

Best Practices for keeping a Difficult Conversation from going off the Rails

How do you know it's a difficult conversation?

- It's hard. You don't want to have it. You play out all the way it could go wrong.
- Or you *really* want to have it, in which case you might want to check yourself and reel it in because no one wants you telling them their business. They will not be hearing it.

Notice your tendencies around these conversations, and what factors make them difficult (i.e. identity, money, power, structure, intimacy, triggers)—always an opportunity for self-awareness and awareness around safety and risk.

Here is a structure that is most likely to achieve mutual benefits:

FIRST STEP :: Mindset

- 1) Imagine it going well
 - a. It sounds novel, but we tend to imagine all the ways it could go wrong and inevitably enact that outcome. Imagine it going well and you will usher it to positive, mutually beneficial outcomes.
- 2) Consider the difference between *impact* and *intention*:
 - a. We only know our intention, so we imagine if we meant well, we achieved a positive impact. The other person only knows our impact, so if it's not positive, they assume that was our intention. Divorce those two and we can stay in collaboration.
- 3) Establish a *collaborative* mindset rather than a mindset of *certainty* with regards to intention and outcome:
 - a. This is to say, you do not cling strongly to a determined outcome but are open to considering the other's experience and needs and collaborating to problem solve a mutually beneficial solution.
 - i. "Yes, and..." Learn from folks doing improv— validating and adding your own experience allows two disparate experiences to coexist and collaboration in seeming disagreement.
- 4) *Empathize*: Consider not only your needs, but theirs as well—or *how can they hear you?*
 - a. Asking for a raise, you don't say your rent is high, you appeal to their interests
 - b. Give feedback with their goals in mind



NEXT STEP :: Action

1) **Content Conversation**

- a. What actually happened? What are the facts? Establish the objective scene so you start the conversation on the same page.

EXAMPLE: On Friday we had a plan to meet at 1:00 and you showed up at 1:15. And then Tuesday we agreed to meet at 2 and you arrived at 2:30.

2) **Feelings Conversation**

- a. How did it make you feel? Using only words from the NVC feelings words list.
I introduce this list as a resource for three reasons:
 1. To identify your feelings (because its easier to manage your feelings if you can name them)
 2. To communicate your feelings accurately and specifically
 3. To avoid communications like “I feel judged” that is actually an accusation.

EXAMPLE: I felt *impatient* and ultimately *angry*.

3) **Identity Conversation**

- a. This doesn't have to be shared (unless you are very close and want to bring the person that far in), but its very helpful to consider to better know your own tendencies and their origin. It's a HUGE benefit for self-awareness.

Typically our identity triggers fall into one, two, or all three of these baskets:

- i. Am I competent?
- ii. Am I a good person?
- iii. Am I worthy of love?

Because someone being chronically late isn't inherently disrespectful. Rather, it might be triggering your fear of being unworthy of love, or “worthless”.

4) **Needs Conversation**

- a. What need is not being met? Share a need from the needs list that puts your feelings into context, to further bring you partner into your experience and remain on the same page, collaboratively.

EXAMPLE: I need *communication* if you are going to be late.

5) **A Request (i.e. a deniable ask)**

- a. Finish with offering a request that your partner can deny. If denied, you then go into a collaborative problem solving stage, or allow your partner to go through the steps to share their experience to empathize with what is preventing them from saying yes.

EXAMPLE: Moving forward, could you text when you are leaving so I can plan on when to expect you? No, that's going to be hard for me to remember. What if you expect me half an hour later than we plan? That works!



“I” Statements

Sometimes framing the Nonviolent Communication structure as “I Statements” makes more sense to folks. It is an assertiveness tool, a best-practices for communication, and a simple structure to integrate into daily communication. The purpose of I statements is to focus on the consequences of the behavior we find upsetting, rather than focusing on the person. By focusing on the consequences, we are being more direct and less likely to raise the other’s defenses, thus allowing the conversation to be productive and heard.

Four parts of “I Statements”:

1. Describe the behavior you do not like
2. Share your feelings using the “I” format
3. Share the consequences as you experience them
4. Provide a desired or more acceptable behavior as an alternative option

FORMULA:

“When you (state behavior), I feel (state feeling) because (state consequence for you), and I need/prefer (state your desired acceptable behavior).”

EXAMPLE:

“I feel frustrated when you interrupt me because I lose my train of thought. In the future I’d prefer you let me finish before you share your perspective.”

