

7 Tips to Discuss Difficult Topics Gracefully

At times, you may have to have difficult conversations with clients, suppliers, or your team, but there are strategies you can use to set the conversation up for success. Being prepared to guide the conversation can keep it productive and keep you in control. Whether you have to deliver unpleasant news or ask tough questions, use these tips to tactfully handle the conversation and keep moving forward.

SET UP A TIME TO SPEAK

If the situation or topic of discussion is not an emergency, ask to schedule a time to speak. This way, the person will be in a frame of mind to have a discussion. However, it is best to not leave too much time between scheduling and having the meeting to ensure the news is timely and avoids speculation.

GET FACE TIME

Nonverbal communication, such as body language and facial expressions, can convey a lot of meaning and soften the blow of difficult conversations. Whenever possible, meet in person or use a video chat program to help facilitate communication.

WRITE A SCRIPT

It may feel awkward at first, but writing a script can allow you to more smoothly handle the conversation by being prepared. Practise before you meet so you can maintain eye contact during the discussion.

SHARE OR ASK FOR NEXT STEPS

If the problem you're communicating about has been solved, lead with that. If the issue you're discussing has not yet been resolved, share your plan or ask for the next steps to end the conversation on a productive note. Always follow up a discussion. Whether it is via email, phone call, or text message: recap the main talking points discussed and set up how to move forward.

WATCH YOUR TONE

The tone of voice used makes a big impact on how messages are received. The specific topic of discussion will dictate the right tone, but in general, speak gently but firmly to instill confidence and head off negative reactions.

SHOW EMPATHY

To overcome a difficult discussion or disagreement, communicate that you can appreciate or understand the other person's experience in this scenario. Reassurance can diffuse an argument. Also, practise active listening by acknowledging the topics, the feedback and the feelings the other person has shared.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION PRODUCTIVE

If someone in the discussion starts to raise their voice or communicates inappropriately, use the phrase, "I'd like to keep the conversation productive," to try to steer the conversation back.