept the other person's understanding, and retry if necessary. Shared learning is the goal - not winning an argument.</li> <li>• <b>Suspend judgment:</b> Suspend any judgement you have about them or the situation. Pause and genuinely seek to understand the situation from the other person's point of view.</li> <li>• <b>Be empathetic:</b> Consider how the other person feels during the conversation and give them time to process their emotions. Acknowledge how they must be feeling and express empathy.</li> <li>• <b>Name and share the impact:</b> Discuss the impact of this conversation on each of you, the team and the organization as a whole. Aim to find a shared truth when you're communicating.</li> <li>• <b>Embrace coexisting realities:</b> Avoid 'either/or' positions and accept that multiple realities can exist.</li> </ul>
<p><b>RESOLVE IT AND MAKE AN ACTION PLAN</b></p> <p>Come up with a solution together. Once you reach an agreement, make sure there is an action plan in place moving forward.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborate on solutions:</b> Work together to identify potential solutions. Listen to the other person's thoughts and bring some suggestions to the table as well.</li> <li>• <b>Agree next steps and close:</b> Finish the conversation by setting clear action items. Take the time to discuss corrective actions, build on them, and decide on a path forward together.</li> <li>• <b>Follow up:</b> Set a talking point for your next one-on-one to revisit your established plan and ensure you've both followed through your commitments and achieved the desired outcome.</li> <li>• <b>Make a record:</b> Document the discussions you had and share agreed next steps via email. Include the date and time, and who was present at the meeting.</li> <li>• <b>Take time to reflect:</b> Take some time to reflect on the matter and regroup. Learn from the experience and think about what you could do differently next time.</li> </ul>