



Communication For Difficult Conversations

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We all find ourselves having to have difficult conversations from time to time. These conversations can take place with all kinds of people that we interact with. Sometimes they are with people we work with, sometimes people we encounter as we move through the world, and sometimes with the people that we care about the most.

These guidelines are sometimes called the “Fair Fighting Rules”, but they can be useful in situations that you might not feel rise to the level of a fight or argument. These guidelines can help you to be more effective in your communications when you find yourself in a difficult or emotionally charged conversation and can also help to promote compromise and mutual understanding.

Make sure that you are discussing one thing at a time

Continuously check in to see if the topic that you are discussing is the same thing that you started discussing. It can get easy to get off track during a difficult conversation, but resolving one issue at a time is going to be more effective than trying to solve multiple problems. Additionally, if it is a conversation with someone who you have a long history with it can quickly become a litigation of past behaviors which will cause the other person to become defensive and shut down in addition to confusing the issue.

Don't use any degrading or intentionally harmful language

Make sure that you are discussing the issue at hand and not the person you are speaking with. Sometimes when we have negative feelings we want the person on the receiving end to feel as bad as we do. This can lead to using hurtful or degrading language. However, this is not effective in resolving the issue. Make a conscious effort not to use swearing, name-calling, put-downs, or other degrading language.

Use “I” statements

Using I statements helps you to take accountability for your own emotional experience while decreasing the likelihood that the other person will become defensive and shut down. A simple formula for using “I” Statements is I Feel _____ because _____ when you _____. What I need is _____.

Take turns speaking

Make sure that you take turns talking to one another without interrupting. When the other person is speaking try very hard to listen to the things that they are saying instead of thinking about how you will respond when it is your turn. This will help you to understand their perspective better and will make it easier for you to respond in a way that makes them feel heard.

No shouting

Shouting will only escalate the discussion. No Shouting. If you have the impulse to shout take a few deep breaths to help yourself relax a bit. If that does not help, consider taking a break from the conversation.

No stonewalling

Stonewalling is like retreating into your shell and shutting down. Sometimes when people feel defensive or emotional it feels easier to stop communicating, this is called stonewalling, and it will not help the discussion proceed to a place of compromise or understanding. Further, it may cause the other person to feel increased frustration and like you don't care to understand their perspective. If you can not go on in the conversation because you are shut down, communicate that to your partner and determine a time to come back to the discussion.

Take a break if the temperature rises

If a discussion starts to rise in temperature to the point that one of you can not continue take a pause. You should feel comfortable asking for that pause and should allow the other person to ask for that as well. Before you take the pause decide on a time to come back to the conversation and discuss it further after each of you has cooled down.