

# Navigating Difficult Conversations

A STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO GETTING THE MOST FROM  
CONVERSATIONS YOU MIGHT WISH YOU COULD SKIP

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# If we want to #EmbraceEquity we will need to navigate some difficult conversations.

**DRIVING CHANGE TAKES A CONCERTED EFFORT AND CAN OFTEN BE MET WITH RESISTANCE. BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES OF ENSURING A CONSTRUCTIVE OUTCOME FOR ALL.**







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# Before the Conversation

Before the conversation commences spend 5 minutes of quiet reflection time thinking about what you know about yourself, the other person you are meeting with and the context of your relationship. The following questions can help guide your thinking:

## Me

### CHANGE IS AN INSIDE JOB

Knowing myself and my triggers is crucial when navigating tricky conversations. Some things to ponder...

- What is the outcome I am tracking for from this conversation?
- What conversations do I tend to find difficult?
- What types of conversations do I avoid?
- What types of people do I find it harder to have conversations with?
- What is one example where I have had success in achieving an outcome I wanted from engaging in a difficult conversation?
- Thinking of the above, what did I do in that situation? What didn't I do?





# Before the Conversation

## You

### UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER PERSON

Put some time in to think about the other person's motivators, their personality and how they may be feeling entering the conversation.

- What do they need to know?
- What does a good outcome look like for them?
- What are they fearing from the conversation taking place? E.g. Organisationally (losing influence or an opportunity, their status) or personally (e.g. financial loss, criticism, rejection, loss of freedom...)
- How do they like to receive information (do they respond better to personal stories or facts and figures? Are they straight to the point or do they like informal chatter before getting to the crux?)





# Before the Conversation

## Us

### DIAGNOSING OUR RELATIONSHIP

- What is the context of our relationship?
- What is the level of trust between us? Have there been past instances to enhance or detract trust between us?
- If trust is low, what can I do to make this conversation safe for the other person?
- When is the best time for us to have the conversation? Think about the location (offsite, in-person etc), the timing (does this person prefer morning catch ups, are they under a lot of pressure, exhausted or pushed at the moment)? Ensure you select a time that will ensure they are receiving the message with the greatest clarity







Learning what drives you, placing yourself in another's shoes, and making promises together. Sound good?

**A CONSTRUCTIVE SPIRIT, A SHARED VIEW OF THE FUTURE AND A UNIFIED CAUSE CAN BIND US TO THE SAME TRACKS AND MAKE TRICKY CONVERSATIONS NOT JUST SIMPLER, BUT INSPIRING**





# During the Conversation

# Psychological Safety

When people feel safe, they are more open and receptive to feedback and new ideas.

You can increase psychological safety with your audience by identifying a mutual purpose and creating mutual respect.

## MUTUAL PURPOSE

Everybody in the conversation needs to understand why you are meeting and what outcomes you are both tracking for. Later in the conversation you can move on to the how you will arrive there. Entering into the detail too soon before outlining a mutual purpose can cause alarm in people.

## MUTUAL RESPECT

This is especially important when one person outranks the other person e.g., a boss and a direct report. Ensure you allow time for the other person to respond, you don't talk over one another and be conscious of language or anecdotes that may inadvertently highlight flaws in the other person. Be aware of your body language. Are your arms crossed? Are you actively listening, are you truly curious about hearing their point of view, or is your agenda to get your point across at all costs?





**Respect is like the air.  
When it's there, no  
one notices.  
When it's not there,  
it's all anyone can  
think about.**





# During the Conversation

## The Two parts of Dialogue

During conversation, there are two parts of dialogue to pay attention to:

### CONTENT - WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT

Come prepared to the meeting with all of the details you require to illustrate your point of view. Ensure you leave ample time for feedback and discussion so it doesn't feel like a lecture for the person you are engaged with.

