

# Having difficult conversations

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## 1. Basics of communication

Communication theorist Paul Watzlawick has formulated the following characteristics of human communication behaviour:

**People can't not communicate:** In the presence of other people, every behaviour has a communicative purpose. Those who speak are sharing something; but those who remain silent are also sharing something. This also applies – in particular – to difficult conversations.

**Human communication is always "bilingual":** When we are talking, we are always using two different systems of expression at the same time. On the one hand, we need words and sentences ("verbal language"), but at the same time our body is also sending out non-verbal or paraverbal signals. These include facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, body language, inflection and voice, external appearance and territorial and distancing behaviour. It then becomes irritating if what is being said doesn't quite line up with the body language of the person saying it. Generally speaking, we tend to believe body language over words.

**All communication has a content-related aspect and a relationship aspect:** The content of what is being said is usually expressed mainly through speech. At the same time, each communication also provides information on how we define our relationship to the other person. These signals are primarily sent out via inflection, facial expressions, eye contact and body language. The other person is easily able to pick up on the relationship aspect and reacts spontaneously to it. The relationship aspect is generally more important than the content-related aspect and determines whether and how what is being said will be taken. In difficult conversations in particular, it is important to express at least respect and consideration towards the other person.

**Communication is susceptible to breakdown as a result of different experiences of the conversation:** It seems to be a human quirk that we always experience our actions as a reaction to something. We always end up asking: Who started it? Our behaviour is often a reaction to something and pushes the conversation further at the same time.

## 2. Conversation-promoting techniques

**Meta-communication:** Especially in difficult conversations, it's important to talk about how we interact with each other. Sometimes, it may make sense to clarify how we meant or understood something and which feelings that triggered for us. Meta-communication also includes indications of the role you see yourself as playing in a certain conversation, e.g. as chair, as a member of the executive committee.

**Listening:** Listening is not a technique, but an attitude, a type of "being there". Listening means being there for the other person for an amount of time, being able to stay quiet, focus on them, be attentive and empathise. Listening is key to the success of a difficult conversation.

**Feedback:** Feedback communicates to the other person how you have taken, experienced or understood them or one of their statements. Feedback also lets us learn how we affect other people or what our behaviour can trigger in others.

### Rules for giving feedback

- Feedback should be **descriptive**, not judgmental. By describing my own perception ("I" messages), I leave it to the other person to decide whether or not to use this information. By omitting assessments, I reduce people's needs to defend themselves or close themselves off.
- Feedback should be **specific**. It should be related to observable events and behaviour. It should not be a sweeping statement or judgment about the person as a whole and their overall behaviour.
- Feedback should be **appropriate**. It must take into account the specific situation, the accompanying conditions and the needs of all participants.
- Feedback should be **applicable**. It should relate to behaviours that the other person can truly change.
- Feedback should also be given in a **timely manner**, because it will be more effective the less time has passed between the behaviour in question and the feedback about the effects of this behaviour.
- Don't forget to also provide feedback on **positive perceptions!**

### Rules for receiving feedback

- **Listening:** Try to listen quietly and check whether you have really understood what is meant. It may be suitable to ask questions like "Have I understood correctly that..."
- **Don't justify:** Try not to get defensive or clarify things straightaway.
- **Think it over:** Let what you've heard sink in. Think about how what you've heard makes you feel.
- **Communicate:** Share how what you've heard has made you feel.

### Recommendations for difficult conversations

- Have difficult conversations **close in time** to the incidents in question.
- **Prepare** for the conversations.
- Get to the point **quickly**.
- Be **clear** in your statements – but always remain friendly and respectful.
- **Summarise** the most important findings from time to time, and definitely at the end of the conversation.

## 3. Holding a challenging conversation

### Preparing for the conversation

Carefully preparing for the conversation is key to its success. When preparing for the conversation, consider the following:

#### *Organisational matters*

- Who do I invite to the conversation?
- When will the conversation take place?
- How long should/can the conversation last?
- Where will the conversation take place? What is the atmosphere like there?
- Who is taking part?
- How and where will we sit?
- How do I avoid external disruptions?

#### *Content-related matters*

- What is my intended objective with this conversation? What is realistic?
- Which documents will I need?

- What do I know about the person with whom I will be talking?
- Which objections/arguments can I expect to encounter?
- Which responses do I have?
- What are the next steps?

### **Structure of the conversation**

- Introduction:*
- Welcome / establishing contact (relationship level!)
- Get in contact and ask them to have a conversation*
- Agree the duration of the conversation
  - Formulate and clarify objectives
  - Clarify roles
- Main section:*
- Share own observations and perceptions
- Argumentation and decision*
- Seek the other's opinion
  - Compare both opinions: agreements and differences
- Conclusion*
- Formulate conclusions/findings
  - Set out next steps
  - Thank the other person, say goodbye

### **Debrief**

Especially after a difficult conversation, it's recommended to write and keep notes and/or bullet points. Such written documents are important, particularly in conflict situations.