

A Guide to Difficult Conversations

Prepare with care. Speak clearly. Agree on the next step.

Respectful accountability starts with a specific concern and a willingness to understand another person's perspective. Adapt these prompts to the situation and your organization's procedures.

1. Prepare the facts

Describe observable behavior, dates, and the effect on the work. Separate what you know from what you assume.

2. Open with purpose

"I want us to discuss what happened and agree on a way forward." Choose a private setting and allow enough time.

3. Describe the concern

"The report arrived after the agreed deadline twice this month. That delayed the team's review." Avoid labels such as lazy or difficult.

4. Ask and listen

"What affected the deadline?" Let the person explain. Summarize what you heard and check whether you understood correctly.

5. Clarify the expectation

State the required outcome. Ask what support or changes would help the person meet it.

6. Agree and follow through

Write down the action, owner, deadline, and review date. Check progress and acknowledge improvement.

If the conversation becomes tense

Pause, lower your pace, and return to the shared purpose. You can say, "I want to understand this and keep our conversation respectful. Let us take a short pause."

Put it into practice

Use this worksheet before the meeting. Record relevant work facts and agreed actions; avoid unnecessary personal details.

Purpose: What useful outcome do I want?

Facts and impact: What did I observe?

Perspective: What do I need to ask and understand?

Expectation and support: What must happen next?

Agreement: Who will do what, by when?

Follow-up: When will we review progress?

Bring the conversation to your team

Interested in a leadership workshop or speaking engagement? [Contact Dr. Paul Gerhardt](#) to discuss your audience and goals. More lessons: [linkedin.com/in/drpaugerhardt](https://www.linkedin.com/in/drpaugerhardt).