



## NOT THE EASY WAY

Speak. Aspire. Take Action.

### Navigating Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations will arise throughout life within both our personal and public (school and work) lives, and we need to be prepared to engage in these in ways which are most likely to bring about the outcomes we desire e.g. to improve problems in relationships, to make changes we are seeking which others may resist, to ask difficult questions, to challenge a way of working or behaving, and to explore ideas when others think differently.

Increasingly we are seeing a polarisation of views occurring, perpetuated by interactive styles on social media, and the echo chamber effect of algorithms, which is leading to a belief that others are so different from us we cannot relate to or engage with them. These beliefs are leading to styles of interaction which are angry, combative, avoidant, or personally demeaning.

We suggest that in using the principles within our **Speak Charter** difficult conversations can be approached differently: with good will, openness, and trust.

The topics and stimuli listed on our website are some suggested difficult or contentious topics which can be used to practice our approach to difficult conversations.

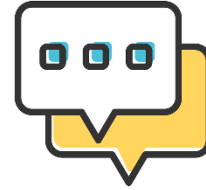
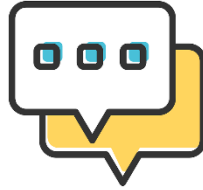
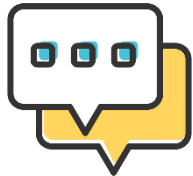
Those agreeing to take part must agree to the principles within the charter, and a mediator should be involved to guide the conversation back to principles when required, prompt for skill development and learning, and comment on skills demonstrated.

The **Difficult Conversations Infographic** summarises the main points of this guidance and will also be supportive during these interactions.



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## Approaching a Difficult Conversation



When you are anticipating a conversation which may be difficult, for you or someone else, you should consider the following:

### **What is the purpose of this conversation? What do I want the outcome to be?**

This can vary.

It could be:

- You need to say something to someone they will find difficult to hear.
- You may need to have a conversation where you fear you will hear things you do not want to hear.
- You may be seeking to have yourself better understood by another.
- You may be seeking to better understand someone else.
- You may want to explore a difficult issue or topic but ensure you maintain your relationship.

Often, we can engage in difficult conversations with an approach which tries to 'win' or to be 'right', when in reality our true motivation is something deeper than this. This is why often, even if we feel we 'won' or 'performed well' we feel sad and unsatisfied, because our true motivation remains unfilled; we are not better understood, we are still confused about others' reasons, and our relationships have been damaged.

### **Decide when to have the conversation, how to invite the other person to have the conversation and accept if others do not accept the invite.**

If we are ready and wanting to discuss a difficult or emotive topic it can be frustrating when others reject the approach for this. But we need to accept that the time, or our approach, or our purpose at that time, may not be shared by others.

Do not attempt to force others into difficult conversations. They may need more time to prepare, or they may not want to engage with you on this topic. You can think about why this may be, and at a future time consider approaching them again in a different manner or with a reason that makes more sense to them.

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Depending on the reasons for the conversation you may choose to have someone else present to facilitate the conversation. This should be agreed by both conversational partners. If it is a deeply personal issue, this may not be appropriate unless both sides see the usefulness of a mediator/ counsellor role, which would require confidentiality.

If it is a conversation exploring contentious issues, you may choose to allow the conversation to take place in a more relaxed social context, trusting that mutual ground rules are respected. If the conversation around a contentious issue is to take place in a more formal setting such as school or workplace, it may be useful to ask for a facilitator to guide and steer the conversation within the mutually agreed ground rules of *The Speak Charter*, and reminders of the purpose of the conversation.

### Helpful skills for Difficult Conversations:



- **Listen.** In order to engage with someone truly and authentically, and if you genuinely want to develop understanding, you need to listen. Really listen. We all know the feeling when someone is really listening and understanding what we are trying to communicate, and we all know the frustration and division which arises when we feel someone is just not hearing us, but intent solely on making their own points.

***Unless you strive to really listen and attempt to understand there is really no conversation.***

Listening is more difficult than it first seems. We are all primed to be more interested in our own thoughts, ideas and making ourselves understood than in focusing on the thoughts of others and understanding them. This is why, even with the best of

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intentions, two people can feel frustrated and alienated at the end of a conversation as they have not achieved their aim of building understanding; because they have focused on being understood and not understanding.

These are some strategies to use when engaging in conversation which can help you show your conversation partner you are listening to them and which will improve your listening the more you practice them:

- ❖ **Prioritize their voice over your own.** When you start to speak at the same time as your conversation partner, stop and say 'please, you go on.' This demonstrates you are prepared to step back and give them the space to make their points above your own. It demonstrates respect, and a selfless prioritizing of the time to them while you pause to listen.
- ❖ **Give people time.** When they are speaking allow them to pause, think, and continue if they wish. Do not wait, and then when they pause, 'pounce' on your opportunity to speak. Allow them a pause to consider their point and if they are ready to cede the 'floor' to you.
- ❖ **Mirror and Reflect.** When you judge it is time for you to contribute, do not rush straight into your point, or a refuting of their position. Show them first you have heard their position by providing a summary sentence which reflects what they have said. This shows you have heard and understood, even if you then go on to disagree. Use the same language they have used to 'mirror' their thinking back.
- ❖ **Hear the emotion.** Listen to the emotive words used and the tone of your conversation partner and be alert to the emotions which are arising. Acknowledge and label the emotion, and offer some understanding in as far as you can e.g. 'I can hear how frustrated you were, I know that having your ideas ignored can really lead to intense feelings of frustration.' Acknowledging and labeling emotions, and offering understanding of why they arise, can reduce the intensity of the emotion, and diffuse conflict.
- ❖ **Ask questions** – when you are struggling to understand a point or someone's position, ask them questions to help you understand. Explain that you do not understand and ask for help e.g. 'I'm not sure I understand, can you explain why that happened next'?

