

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION



PREPARATION GUIDE

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA HUMAN RESOURCES

Use this resource to organize your thoughts before addressing a conflict. Writing things down can help you gain clarity, regulate emotions, and approach the conversation with confidence and purpose.

Consider having our resource [Sentence Starters and Scripts for Difficult Conversations](#) nearby as you prepare.



1 PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

Get what you want to communicate organized and plan how you can say it honestly and respectfully.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What happened? (Stick to the facts)
- What assumptions might you be making about the other person's perspective?
- What emotions are you feeling about this conflict? How might those emotions influence how you approach the conversation?
- How can you approach this conversation with curiosity rather than defensiveness?



2

INITIATE THE CONVERSATION

The biggest hurdle is starting the conversation. Know how you can engage the person(s) and give yourself grace to not handle it perfectly.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What is the key message you want to communicate? How can you phrase it honestly and respectfully?
- How will you start the conversation?
- What concerns or hesitations do you have about initiating it?
- When and where is the best place to have this conversation?
- How can you set a positive tone at the beginning?



3 DELIVER THE MESSAGE

Say what you need to say; don't get sidetracked.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What are the main points you need to get across?
- How can you ensure you stay focused and avoid getting sidetracked?
- How can you use "I" statements to express your perspective without blaming?

ANATOMY OF AN "I" STATEMENT

I feel...

When you... *action*

Because... *impact on you*

And I want... *desired change*



4 LISTEN AND RESPOND

Seek to have a great conversation by being curious and listening actively.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How will you ensure you are actively listening?
- What clarifying questions would help you fully understand the other person's perspective?
- How will you manage your emotions and remain engaged in the conversation?
- What are some ways to acknowledge their perspective, even if you disagree?
- How will you respond appropriately and seek agreement on next steps?
- How can you approach this conversation with curiosity rather than defensiveness?



5 CLOSE THE CONVERSATION

Conversations need an end. Summarize the discussion and what will happen next.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How will you summarize the discussion to ensure mutual understanding?
- What agreements or action steps need to be confirmed?
- How can you ensure that both parties leave the conversation with a clear sense of next steps?



FOLLOW-UP AND REFLECT

Act on the agreements and next steps. To better yourself for future conflict, reflect on lessons learned and how you can carry them forward.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What actions do you need to take after the conversation?
- How will you check in to ensure follow-through on agreements?
- What went well in the conversation?
- What challenges did you encounter, and how might you handle them differently next time?
- What did you learn about yourself and your approach to conflict?