

When our emotional warning signals are going off, it might be a signal to have a difficult conversation. To navigate the conversation well, we must have grace for the person and truth for the problem. Below are steps to having a productive brave conversation.

1. Connect with the heart

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:6-7)

Sample Prompts:

- "Because I love you, this is what I want for you, me, and our relationship..."
- "I want you to know you've meant a lot to me and I appreciate all of your hard work... Because I do, we need to have a difficult conversation..."

2. State the problem

Be sure to separate facts from stories. Ask yourself, is this an actual fact (something I observed) or am I telling myself a story (about what I thought or concluded about what I saw)? It's hard to argue facts but easy to debate judgments or opinions. It is much better to be specific rather than global about the problem.

Sample Prompts:

- "I noticed... I was expecting..."
- "I heard... I'm wondering what's going on..."
- "I observed... I'm curious if you could tell me why that is..."

As much as possible, use the words "I" or "me" instead of "you" or "your." This helps the person not feel attacked. "You" can feel like a pointing finger.

3. Own your part

"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Proverbs 28:13)

Sample Prompts:

- "I should have... Please forgive me..."
- "Here's my part of the problem... I apologize."

4. Hear their side

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently... (Galatians 6:1b).

When listening to their side, take a "presumed innocent" approach remembering next time it might be you in the hot seat.

Sample Prompts:

- “Help me understand how you see this...”
- “I want to hear from you on this...”

Watch out for three clever stories:

- *Victim stories* - “It’s not my fault.” As a victim, we are innocent sufferers. Help them notice their role in the problem. “Is there anything you’re not noticing about your role in the situation?”
- *Villain stories* - “It’s all your/their fault.” Vilifying others emphasizes their negative qualities and relies on nasty labels. Help them to acknowledge other people’s positive qualities. Assume the best by asking a “humanizing question” about the person being vilified: “Why would a reasonable and decent person do this?” At the same time, don’t assume the best in others at the expense of ignoring blatant failures.
- *Helpless stories* - “There’s nothing else I can do!” These stories convince us there is no healthy option for taking action. “What can you do right now to move toward what you really want? How can I help?”

Consider the major ways that people resist confrontation: shooting the messenger, rationalization, minimization, blame, denial, or projection. What are the methods most often used by the person you need to confront? Prepare in advance.

Dealing with diversions:

- Don’t react to reactions or go down rabbit trails to defend or explain yourself. Listen and contain, which doesn’t mean you have to agree.
- Give them 2-3 minutes, then steer them back on track using this simple phrase, “I understand.... But for now, let’s get back to...”

5. Request change with a win/win stance

A “win/win” means both sides will benefit from the resolution. It is important to be specific when requesting change, so both parties know if it has occurred.

Sample Prompts:

- “I’d like to hear where you think we could go from here...” (pause and wait)
- “It would help me if you...”
- “Would you be willing to...?”
- “It would help me if we could agree to tell each other we are angry rather than raising our voices. If we’re not able to have a civil conversation, then I’d prefer we wait until our tempers are under control.”
- “Would you be willing to call me when you’re going to be late? That will help me make better use of my time.”

6. Establish natural consequences, if necessary.

Sample Prompts:

- “When you start demeaning me, I will leave the conversation/room.”
- “If you continue to talk about me when I’m not around, I’ll have to take a step back from being involved with the group.”
- “When you drink or lie, I will not cover for you.”
- “I want you to know that I cannot go on the way things are. If you don’t deal with this, then I will start taking steps on my own. I’ll talk to a counselor or pastor about how to move forward. I want to solve this with you, but if you have no interest in resolution, I won’t ask you about it any longer. I want to be clear that until things change, our relationship and closeness will be affected. Let me know if you do change your mind... I’d like this to be better for both of us.”

7. Return to “I am for you” stance

It’s important to affirm the relationship throughout the conversation. Be careful not to error on the side of going overboard with platitudes. Brief but authentic is key.

Sample Prompts:

- “I hope as a result of our conversation that things can get better between us.”
- “I know that was a hard conversation. I want to remind you I’m on your side and want you to succeed.”
- “I want to check back in with you... are you doing okay?”
- “I’m glad we were able to deal with that and still be friends.”
- “Thanks for hearing me out. I feel much better!”
- “I’m glad we discussed this and understand each other better. Your friendship is really important to me.”

8. Follow up within 24-48 hours

If there’s no closure at the end of the conversation, place a timeframe on following up. “I’ll touch base with you again on Monday so I can hear your response/plan of action.” Even if the conversation goes well, be sure to follow up within 24-48 hours to cultivate trust. This can be done in an informal way.

- “Thanks again for talking with me. I feel better knowing we understand each other.”
- “How has it been going since we talked?”
- “I am glad we talked, and were able to discuss how to get better as a team.”