A Guide for Difficult Conversations in Team Projects

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Difficult Conversations

Team members who are working together to accomplish a shared goal often need to engage in difficult conversations–discussions about issues that people might find uncomfortable or be hesitant to raise.

These discussions might involve addressing behaviors that negatively impact the group, voicing an unpopular perspective, talking through a disagreement, or providing constructive criticism on a teammate's work. In teamwork, these are ubiquitous and necessary conversations, but often people avoid them or handle them poorly.

Take a look at the following reflections and contemplate what these reflections suggest about difficult conversations.

1. During a homework assignment, I realized that my partner had misunderstood the requirements and was approaching the problem incorrectly. Since we were close to the deadline, I knew I had to address it quickly. I called them and politely explained the assignment's expectations, walking through the key points to clarify the misunderstanding. At first, they seemed surprised, but once I showed them specific details from the assignment, they appreciated the clarification. We adjusted our approach, and in the end, our submission was much stronger.

2. In a previous team project, I noticed that one of my colleagues was submitting work that didn't meet the agreed-upon quality standards. Their sections often required extensive revisions, causing delays and frustration among the rest of the team. As the project progressed, the issue worsened. Other teammates also grew frustrated, and we ended up having to stay late to compensate for the extra revisions. Looking back, I wish I had spoken up sooner with a supportive approach, as it could have helped both the individual and the team as a whole.

What do these reflections suggest about difficult conversations?

Difficult conversations can strengthen relationships

You may worry that a difficult conversation will hurt your relationship with others. However, research shows that such conversations are not as harmful as people fear.[1] Moreover, we often underestimate the benefits of honestly communicating our opinions and feedback. The reflections you just read demonstrate that a difficult conversation handled well can not only improve the team's performance but can also strengthen relationships among team members.

By contrast, frustration can build up when we put off or avoid having difficult conversations which can sometimes lead to behaviors that diminish team morale and negatively affect the team's ability to do good work. Thus, ironically, by postponing difficult conversations to avoid hurting feelings or damaging relationships, we may cause more harm than if we had addressed the issue earlier.

Many people avoid difficult conversations because they lack experience holding these conversations and are unsure of the best way to proceed. We want to show you a research-backed framework for holding difficult conversations. But first, let's see if you can figure out the difference between more and less skillfully handled difficult conversations.

Take a look at these two options for speaking to a teammate who is not responding to messages and decide which option you think would lead to a more productive conversation. **Which option would lead to a more productive discussion: 1A or 1B? Why?**

Option 1A	Option 1B
The reason for this conversation is that I have been talking with several other members of the team and we all have been getting frustrated because you aren't responding to our messages. This is a team project, and when you don't respond, it feels as if you don't respect us and don't care about the other parts of the team. How can we get you to provide more timely responses to our questions?	The reason for this conversation is to improve communication and coordination in our team. Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses. This silence makes it hard for the rest of the team to move forward on other parts of the project. You have unique expertise that our team depends on. What are your thoughts on the situation? Let's discuss what we can do to align everyone's expectations on communication for the future.

[1] Levine, E. E., & Cohen, T. R. (2018). You can handle the truth: Mispredicting the consequences of honest communication. Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 147(9), 1400–1429. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000488

Now consider a different situation where an individual is expressing a disagreement with the direction their team has chosen. **Which option would lead to a more productive discussion over a controversial feature: 2A or 2B? Why?**

Option 2A	Option 2B
Our current plans and milestones include feature X. I'm concerned this optional feature adds significant complexity and could distract us from delivering the required features in the specifications. Could we return to the specifications document, review our project goals, and discuss the potential benefits versus risks of the optional features?	Our current plans and milestones include feature X and I just don’t think it's necessary. It looks good, but it will distract us from our core goals and will put us behind schedule. I think we need to get rid of it and focus on the mandatory parts of the project.

A framework for difficult conversations

You may have heard of various strategies for handling difficult conversations–such as sandwiching criticism between two positive statements (often called the “praise sandwich”) or sharing your thoughts and feelings with “I statements.” These approaches are often unclear about what needs to change and why, and they introduce unnecessary information that can confuse recipients or lead them to be skeptical of the feedback or the communicator’s intentions. By contrast, the framework described in the table below focuses on holding a clear, specific, and respectful conversation. The framework components can be mixed in different amounts and orders depending on the situation, the people involved, and the broader context.

Step	Explanation	Example
01. State shared group goals and values.	Establish common ground by explicitly stating the shared goals and/or values that are at stake in the conversation.	The reason for this conversation is to improve communication and coordination in our team.
02. Set context, describe behaviors	Describe specific situations, issues or behaviors. Help others understand what you are referring to (e.g., specific behaviors or issues) and why you are having the conversation (general rationale). Focus on the behavior and not the person or personality so that it is clear what actions are needed to create positive changes	Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses.
03. Explain how the behavior affects the group.	Describe how the situation or behavior has affected (or will affect) the group or others in the group. Focus on harms and threats to goals and values that everyone in the group shares, or show how a change is needed to realize the group's goals and values.	This silence makes it hard for the rest of the team to move forward on other parts of the project.
04. Express respect and concern	Express respect and/or concern for the other person, for example by acknowledging their effort, expressing interest in their experience, showing concern for their well-being, or offering support.	You have unique expertise that our team depends on.
05. Demonstrate openness and curiosity	Recognize that you may not have all of the information about the problem and invite the other person to share their perspective about the problem.	What are your thoughts on the situation?
06. Jointly identify a path forward	Invite the other person into a problem-solving process. The more tense and difficult the relationship or conversation, the more important it is to commit to a process for proceeding. Some common ways to structure a group decision include: ● Hearing from everyone in the group before continuing. ● Reviewing statements of goals, specifications, criteria, etc. and agreeing on a shared vision before discussing next steps. ● Committing to a decision-making process of listing and prioritizing all criteria and then listing all options and systematically discussing the pros and cons of each option on each criteria before ranking the options. ● Seeking outside opinions or new information before proceeding. The focus should be on agreeing to steps for moving forward.	Let's discuss what we can do to align everyone's expectations on communication for the future.

