

# Managing Difficult Conversations

Online Resource

## What makes conversations feel challenging?

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We would be extremely unusual if, at some point in our lives, we didn't find the prospect of having a particular conversation challenging. This can be caused by several reasons including:

- A power imbalance in the relationship you have with the other person/people involved e.g. they may be your supervisor or another member of staff who holds a more senior position than you do.
- You've tried to sort the issue out before and it hasn't worked.
- The longer an issue has gone on, the bigger a task it feels to address it.
- You may assume that the other person/people involved are either happy with the way things are, or that they are purposely behaving in a way that causes you an issue.
- You may not know what the best resolution to the issue would be.
- There may be several issues that have developed over time, and it seems too big a job to try to sort them all out.
- There may be cultural barriers to resolving the issue/s.

### Activity

- What conversations have you found challenging?
- What conversations have you avoided because you thought they would be challenging?
- What stopped you having these conversations?
- What patterns are there in your answers to the above three questions?
- What can you learn from what you have noticed?

It is worth noting that if you avoid having challenging conversations, there will continue to be an impact on you. If you don't address issues, the behaviours that you find difficult in others can become embedded patterns of behaviour. For example, in a research group meeting there may be someone who consistently talks over or interrupts others. If so, has anyone pointed out this behaviour? If this hasn't happened, then the individual might either be unaware that other people don't like this behaviour or believe that it is ok to behave like this because no-one has explained the impact it has on them.

If you find it difficult to have conversations you believe will be challenging, it is important to find ways to enable yourself to have these conversations. A simple way of finding the motivation for having these conversations is to ask yourself these three questions:

1. What will be different in a month/ three months/12 months if the issue **is** resolved?
2. What will things be like in a month/three months/12 months if the issue **isn't** resolved?
3. What is the worst thing that could happen if you have the conversation?

The answers to these questions usually help highlight the fact that the end result is likely to be worth the discomfort – real or perceived – of addressing issues that are having negative consequences. It is also true that very often conversations we think will be challenging turn out to be much easier in practice, and that it takes much less energy to have them than to continue to deal with the impact of avoiding them.



## Two different approaches to the same conversation: the blame conversation and the learning conversation.

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One of the things which can happen when having challenging conversations is that they can degenerate into arguments about the perceived facts of the situation. We are unlikely to agree about what the 'facts' are, and if we focus on trying to do this can spend too much time looking backwards to the past and not enough time finding ways to improve things in the future. During challenging conversations, it is therefore important to ensure that the conversation occurs in what could be described as a 'learning frame'. This is best summarised as: "I am curious about how we got to where we are, and how we can move forward productively". This will usually achieve a more effective outcome than a conversation held in the 'blame frame' which can be summarised as: "I am in the right and you are in the wrong".

Reframing the reasons conversations may feel challenging so we can approach them in the learning frame often brings a helpful new perspective:

Reason conversation feels challenging	Reframe into the learning frame
A power imbalance in the relationship you have with the other person/people involved e.g. they may be your supervisor or another member of staff who holds a more senior position than you do.	It is in everyone's interest to resolve issues. Just because someone is more senior doesn't mean they are better at having difficult conversations. Your perspective is just as valid and valuable as that of anyone else.
You've tried to sort the issue out before and it hasn't worked.	The situation may have changed, so the approach you used before may work this time. You can also use what you learnt from your experience last time to do something different this time.
The longer an issue has gone on, the bigger a task it feels to address it.	If the issue hasn't resolved itself by now, the quicker it is addressed the better, so it doesn't continue to have an impact on you.
You may assume that the other person/people involved are either happy with the way things are or are purposely behaving in a way that causes you an issue.	In practice this assumption is rarely true. However, we are usually very poor at mindreading, and the only way to find out is to ask the other people. That way we can understand the issue from their perspective and use this to help develop a positive way forward.
You may not know what the best resolution to the issue would be.	You don't need to have all the answers. Working out a solution together is more likely to result in actions that will be delivered, and which will produce positive results for everyone.
There may be several issues that have developed over time, and it seems too big a job to try to sort them all out.	You don't need to sort everything out at once. Choosing the key issue that will have the biggest impact if it is resolved may result in other issues being resolved anyway. If it doesn't, finding an approach that works for one issue will mean you are well placed to tackle the other issues over time.

