

Talking With a Difficult Person

1. **In preparation for the discussion, review the positive traits of the person or the positive things the person has done for you in the past so you don't focus exclusively on the negative.**
2. **Ask yourself what, if anything, you might be doing to make things worse.**
3. **Set a time and place to talk, and provide enough time and privacy.**
4. **Speak from your heart with honesty and sincerity.**
5. **Approach the subject carefully.**
 - Honestly express your feelings.
I have been wanting to talk to you about _____, and it has been hard for me to bring up the subject. Are you willing to talk to me about it?
 - Avoid blame, even if it is clear to you and everyone else that the other person is in the wrong.

We have been having some difficulties, and I am hoping you will be willing to talk about them. I would like to discuss an issue that concerns both of us. I hope we can jointly create a solution that will be agreeable to both of us.
 - Continue to be honest about what you are feeling to make you more human to the other person. If you are nervous, say so. If you are happy the person is willing to talk to you, say so.
6. **Avoid accusations by describing your own feelings.**

Not: You never let me know where you are or when you will be back.

But: When someone needs information from you and wants to know where you are or when you will be back, I feel that I'm not doing my job when I can't answer the question. I am concerned that in these situations our department appears to not know what we are doing.

7. Listen to the other person carefully and respectfully to understand his/her point of view.

- Don't interrupt. Be quiet, and don't tell the person to calm down.
- Don't judge or evaluate what the person is saying while you are listening, and don't get defensive.
- Watch your body language. Maintain eye contact, sit forward, don't fidget, look at your watch, etc.
- Listen for unspoken feelings behind the person's words.
- Repeat the other person's view, if appropriate:
 - So what you are saying that...
 - OK. Let me see if I understand you correctly.
- Express empathy to the person in a genuinely warm and caring tone of voice. (Empathy means appreciating and understanding the feelings of others, whether or not you agree with them.)
 - I can see why you feel that way.
 - I see what you mean.
 - That must be very upsetting, frustrating, etc.
 - I'm sorry about this.
- Show interest in learning more from the person, using phrases such as:
 - Tell me more...
 - What was it like?

8. If feelings become intense on both sides, allowing them to subside over time may be the best course of action.

Suggest that you both think about the situation and discuss it the next day.

9. Explore solutions that would satisfy both parties. Ask:

What could I do...?
What would you be willing to do...?

10. Offer fair-exchange proposals.

I'll do _____ for you in the future if you will do _____ in exchange.

11. Test for agreement and commitment.

Do you think we can carry out this agreement?

What will we do if one of us doesn't carry out our part of the agreement?

12. Consider writing a carefully worded letter to a difficult person if you feel that you communicate better that way, or if it is someone too difficult to deal with in person.

Don't write to tell the other person off.

13. Don't burn bridges behind you in anger.

You may eventually have to cross the difficult person again in an unexpected and unpleasant way.

14. Remember that bitterness lasts only as long as you let it, and it takes courage to forgive and reconcile.