

Manage conflict

Conflict, and differences of opinion, are an unavoidable part of business life. As managers, we all deal with situations we'd rather avoid. But difficult discussions poorly handled or avoided sap energy, detract from performance, erode work relations and impact stressfully on you.

Often, people resort to one of four 'survival strategies':

1. **Fight:** In the heat of the moment you decide to really let go and 'let them have it'. No matter what the effect might be on you or others.
2. **Flight:** You swallow your pride; put a lid on the anger or righteous indignation and act polite no matter what - then feel like a defeated doormat afterwards.
3. **Avoidance:** You sidestep the whole issue; talk about any topic that distracts from or defers the difficult moment - then later feel frustrated with yourself for being such a whimp.
4. **Placation:** You back-down, agree to anything to keep conflict at bay or ensure the other person keeps their cool and doesn't make the discussion even more difficult.

Assumptions

While it is natural to make assumptions, difficulties arise when we fall into the trap of believing our assumptions are 'right'.

There are three crippling assumptions we all make in dealing with difficult discussions. Clarifying and checking these assumptions is essential to improving your ability to deal better with them:

1. The 'I am right' assumption

Difficult discussions are more usually about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values - not about what is being said:

- We forget to question the one critical assumption our whole position is based on: I am right - you are wrong. Trouble is, the other person thinks this too.
- We both climb different 'ladders of inference'. Our assumptions harden into facts: 'But that is clearly the only reasonable way to see it'.
- Dislodging ourselves from believing what we assume is true or right is a crucial first step to move a difficult discussion forward.

2. The invention of intention

Another source of conflict in difficult discussions is assumptions we make about other people's motives - their intentions. We can observe behaviour (who said or did what) but we invent intentions:

- The mistake we make here is simple but destructive: we assume we know the intentions of others when we actually don't.
- We make this worse by 'thinking the worst of' others. When we're unsure about someone else's motives or intentions, we're more likely to decide they're bad - not good.
- At the same time, knowing our own intentions are good, we act outraged or surprised that another person could possibly misinterpret our own motives (though we allow ourselves to do this with others).



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Intentions are invisible. We make them up to explain the motives behind what others say or do. These invented stories about others are often much less accurate or right than what we think.

People's motives are far more mixed and complex than we can fathom without directly exploring it with them. Often they act with no 'intention' toward us at all.

3. The blame game

Much time and attention in difficult discussions is focussed on blame - finding out who's at fault, who ought to be punished and what that punishment should be:

- We mentally play 'judge-and-jury' instead of listening to the other person or trying to see other perspectives. But fault-finding and judging only leads to defensiveness, denial and more disagreement.
- The blame game actually distracts us from really finding out what went wrong and how to fix it. To play the blame game effectively we must of course assume that we're right - and they're wrong (see Assumption 1).

Diffusing conflict

Does this conversation have to be difficult? Can you shift it by changing your approach?

Regardless of the context, its the small but crucial errors in difficult conversations that trip us up and a few key adjustments can make all the difference. Here are some tips to make difficult conversations a little less so:

- **Prepare yourself beforehand:** Reflect on how the other person may be feeling. What are their intentions? How do you contribute to making this conversation difficult? Can you change your approach? If you don't raise the issue, can you let go of it?
- **Take responsibility:** The easy way out is saying to yourself: 'It's their problem - not mine'. But their problem is your problem. Difficult conversations remaining unresolved strain, poison or even kill-off relationships. Take ownership for finding a solution.
- **Calm the climate:** Do you prime yourself to expect a difficult discussion? This pre-conversational tension bubbles over into blame or criticism that makes matters worse. Connect with the other person in a safe mental spot before tackling the difficult issue. (What's *good* in what they're doing?)
- **Don't assume intention:** Don't assume you know the other person's intentions, this can attribute motives to them or know what they think. These common conversation blockers make discussions more difficult. Our assumptions are more often than not *wrong*.
- **Don't start inside your own story:** Beginning with your side of the story will only draw a defensive reaction. It immediately says to the other person that you're on the 'right-foot' and they're on the 'wrong'-foot. Sum up the issue neutrally (eg. 'I think we both have a problem with [X]...' then suggest exploring it together.)
- **Tune into their story:** During difficult conversations we typically assume the clash is because of how the other person is and they assume it's because of how we are. Really, the collision is a result of our 'stories' being different, but neither of us realise it. Agree to listen to each other's stories.



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- **Objectify and paraphrase:** Try describing the problem as differences between your stories and invite them to join you to sort out what those differences are. Explore and paraphrase each other's stories. Listen to understand their perspectives and the feelings behind their story.
- **Listen for feelings, not just facts:** Paying careful attention to what the other person is feeling (but probably *not* saying) is the key to unlocking many difficult conversations.
- **Model yourself on what you want from others:** If you want to be listened to - listen to others first. If you want to be understood - understand them first.
- **Avoid the blame-game:** Think back on your difficult conversations - did you get critical, point out mistakes, use provocative or disapproving words? Fix 'the problem - not the blame'.
- **Consider it may be you:** Genuinely admit openly where you could have been wrong or made mistakes. Admitting mistakes actually puts us in a stronger position.
- **Reframe the situation:** Test your mental agility. How many other ways can we see this situation? Invite the other person to do this too.
- **Get solution-focused:** You can't do this until emotions have played out. The turning point in difficult conversations is when people start thinking together towards the future and leave the past behind. You can then entertain options that meet each other's concerns, agree on actions and how to prevent this happening again.

Every business likes to see itself as a learning organisation. But businesses where people avoid difficult discussions simply can't learn:

- From mistakes because they don't know how to discuss them.
- From each other because they can't give positive or negative feedback to each other.

Too often, short-term comfort wins out over longer-term learning and improvement.

Usually in a difficult discussion, someone needs to take the lead in trying to resolve it, move it forward, divert it from a disastrous course, or convert a potentially destructive confrontation into a constructive, learning conversation. And, as the manager, it should be you.

Further information

The following fact sheet provides further information on these issues:

- Verbal communication