There are several strategies you can use to ensure that you stay in the “learning frame” during challenging conversations:

1. Firstly, ensure that you separate ‘intention’ and ‘impact’. There are very few people who intend to behave in a way which is challenging to others, so it is helpful to recognise that this was not likely to be the intent. Even acknowledging that this is the case can significantly change our perspective of an issue. However, what is experienced by someone (the ‘impact’) is individual to the person who experiences the behaviour. So, when discussing the situation, focus on the **impact on you** rather than making assumptions about and commenting on the other person’s intent.
2. Use future orientated language which engages in a problem-solving dialogue rather focussing on the past. Some examples of this include:
  - “I appreciate that we have a different view of what has happened. I am interested in what you think we could do to improve how we work together in the future?” Follow up question once there are a range of options: “Which of these are you willing to commit to trying over the next month?”
  - “From my perspective the quality of your work is not up to the standard required. What support do you need from me to enhance the quality of your work?” Follow up question: “What support from other people do you feel would help you achieve these changes?”
  - “I understand you do not agree that your behaviour was unacceptable, however the impact your behaviour had on me was upsetting. I am wondering what needs to change to prevent this happening again in the future.” Follow up question: “If we make these changes, what differences will we notice about the way we are able to work together?”
  - “I feel that one way forward would be to organise to meet more regularly to discuss my results and agree actions. How would this would work for you?” Follow up question: “When would be a good time to meet each week that would suit you?”
3. Using questions that start with ‘why’ can feel like an attack and are more likely to result in defensive responses. Try to rephrase ‘why’ questions to ‘what’ or ‘how’ questions. For example, you could change “Why don’t you act on the feedback I give you about your work?” to “What stops you acting on the feedback that you get from me?”.

## Activity

Thinking about a challenging conversation you need to have (or one you have had recently):

- What was the impact of the other person's behaviour on you?
- How can you express that without making assumptions about, or commenting on, the intention of the other person?
- Come up with three questions which you could ask the other person which would be future orientated.

