

NAEPDC

News, Views, and Clues

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Difficult Conversations

We all have to deal with difficult situations and it is good to be reminded of positive strategies to use. Below is an article from one of my professional associations that you might want to file away for future reference.

7 Strategies for Managing Difficult Conversations

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By: Mary Byers, CAE

There comes a time in every person's life when it may be necessary to have a hard conversation. This conversation might occur with your boss, a colleague, a neighbor, a family member, or a member of your association. In any case, it's a good idea to be prepared prior to starting a difficult conversation rather than launching into one in the heat of the moment. These helpful guidelines will get you through a tough conversation with your relationship intact.

1. **Choose the time for the conversation wisely.** The harder the conversation, the more carefully you should select the time for it. It's not wise to hurry through a difficult discussion when you're under time pressure, nor does it make sense to have it in passing in the hallway. Tough conversations should be held when you are unhurried and have uninterrupted time.
2. **Ask for permission to have the conversation.** Approach the individual with whom you need to speak and ask him or her when it would be convenient to talk with him or her. Try something like, "Susan, there's something I'd like to touch base with you about when we both have the time and know we won't be interrupted. What time would be good for you?"
3. **Use "I" statements so that the person you're talking with doesn't feel defensive.** "I" statements put the focus on you rather than the person with whom you're talking. As an example, you might say, "I feel frustrated when you're impatient with me because I believe it hurts our working relationship." By focusing on how you feel, rather than placing blame on the person you're talking to, you keep that person tuned into the conversation without him or her feeling defensive.
4. **Decide what you want ahead of time.** Do you want the person you're approaching to talk with you privately when he or she is upset with you? Do you want the person to give you input as to how you can improve your job performance? Deciding what you want ahead of time makes it easier to have a difficult conversation because you can ask for what you want. This keeps the conversation focused and prevents unnecessary tangents.

5. **Remain calm.** This shows the person you're talking to that you are serious about solving the problem and aren't interested in escalating the conversation to an angry debate. By controlling your emotions, you'll make it possible to complete the conversation even if the individual with whom you're speaking is angry or defensive. If it's clear that his or her emotions are making it difficult to continue the conversation, simply say, "I can see that I've made you angry, and I'm sorry. That wasn't my intent. Instead, I had hoped we could come to an agreement on how to handle this situation in the future. Perhaps we should both think about this and talk again tomorrow?"
6. **Summarize the conversation.** Before you end the discussion, summarize your understanding by saying, "Am I correct in understanding that we've agreed to..." and then recap the conversation. This will help ensure both of you are on the same page before the dialogue ends.
7. **Say thank you.** Be sure to thank the individual for his or her willingness to have the conversation, even if it was extremely difficult. Say, "Susan, I know this was difficult, and I appreciate your willingness to hear me out and discuss the issue with me. Thank you." This ends the conversation on a more positive note.

Hard conversations are sometimes the most productive. Rather than letting things simmer, it makes sense to have a difficult conversation sooner rather than later. The more you practice, the easier it becomes.

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Byers will lead a learning lab titled "Tough Talking: How to Start and Manage Difficult Conversations" at ASAE's 2011 Annual Meeting & Exposition on Monday, August 8, at 8:45 a.m.

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Keep up the good work. Let me know when we can help.

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