

Difficult conversations are the ones we avoid, delay, or handle badly — and then think about for days afterward. They are difficult not because the subject matter is technically complex but because the stakes feel high. This handout offers a practical framework for approaching them with more confidence and less damage.

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## WHY WE AVOID THEM

The anticipation of a difficult conversation is almost always worse than the conversation itself. We catastrophize the other person's reaction and convince ourselves that silence is safer. It rarely is. Avoided conversations don't disappear — they accumulate, and they resurface later with more charge and less goodwill.

## A SIX-STEP FRAMEWORK

### Step 1: Clarify your purpose

Before the conversation, ask yourself: what do I actually want to achieve? Not what do I want to say — what outcome do I want? Clarity about purpose prevents conversations from becoming venting sessions.

### Step 2: Understand your own contribution

In almost every difficult conversation, both parties have contributed to the situation. Understanding your own contribution before the conversation shifts your stance from blame to inquiry.

### Step 3: Start with curiosity, not conclusions

Open with a question rather than a statement. 'I've been wanting to understand what happened with...' lands very differently from 'I need to talk to you about what you did.'

### Step 4: Name the impact, not the intent

Avoid attributing intentions — you cannot know them. Instead, describe the impact on you: 'When that happened, I felt...' This is both more honest and less inflammatory.

### Step 5: Listen before problem-solving

After you have said what you need to say, listen — genuinely. Most difficult conversations break down not because people disagree but because neither person feels heard first.

### Step 6: Agree on what comes next

End with something specific. Not 'I hope things will be better' but 'What can we each do differently going forward?' A difficult conversation that ends with a concrete next step is far more likely to produce change.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN IT GOES WRONG

Even well-prepared conversations go sideways. When they do:

- Slow down rather than push through — 'I want to make sure we're understanding each other. Can we slow down for a moment?'
- Name what's happening — 'I can feel this is getting heated. Can we both take a breath?'
- Return to purpose — 'I don't want us to lose sight of why we're having this conversation. What I care about here is...'
- Offer to continue later — 'I don't think either of us is at our best right now. Can we come back to this tomorrow?'

## THE LONGER TRUTH

Difficult conversations become less difficult with practice — not because they stop mattering but because you develop confidence in your own ability to navigate them. The framework above gives you structure. What builds confidence is using it, reflecting on what happened, and using it again.

*Develop your difficult conversation skills with personalized coaching at [conflictmanagementspace.com](https://conflictmanagementspace.com)*