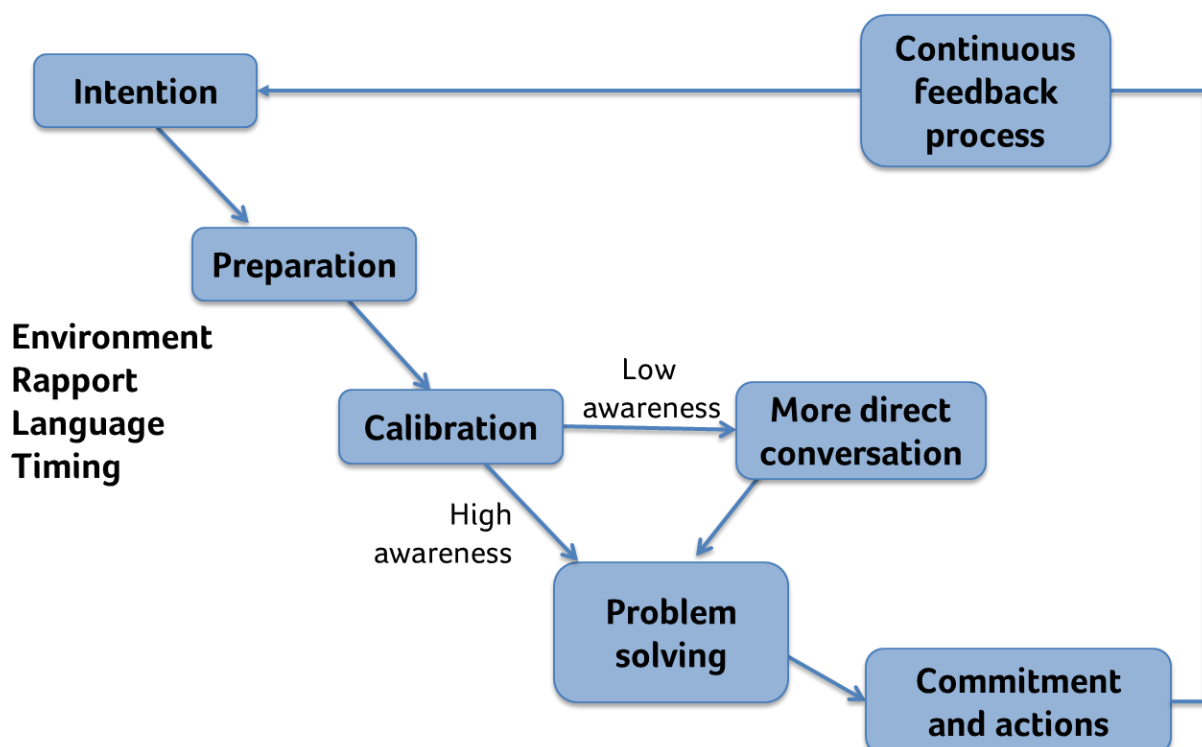


## Having the conversation

During your preparation for having a challenging conversation, there are a few basic things that will help deliver an effective result:

- Conversations which may be challenging for any of the people involved should take place in a private environment, and ideally one which does not reinforce any perceived power imbalance. Therefore, if possible use neutral meeting rooms for having conversations which are likely to be challenging. If you are a research group leader you should ensure that these types of conversations do not happen in a public forum such as within group meetings.
- Think about how you build rapport with the other person/people involved in the conversation. Techniques such as mirroring body language, choice of words, pace of conversation and listening carefully will all help with this.
- Think about the questions you would like to ask in advance. Spend time:
  - Focusing on the impact on you rather than on assumptions about the intent of the other person.
  - Putting your questions into a 'learning frame'.
  - Ensuring they are future orientated.
  - Preparing 'what' or 'how' questions.
- Have the conversations soon after the issue arises. This will help you identify ways of resolving the issue quickly and prevent the issue become embedded and intensified.
- Try to find a mutually convenient time, as this will help demonstrate a commitment to joint working.

When having challenging conversations, it is helpful to have a process to work through to enable the conversation to move forward (rather than getting stuck in loops of discussion about the past). This diagram is a useful structure to follow:



### **Stage 1: Intention**

Before having the challenging conversation, be clear about what you would hope to achieve from it – what would be an acceptable outcome from the conversation? For the conversation to be effective this outcome should be in a “learning frame”. If you are clear on this, during the conversation you can state your outcome as a way of ensuring that the conversation remains future focussed.

### **Stage 2: Preparation**

In preparing for the conversation it is worthwhile understanding the perspectives of other people involved in the situation. Some questions which are worth asking yourself (dependent upon the situation) include:

- What might be preventing them delivering work of a suitable quality?
- What might be causing them to behave in an unacceptable way?
- What are the consequences for them now and in the future?
- What might you be doing which is contributing to the situation?
- What might other people be doing which is contributing to the situation?

It is also useful to think about what actual evidence you have. For example, you can refer to:

- Job specifications when talking about the quality of someone’s work.
- Assessment criteria when discussing quality of work with students.
- REF criteria when discussing quality of research outputs.
- Codes of practice e.g. University and School level postgraduate codes of practice when discussing expectations within supervision.

### **Stage 3: Calibration and direct conversation**

At the start of any challenging conversation it is useful to understand the other person’s view of the situation. There are two general situations:

- When people are aware of their behaviour (and willing to admit this) then all you need to do in the conversation is confirm that you have the same view of the situation. A comment such as “Yes, I would agree that the way you talked in the meeting was unacceptable” reinforces their understanding of the behaviour without dwelling on this issue. From this point you can move directly into problem solving and agreeing actions.
- When people are unaware of their behaviour (or not willing to admit to it) then you will need to be more direct. Be careful to describe the impact of their behaviour (and avoid reference to intent). You may need to restate the impact their behaviour has had on you several times before they will acknowledge their role in this (whether intentional or not). In cases where people are unwilling to accept that there is an issue with their behaviour, you may need to agree to differ before moving to the problem-solving stage of the conversation. Language such as “I appreciate that we clearly have a different view of the situation. However, I would like us to agree how we can ensure that this situation does not reoccur in the future.” This avoids getting stuck in a loop of disagreement about the facts and helps focus the conversation on gaining agreement on what will change in the future.



