Why do we need difficult conversations?

When collaborating to accomplish a task, team members may 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 from CMU students. **What do 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.

How to have difficult conversations

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. Moreover, we often underestimate the benefits of honestly communicating our opinions and feedback. In fact, a difficult conversation handled well can not only improve the team's performance, but also strengthen relationships among team members.

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. Why?**

Option 1A	Option 1B
The reason for this conversation is because 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 discuss challenges with communication in our team. Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses. Not responding promptly impacts our team's ability to move forward on other parts of the project, which is putting us behind schedule, and could ultimately result in a failed project. You may not have realized how much our team depends on your expertise in answering these questions. What would make it easier for you to give timely answers to our questions?

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? Why?**

Option 2A	Option 2B
Our current plans and milestones include feature X. I'm concerned that this feature adds a lot of complexity, which could ultimately distract us from doing a good job on the mandatory features described in the specifications document. I understand why we might want to include it, though I'd love to hear more. Could we return to our specifications document, review the goals we have for the project, and discuss the potential benefits versus risks of including feature X?	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.

What do the options you chose have in common that the other options lack?

A framework for difficult conversations

The table below describes a framework for having these conversations successfully. The components in the table can be mixed in different amounts and orders, depending on the situation, the people involved, and the broader context.

Step	Explanation
00. OPTIONAL: Use a starter phrase	Open the conversation with a phrase such as ● I'd like to raise an issue ● What do you think about X? ● I'd like to discuss an observation. ● There's something I would like to share with the group.
01. Describe situation and behaviors	Set the context. Help others understand what you are referring to (e.g., specific behaviors) 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.
02. Explain the impact on shared group goals and values	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.
03. Communicate respect and curiosity for others' perspective	Conversations go better and are more productive if we express concern for others' well-being and acknowledge that others on the team may have different perspectives on the issue than we do. This step can consist of many things, including: ● Expressing curiosity about their perspective and asking questions about their point of view ● Acknowledging that others might have different priorities or opinions ● Acknowledging the merits of others' arguments or viewpoints ● Expressing appreciation for their work – provide specific details about what should continue ● Expressing concern for the person's well-being, future success, goals or objectives
04. Jointly identify a path forward	This involves generating options and articulating a process for making a decision. As part of this step, you may want to: ● Elicit ideas or viewpoints from everyone on the team ● Review criteria or group principles articulated in the team contract or charter ● Gather more information or data ● Ask for input or advice from others outside the group ● Systematically evaluate the strengths and limitations of all options

You should customize this framework to fit your communication style and the context. However, using the framework as a rough guideline for initiating your difficult conversation can help you ensure that you are focusing on group goals and values, being specific about the behaviors and impacts, and enlisting others to identify a path forward.

Other factors to consider are:

- **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.

- **What 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.

Examples

Options 1B and 2A on the first page of this handout both follow this framework.

Here are these two options broken down:

Step	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
00. OPTIONAL: Use a starter phrase	The reason for this conversation is to discuss challenges with communication in our team.	
01. Describe situation and behaviors	Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses.	Our current plans and milestones include feature X.
02. Explain the impact on shared group goals and values	Not responding promptly impacts our team's ability to move forward on other parts of the project, which is putting us behind schedule, and could ultimately result in a failed project.	I'm concerned that this feature adds a lot of complexity, which could ultimately distract us from doing a good job on the mandatory features described in the specifications document.
03. Communicate respect and curiosity for others' perspective	You may not have realized how much our team depends on your expertise in answering these questions.	I understand why we might want to include it, though I'd love to hear more.
04. Jointly identify a path forward	What would make it easier for you to give timely answers to our questions?	Could we return to our specifications document, review the goals we have for the project, and discuss the potential benefits versus risks of including feature X?

Activity

For each of the scenarios below, write out a script for opening a conversation onto this difficult topic. Use the framework to create your script.

Scenario A: A team member has submitted code to the group that runs but is difficult to read and is organized in a way that is likely to lead to errors as the project grows more complex.

Your script:

Step	What you might say
00. OPTIONAL: Use a starter phrase	
01. Describe situation and behaviors	
02. Explain the impact on shared group goals and values	
03. Communicate respect and curiosity for others' perspective	
04. Jointly identify a path forward	

Scenario B: A team member did not submit their ideas by the deadline the group agreed upon.

Your script:

Step	What you might say
00. OPTIONAL: Use a starter phrase	
01. Describe situation and behaviors	
02. Explain the impact on shared group goals and values	
03. Communicate respect and curiosity for others' perspective	
04. Jointly identify a path forward	

Listening during difficult conversations

The success of difficult conversations does not just depend upon finding the right words to say: it also requires effective listening. You may sometimes find yourself in a situation of receiving feedback that challenges you. Consider the following reflections from CMU students:

1. A week before our final presentation, a teammate pulled me aside and pointed out that some of my data was outdated, making my conclusions less reliable. At first, I felt defensive because I had spent hours compiling research. But instead of reacting, I listened and asked him to clarify the key issues. Once I understood, I acknowledged the gaps and asked for suggestions. I quickly updated my sources, refined my analysis, and ensured my insights aligned with current market conditions. In the end, our presentation was much stronger, and I appreciated the direct but constructive approach.

2. I took the lead on our project in organizing logistics, setting pricing, and ensuring smooth execution. However, midway through, one of my teammates pulled me aside for a conversation I hadn't expected. He told me that while my leadership kept things on track, I was not delegating enough, which made others feel like their contributions weren't valued. At first, it was difficult to hear because I thought I was just being efficient. However, I reminded myself that feedback, even when uncomfortable, is essential for growth. Instead of getting defensive, I asked for specific examples and listened carefully. I realized I had been making quick decisions without consulting the team as much as I should have. After that conversation, I made a conscious effort to involve everyone more - asking for their input on pricing, marketing, and customer engagement. The shift not only improved our team dynamic but also helped us work more effectively.

What do these reflections suggest about effective listening in difficult conversations?