### CONDITIONS – HOW YOU TREAT EACH OTHER IN THE PROCESS

- Are you being defensive? Are they being defensive?
- How might your body language be perceived as defensive? What defensive cues can you pick up from them?
- Are you sure of your intention, is the other person clear on your intention







## SOME HELPFUL PHRASES IN CHALLENGING TIMES...

**“It feels like we have gone off track and something we are discussing is upsetting you. Please know this is not my intention.”**

**“Just checking in to see what you are thinking and feeling after hearing what I’ve just said”**

**“I’d love to know what you are thinking about XYZ...”**



# During the Conversation

## READING THE ROOM

Reading the room is all about being aware of what is happening for other people during the course of a difficult conversation. It particularly applies to being aware of when safety has exited the room.



### NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Some tell-tale signs that safety has left the room include:

- Someone has checked out of the conversation, and they are no longer listening
- One party has moved to compliance or detail without seeking further clarity or asking additional questions - the curiosity has left the room.
- One party has moved to a position of blame
- The conversation has gone off-topic and irrelevant information intended to cause malice has been voiced
- There are defensive phrases and body language being used
- People are talking over one another and not inviting room for commentary

When safety leaves the room, you have 3 options:

- 1.Ignore it and proceed anyway
- 2.Step up and address it badly
- 3.**Step up and address it well – talk cleanly, clearly, apologise if appropriate, and move forward with the mutual goal and shared intention in mind**



# During the Conversation

## GETTING THINGS ROLLING

Often we avoid difficult conversation because we don't know how or where to start, then when we do start, we say things in a way that maximises defensiveness.

Here we give you a sequence of how to raise risky things in a way that invites conversation rather than defensiveness, without sugar-coating, minimising, or steam-rolling.



### EXERCISE

#### A TOUGH MESSAGE

Think of a message you need to share with someone but haven't because it's too sensitive and you just know they would become defensive or angry. Maybe they are insensitive, abrasive, or incompetent. You feel there is no way to share it without things heading south.

Write it down exactly as you would say it.



## WITH YOUR PRACTISES IN MIND, THINK ABOUT:

- What are the cold, hard facts that have led you to your beliefs..? (Remember, facts are things you can see and hear – no opinions or conclusions yet).
- What are you starting to conclude based on those beliefs?
- Consider how you would enter the conversation if these beliefs weren't a factor in your thinking – that is, what does it look like to come from a neutral place without leading from opinion...



# During the Conversation

## OPTIONAL EXTRA #1 – ASK PERMISSION FIRST

You can increase the safety level in the conversation by asking permission to hold the conversation. As soon as they agree, you have increased mutual purpose.

E.g. Can we talk about something I'm a bit confused/concerned about..?

## OPTIONAL EXTRA #2 – ELICIT CONTRARY OPINIONS

The best of leaders have the courage to interrogate reality, even when they really believe in their version of events, or their proposed solution. Invite alternative perspectives as part of understanding the full picture.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN OTHERS GO AGGRESSIVE/DEFENSIVE OR PASSIVE/DEFENSIVE?

Even when you get things rolling well, it doesn't always go smoothly. Before you know it, the other person is becoming defensive – either in an aggressive or passive way. You may be doing OK, or you may be losing your constructive composure too.

When this is occurring typically one of the parties is focussing on their beliefs, conclusions, or their feelings. This is a sign to get back to the facts that have led everyone here. Then we can have a healthy conversation.





# After the Conversation



## AGREE TO A PLAN OF ACTION

Ensure everyone knows what their part to play is and any actions committed from the discussion. A lot of good work often gets missed by failing to ask the simple question: Who will do what, by when, and how will we follow up?



# After the Conversation



## FOLLOW UP, CHECK IN, BUILD UP YOUR RELATIONSHIP

- Do what you have agreed in the timeframe it was agreed - even if it's still a bit uncomfortable
- Check-In to see how the relationship is going. Don't wait for another crucial moment before you discuss your relationship again!
- Intentionally build trust, and make deposits in the emotional bank account of your relationship.



# About the Dattner Group



## Dattner Group

Big change. Little by little.

Dattner Group is one of Australia's most accomplished and trusted consultancies helping to build sustainable, purposeful leadership for almost forty years. We drive increased self-awareness in leaders at all levels, by examining organisational culture, values, individual preferences and purpose and vision, so that everyone has the passion and skills to influence.

SPEAKING OF HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS: COME SAY HELLO

WHO WE ARE

**A high-impact consultancy helping organisations realise transformational and sustainable change, for the greater good**

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Our Work

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