Customizing the framework

Using the framework as a guide for your difficult conversation can help you focus on group goals and values, be specific about the behaviors and impacts, and invite others to identify a path forward. You should customize this framework to fit the person and the situation, as well as your own personal communication style. Consider the following questions.

- **What do you know about the person and their possible reaction?.** Use your specific knowledge of how others will react to modify the framework to be effective. For instance, a person who is defensive might respond best in private and may also need more kindness, whereas others may be more motivated by a public discussion or need more accountability.

- **What is the cultural context?** What works in a U.S. context will not necessarily be effective in other cultures. Different regional and organizational cultures often have different expectations for communication. In particular, some cultures value directness, simplicity, and precision in communication whereas in other cultures good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered, with messages implied rather than directly expressed.

- **Should the conversation be public or private?** Private conversations can help individuals process negative feedback and be receptive to critical information, which is important if the other person is likely to experience negative feelings such as shame or embarrassment. However, public conversations provide transparency and allow the group to jointly problem solve and address issues at the group level.

- **Which communication medium should you use?** In a face-to-face conversation, you can use your voice and body language as well as your words to communicate information. In addition, you can see other's responses in real time and adjust your communication accordingly. Face-to-face communication also allows you the opportunity to make instant clarifications or corrections if you sense that someone misunderstands. On the other hand, asynchronous communication, like email or messaging platforms, gives you more time to respond thoughtfully and others can reflect on the message privately.

- **Is this the first or second or *n*th time you have had the conversation?** If you have raised this topic before and the issue recurs, you may need to switch tactics, though many of the framework components can still be useful. For instance, it may be helpful to ask "why?" questions until you uncover a root cause. **More information on repeat difficult conversations appears in the FAQ at the end of this handout.*

Activity

Part I: Applying the framework to a scenario

Working with a partner, use the Difficult Conversations framework to write a script for opening the difficult conversation described below.

Scenario : A team member has submitted confusing and poorly organized code to the group. You suspect the code was generated by AI and will lead to errors and lack of alignment with other parts of the project.

Step	**What you might say**
01. State shared group goals and values.	
02. Set context, describe behaviors	
03. Explain how the behavior affects the group.	
04. Express respect and concern	
05. Demonstrate openness and curiosity	
06. Jointly identify a path forward	

Part 2: Compare approaches

Join another pair and share your scripts.

As a group, discuss the following:

- What similarities and differences do you notice in your approaches?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
- Which elements of each script would you combine into an ideal conversation?

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I talk about my feelings? When deciding whether to explain the emotional impact on you personally, consider whether it is reasonable to expect them to care about your feelings. If the person is a friend, it may be appropriate to discuss how their actions affect your friendship. However, if you are not close to them, it may make more sense to leave feelings out and focus on how their actions impact the team and its work.

I see how your framework is useful for the first conversation, but what if I previously raised the issue and nothing has changed? Changing behavior is hard! There are many reasons why the person may not have changed their actions: maybe they didn't fully understand your request or did not fully agree with the rationale; maybe they did understand but just had trouble putting changes into practice. **The second time you have a difficult conversation on the same topic, focus on understanding the barriers to implementation.** Remind them of the conversation and ask them for their perspective on what the team agreed to and the obstacles to implementing that agreement. Keep an open mind and try not to judge what you hear. A good strategy is to continually ask "why?" until you uncover the root of a problem (often called root cause analysis). Here is an example:

Problem: A teammate consistently turns in work after the deadline the team agreed to.
Why?: The teammate frequently has a problem meeting deadlines
Why?: The teammate often gets distracted and pursues options that are not immediately relevant
Why?: The team does not always communicate its priorities clearly and the teammate does not have effective strategies for maintaining focus.
The root cause appears to be a combination of insufficient communication about task priorities and a lack of training or resources on time management and focus strategies.

Once you have identified potential root causes, the team may experiment with strategies for addressing these issues, such as clearly articulating priorities and recommending focus strategies. However, this support may not be sufficient to overcome habits that have accumulated over a lifetime. In this case, **the team may need to establish consequences for continued undesirable behavior.** Such consequences should be motivating and not punitive. For instance, in the case of the teammate who does not submit work on time after the team has addressed the issue with them, a consequence could be speaking with someone in charge as soon as a deadline is missed and asking advice on the best way to handle it.

How does the difficult conversations framework compare to the "praise sandwich"?
The "praise sandwich," in which criticism is sandwiched between two statements of praise, adds ambiguity and can confuse recipients about the purpose of the conversation. While you should be kind and concerned about others' well-being when you are initiating discussions that may be difficult for them to engage in, you should avoid including irrelevant information just for the sake of being positive. If you do include praise when having a difficult conversation or providing feedback, make sure that it is specific and relevant to the work of the team.