

NAVIGATING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS



A Foundation for Success

GETTY IMAGES



Navigating Tough Conversations

A **tough conversation** is any situation you face where:

- there are differences of opinion,
- emotions are strong, and
- it is imperative that the conversation goes well

If you've ever reflected on a conversation and verbally kick yourself, saying, "That didn't go well. What I SHOULD have said was..." - then you know it was a tough conversation.

Take a moment to identify a tough conversation you will be having in the future. This could be a church-related conversation, or something from your personal life. Perhaps it's a boss, a coworker, or a customer? Or maybe it's a discussion you need to have with a family member, a spouse, your neighbor or your kid?

Identify a critical conversation you will be having. Something where there are 1) differences of opinion, 2) emotions could be strong, and 3) it's imperative that the conversation goes well.

Who

-

What's the topic?

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Truths and Myths

Check Your Mindset

Common beliefs about conflict (and those on the “other side”) keep us from effectively navigating tough conversations. Our brain’s automatic response in anticipation of disagreements makes it difficult to maintain an open mind. All of this makes it harder to identify mutually beneficial solutions and strengthen the relationship.

During these interactions, we can easily get “Lost at SEA”, meaning, the

- Story playing out in our heads, creates strong
- Emotions, which involuntarily dictate our
- Actions in the conversation.



Some things to remember and internalize *before* engaging in a tough conversation:

- **Disagreements aren’t bad,**
But past disagreements that weren’t managed well cause us to dread and avoid them.
- **Tough conversations don’t make people defensive,**
But if we anticipate defensiveness, it’s a sign we may be biased toward our “rightness”.
- **We are all well-informed,**
But we seek and remember information that supports our own world view.
- **We all have positive intentions,**
But we often mis-interpret the intentions of those who disagree with us.
- **We all want to be heard,**
But it’s rare that others will hear us unless we first demonstrate we’re listening to them.
- **We all want to arrive at a positive outcome,**
But we have to admit we may not know the best answer yet.

Master Your Story

“The Pastor’s Dilemma”

Sometimes, it can be difficult to analyze our own stories. It can also be difficult to assess the situation when we are in the midst of the conversation. The following scenario, based on a real-world scenario, can help us learn to identify key issues that can get in the way of having productive critical conversations.

“I’ve been the lone pastor at a small church for 9 months. Two months ago, our two part-time staff members refreshed the weekly newsletter. Unfortunately, the first one had a number of errors, including a “food for thought” message that wasn’t aligned with our church’s overall theology. I let them know what the boundaries were, and asked to review the next one before sending. When I did, I noticed similar issues. The deadline was tight, so I revised it myself. Since then, when I check their work, I see similar problems. I now ask them to submit a week ahead of time to assure it’s all good, but there are still issues.”

- Kurt, Pastor

- 1. What is Kurt’s POSITION for this upcoming tough conversation?**
(what he’s asking for)
- 2. What do you believe are Kurt’s true INTERESTS?**
(what he truly wants)
- 3. Which of the HARMFUL STORIES could be impacting Kurt’s response?**
(1) “It’s not my fault”, (2) “It’s all their fault”, or (3) “There’s nothing I can do”

Positive Intent Practice

It can sometimes be difficult to see the positive intent of the person with whom we disagree. The more prolonged the situation, the more likely it is that we will need outside perspective to find the positive intent. To identify the Positive Intent in the following scenarios and ask:

“What positive outcome is this smart, reasonable, conscientious person seeking and why?”

and/or

“What are several things we agree upon?”

1. THE CHALLENGER

In a recent session meeting, one of the elders was disrespectful in the way they disagreed with others about executing the plan for VBS this summer. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how best to meet deadlines, not to discuss if we had selected the best theme, and their response was inappropriate.

Positive Intent & Points of Agreement:

2. THE BULLDOZER

A long-standing member of the congregation is a big proponent of a project to build a new congregational life center. He drafted plans & drawings, including a budget, and sent them out to all of the lay leadership asking for feedback. Unfortunately, there isn't a consensus that the congregation wants to expand the existing facilities, and some think he's intentionally trying to push through a controversial decision.

Positive Intent & Points of Agreement:

3. THE INTERRUPTER

You have a staff member who consistently interrupts in meetings and criticizes your ideas and the ideas of others. The behavior isn't malicious, but it tends to bring judgment and negativity into the conversation.

Positive Intent & Points of Agreement:

Tough Conversations Practice

Setting the Foundation

Consider your tough conversation from page 1.

1. **What is your POSITION?** (what are you asking for?)

2. **What is your INTEREST?** (what do you truly want?)

3. **What BIASES/HARMFUL STORIES do YOU have that are making it hard to see a way forward?**
(preconceived notions, or mindset of “It’s all their fault”, or “There’s nothing I can do”)

4. **Consider the the situation from the other person’s point of view. What is their POSITIVE INTENT & WHAT ARE SEVERAL THINGS YOU AGREE UPON?**
(Why would a smart, reasonable, conscientious person choose to help in this way?)
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Tough Conversations

Ongoing Discussion

In your large group discussion,

1. Discuss what strategies were most helpful, and how you employed them
2. Share best practices for any specific scenarios you are dealing with
3. Compile a list of “Ground Rules” you could share prior to having a tough conversation that could prevent challenges, encourage productive dialogue, and strengthen the relationship. Below are some sample guidelines to get you started.
4. Write down any lingering questions you have that can be addressed in the second session on Navigating Tough Conversations.

Sample Guidelines for Tough Conversations

- Commit to a relentless pursuit of mutually agreeable solutions
- Clarify the true interests behind positions – for ALL parties involved
- Assume and acknowledge the positive intent of others.
- Identify points of agreement
- Demonstrate you’ve been listening by paraphrasing the points others make. Ask if they...
 - agree with your characterization, and
 - wish to clarify anything you may have misinterpreted
- Brainstorm options to satisfy as many interests as possible
 - Avoid the yes/no, either/or trap

Notes

Notes