#### **Stage 4: Problem-solving and agreeing actions**

In any challenging conversation the aim is to come to a resolution to prevent the situation continuing or reoccurring. It is therefore important that you move forward at some point in the conversation to the problem-solving process. To do this, be willing to ask questions to explore the potential solutions and remember that the problem-solving process should be a mutual process rather than a one-sided process. Use language such as:

- “One of the things which would make a difference to me is you listening more rather talking over me. Are you willing to try this?” Follow on question: “What will help you listen more?”
- “What could I do which would enable you to contribute more effectively in group meetings?” Follow on question: “What would be the most effective way of me doing that?”
- “What do you think would help you improve your performance?” Follow on question: “What support do you need from me?”
- “What one thing do you think you could do differently to ensure that you support the students in the research group more effectively?” Follow on question: “What would help you put that into practice?”

Within the problem-solving stage, you are looking for a solution, or solutions, which both of you find acceptable. One of the common mistakes in the problem-solving process is to try and resolve every element of the challenge in one conversation, rather than look at it as a process of problem solving which might take several conversations. In the case of poor performance, focus on finding solutions to the areas which have the biggest impact on performance and avoid seeking to resolve these at the same time as resolving minor issues in performance. Similarly, when discussing behaviour agree some initial (and achievable) modifications to behaviour rather than trying to resolve every element of the challenging behaviour. At the end of the problem-solving process it is helpful to agree actions, document these and share them with the other person. This will form the basis of follow-up conversations. It is often also useful to agree when you will next meet to discuss and reflect on how effective the solutions that you have implemented are. This ensures everyone involved knows there will be a follow-conversation and provides a specific timescale for delivering agreed actions.

#### **Stage 5: Commitment and actions**

The final stage of the process is to recognise the need to let the other participant in the conversation know that you can see any changes in their behaviour or performance. Doing this is simple – when you see someone implement the agreed change and it makes a more positive impact on you than the previous behaviour would have, tell them that you have noticed this, let them know what the impact has been and say thank you to them. A comment such as “I noticed that you tried hard not to talk over me today in the group meeting – I really appreciate this and it felt like I was able to contribute more as a result. Thank you for giving me more space to be actively involved in the meeting” gives the other person valuable feedback on the change they have made and encourages them to continue to change their behaviour.

## Advice for PhD Supervisors when having challenging conversations

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When you are having challenging conversations as a PhD supervisor there are several actions which you can do to make the conversations more effective:

1. The most important action you can take is to ensure that you are clear with your student about the expectations of the supervision process. This means that when you need to have a challenging conversation with the student there is a framework in place around what is and is not expected of all parties in the supervision arrangement. There is a lot written in the literature about PhD supervision about setting expectations. A good first step would be completion of a “Doctoral Expectations Questionnaire” at the start of the PhD, so that the supervision team and the student are clear about expectations.
2. Ensure that the supervision team is consistent in their approach and are willing to follow through with the actions of any challenging conversation. You should agree what the parameters of the challenging conversation will be with the other supervisors prior to it taking place.
3. Be aware of cultural challenges which might be in play within the supervision dynamic. If you are supervising in cross-cultural context it is recommended that you explore the literature of cross-cultural working to understand the potential impact this could have on the conversations.
4. Be aware of the power imbalance. In most situations the student will expect you to take the lead in the conversation, and it is easy for this to result in you telling the student your perspective on the situation without asking for theirs. It is also easy not to include the student in generation possible solutions. Therefore, be willing to ask open questions (what, where, how, when) and give space for the student to answer. Their perspective is just as valid and valuable as yours, and it is useful to understand this before you share your own perspective.
5. If the student finds it difficult to express themselves in meetings, it can be worthwhile encouraging them to email you their concerns prior to the meeting (and you might choose to do likewise). This will support both of you to prepare for the meeting.
6. When giving feedback to students who are struggling (especially with activities such as writing) do not overload them with feedback. Highlight the changes which would make the biggest improvements and recognise that it may be an iterative process to reach the result you want. For example, you may need to read the same piece of work several times as they work to improve it, and each iteration of this will help them learn something different and improve their work in the future.

## Resources

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- Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. *Stone, Patton and Heen*. ISBN: 978-0670921348
- Dealing with Difficult People. *Lilley*. ISBN: 978-0749456603
- Building rapport: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/turning-point/201504/how-build- rapport-powerful-technique>
- Pinker / RSA Animate - Language as a Window into Human Nature: <http://bit.ly/11E9HXL>
- Doctoral Expectations Questionnaire example: <https://bit.ly/2Me2XNt>
- The challenges of supervising students from other countries: <https://bit.ly/1NwmFvW>

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