

# P REPARING FOR DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS

Maybe your manager has been intimating that your job might change, or you are getting wind of a senior management reorganization that could eliminate your role. It's scary and disquieting. What do you do? How do you bring up the topic and have a productive discussion?

Or a colleague who has always been a supporter seems to be critical and unsupportive. You need this person's cooperation to pull off a big project but the two of you can't seem to communicate without one of you feeling hurt and angry.

Or you are an attorney getting ready for the annual partner evaluation meeting and you have several points you want to make very clear to the group even though this is a meeting for which there is typically no formal agenda.

You are at the end of a long job search and the offer you have been waiting for has arrived but it is too low... how do you negotiate for a higher salary without jeopardizing the company's positive thoughts about you? Planning for all of these difficult discussions will help ensure that you say exactly what you want to and improve your chances of achieving the desired outcome.

*A three-step process that really works!*

## 1. Plan Your Strategy

- Come from a neutral place
- Have a learning conversation
- Consider all of the possible outcomes in advance including the worst case scenario

Shifting to a neutral position prior to beginning your conversation will provide the best climate for a productive dialogue. If you are very angry or upset, this may be hard to do. Wait until the next day or schedule a meeting after you have had time to step away from the emotions of the moment and plan the discussion. As you prepare for the discussion, be objective and consider all points of view. Be ready to have a "learning conversation". Learning conversations help us understand the other person's story or point of view by inviting that person into the conversation with us to help us figure things out. *Difficult Conversations* by Heen, Patton, & Stone, of the Harvard Negotiation Project, provides excellent background material and scripts of actual difficult conversations. The authors define a difficult conversation as anything that is hard to talk about.

Be honest with yourself about the possible scenarios that may be uncovered in your discussion—best case, worst case, and others. It is easy to not consider these in advance, but allowing yourself to do that is invaluable preparation. For example, if there is the possibility that your employment is really in jeopardy, envision hearing this information in advance of having the discussion and begin to consider how it will impact you. What will you say in the case of a salary negotiation that does not result in you receiving the compensation you believe is appropriate—again, envision this occurring and plan for it.

## 2. Write a script

- Cover all of the points
- Use neutral language
- Write out even more words than you might actually say

Write down the words you would like to say in response to the possible scenarios in your carefully thought out strategy. You may need to prepare for several discussions given the range of possible responses to your learning conversation. This is probably a new tactic for you and may sound like over preparation. My clients tell me repeatedly, that writing scripts down helps them cover all of the essential points in the midst of the actual dialogue.

Use neutral language and tone to state your points. Communication messages are 55% tone and 38% body language according to researchers at Target Training International, publishers of the Managing for Success™ style analysis tools. It is much easier to adopt the tone you believe will get the desired results if you take the time to write down the words you want to use.

## 3. Practice

- Practice alone
- Role play with a trusted advisor or coach
- Practice several times

Speaking the words you have crafted in advance of the actual discussion helps to imprint them on your brain. Practice increases the likelihood that you will, in fact, stick to your agenda and get the points expressed that are important to you. Practice prevents you from making quick, impulsive and even damaging responses.

Role-playing with someone who can help act out the various scenarios with you is helpful. If you take on the role of the person you will be having the dialogue and allow your coach to take on your role, additional scenarios may emerge.

Practice is something we all do to prepare for public presentations but we often don't practice for private conversations or small group discussions. If you practice several times, your script will be fluent and feel more comfortable.

Following the difficult discussion, debrief with yourself. How did you do? Are there notes you need to make for future discussions? What did you learn from the dialogue? How do you need to prepare differently the next time?

