

Difficult Conversations Practice Tool

Difficult conversations are a normal part of learning, leadership, teamwork, and professional growth within academic medicine. Thoughtful communication can help strengthen trust, psychological safety, accountability, collaboration, and wellbeing.

This tool is designed to support reflection and preparation before engaging in challenging conversations related to:

- feedback
- conflict
- workload
- professionalism
- wellbeing concerns
- boundaries
- communication challenges
- or team dynamics

Before the Conversation

Clarify the Purpose

What is the main issue or concern that needs to be discussed?

Why is this conversation important?

- ☐ Supporting wellbeing
- ☐ Clarifying expectations
- ☐ Addressing conflict
- ☐ Improving communication
- ☐ Supporting learning or growth
- ☐ Addressing workload concerns
- ☐ Maintaining team trust or safety
- ☐ Other: _____

Reflect Before Responding

What emotions, assumptions, or concerns am I bringing into this conversation?

What might the other person be experiencing or feeling?

Am I approaching this conversation with curiosity, respect, and openness?

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Planning the Conversation

Key Messages

What is most important to communicate clearly and respectfully?

What outcome or next step would be helpful?

Communication Considerations

Before the conversation, consider:

- ☐ Is this the right time and setting?
- ☐ Is privacy or psychological safety needed?
- ☐ Am I prepared to listen actively?
- ☐ Am I focusing on behaviours/situations rather than personal attacks?
- ☐ Am I leaving space for dialogue and different perspectives?
- ☐ Have I considered equity, power dynamics, or hierarchy?

During the Conversation

Helpful Communication Approaches

Start with curiosity

- “I wanted to check in about...”
- “Can we talk about something that has been affecting.. e.g., the team/workflow
- “I’d like to better understand your perspective.”

Focus on observations rather than assumptions

- “I’ve noticed...”
- “It seems that...”

Avoid:

- “You always...”
- “You never...”

Acknowledge impact respectfully

- “This has been affecting...”
- “I’m concerned about...”
- “The challenge I’m noticing is...”

Invite dialogue and collaboration

- “How are you experiencing this situation?”
- “What support might help?”
- “What would be a constructive next step?”

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After the Conversation

Reflection

What went well?

What was challenging?

What follow-up, support, or accountability may be needed?

What did I learn about communication, leadership, or myself?

Tips for Psychologically Safe Conversations

- Approach conversations early when possible.
- Focus on shared goals and mutual respect.
- Balance compassion with accountability.
- Avoid public criticism or shaming.
- Allow space for reflection and emotion.
- Recognize that hierarchy and power dynamics influence communication.
- Seek support or mentorship when navigating particularly complex situations.

Further reading:

- Rudolph et al. - [A theory and method for debriefing with good judgment](#)³⁰
- Edmondson AC. - [Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams](#)¹⁶
- Cantillon & Sargeant - [Giving feedback in clinical settings](#)³¹