- **Find common ground** and use this to build rapport and trust. Highlighting common ground helps you to both see that you are more alike than you think, even though there are areas you disagree. It highlights your common humanity.

Find the common ground in areas of interest, experience, and intention. Finding shared interests and experiences build rapport through connection and recognition of yourself in another. Focusing on intention demonstrates to both that you share good intentions despite maybe disagreeing on the way forward or why something occurred.

- **Look for the best. Give the person the benefit of the doubt.** Try to listen carefully to establish the motivations for your conversation partners views and give them the benefit of the best interpretation of those motivations. If they say they want to make the world better, believe them, even if you disagree with their solution. Actively question yourself when you spot automatic negative assumptions about them or their motivations just because you disagree. You likely both want the best for yourselves, your friends, family, and wider community, you share an impulse for good.
- **Avoid Parallel Talk.** Parallel talk is when you hear someone's else's experience or point, and use it reference and talk about your own experiences and thoughts e.g. they mention they are training for a marathon and you talk about the various marathons you have done. This demonstrates you are not really interested in them but only focused on finding ways to talk about yourself. If someone shares an experience, a thought, or a plan, ask them questions about it to show you are listening and interested in them. This is how you connect with others. Once you have built connections and trust, they will be interested in you and will follow your model to ask you questions and listen to your experiences.
- **Friendship and Family are Important.** Unless you live in a small bubble with only people who think and act like you (in which case you should expand your horizons), you are likely to have friends and family members with whom at some point you disagree, sometimes on some quite contentious issues. There is an increasing tendency to believe we need to find those who differ in opinion from ourselves, establish they are wrong, and eliminate them from our lives. This is leading to breakdown in family relationships and insular friendships groups, over political and social views where we previously accepted differing opinions were valid. The breakdown of these relationships over differing views leads to feelings of sadness and loss, and is an example where we can ask ourselves: 'Do we want to be right or happy?'

There will be some occasions where through ongoing conversations over time you may conclude that a person's motivation and approach is so offensive to you, you choose not to engage in conversations on certain topics or even to involve them in your life. But these situations should be rare if you can apply the principles of common humanity, best of intentions, benefit of the doubt.

Remember people's views will change over time. Your views will change over time. That is natural and positive. Changing our views shows we are gaining experience and knowledge and adapting as we do. This is a life-long process.



- **Judge when it is time to move on** – when conversations are getting too heated and going in circles, particularly in social situations, you need to be ready to change the subject, lighten the mood and reestablish rapport. Be particularly mindful in situations with friends and family, where it can be good to share differing views, but where this can lead to breakdown in important relationships, or the ruining of a social or family event, when the heat of the topic is allowed to become more important than the people.
- **Avoid personal denigration.** Challenge the point and not the person or their character. Avoid suggestions that people who think or act in certain ways are bad/ stupid/ pathetic/ weak etc. instead try to describe why you view that position as wrong or that behaviour or choice as unhelpful, or not optimal, or wrong. Once you begin to attack a person's character you alienate them, all connection is lost, and you become two people opposing each other who feel there is no common ground or common humanity.
- **Do not aim to change others' minds.** The aim of a difficult conversation is different from a debate. Remind yourself your aim is not to 'win' but to build understanding. You may provide your views and give explanations, but do not expect your 'logic' to be sufficient to bring others to your point of view. Just asking a few questions to sow doubt can be sufficient for one conversation. Approach this

conversation as one within a series of conversations over time. If someone comes to respect you, they will over time give more credence and attention to your position.

- **Don't be the 'Call Out Person'.** 'Calling out' is an approach used to declare someone has said something that will not be tolerated and is often accompanied by a socially damaging label that can be impossible to refute once stated and brings shame and judgment on the person accused. Once this point is reached any hope of a conversation is usually over, and the shared aims cannot be reached.

If someone is saying something you find shocking or offensive, consider the points above before imposing the 'call out': ask questions to clarify, name and label the emotions arising, consider their intentions, give them the benefit of the doubt.



**N.B.:** If your conversation partner is becoming abusive towards you, personally denigrating your character, being deliberately rude and hurtful, then you should defend yourself, state why you feel this is inappropriate and unacceptable, reset the boundaries, and be clear you will end the conversation if this is not adhered to.

Similarly, if you feel the person you are speaking to is at risk of harming themselves or others, make sure to let them know that you will have to tell someone who can help.

- **End it well.** End it before emotions escalate. End it if you can see the other person is finding it difficult. End it if it is dominating a social event. End it when you notice you are repeating the same ground.
  - ❖ Ask for agreement on ending the conversation e.g. 'Shall we get back to helping with dinner?'
  - ❖ Be open about why you think you should end it e.g. 'I don't want this to get more heated and spoil the day'.
  - ❖ Say what you have gained from the conversation e.g. 'It's been good to hear your thoughts on this, not many people share their position on this, I appreciate these discussions we have.'
  - ❖ Thank them for engaging with you and sharing their time.

**Good luck with your difficult conversations!**



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