



The *Difficult Conversations Model* helps you prepare for or engage in a difficult conversation by having you think through 3 levels of conversation from various viewpoints.

The 3 levels of a conversation:

1. The content level (what happened?)
2. The feelings level (what emotions are involved?)
3. The identity level (what does this say about me?)

The identity level almost always involves one of these three questions:

- Am I competent?
- Am I a good person?
- Am I worthy of love?

When to use:

1. Prepare for or learn from a difficult conversation.

When you are anticipating having a difficult conversation and want to prepare for it or when thinking back over a difficult conversation you had in the past to learn from it.

2. In the moment.

When you feel comfortable with the model and have practiced using it enough, you can use this model during a difficult conversation.

In either situation, Step 1 is to think through each of the 3 conversation levels for each of the people involved, as well as how an observer might have experienced this interaction. After considering these perspectives, if you decide to proceed with having the difficult conversation, follow steps 3-5 below.

Example:

You have a work project that requires support from a team in another business unit. You feel you have formed an agreement about project deliverables, timelines, and quality standards, yet your peer regularly does not deliver on time. When you raise the issue, he says that he is under pressure from his manager to deliver on other business priorities and his team is doing their best and that you'll just have to wait. You leave the meeting feeling frustrated and need to figure out how to move forward.



Step 1: Consider the 3 levels of the conversation

- Go through the 3 conversation levels from your point of view. From a content perspective, what happened? What emotions did you feel during the conversation? What stories were in your mind about what this says about you? In what way did this confront identity?
- Then go through those same 3 conversation levels from the point of view of your peer. You'll have to do some guessing here, but that's okay. What do you think was his experience of the content? How do you think he felt during the conversation? What do you imagine came up for him around his identity?
- Now imagine the perspective of an objective observer. Using the same 3 levels, consider how this person might have witnessed the exchange. A useful frame is to imagine this person is a journalist reporting on the story of this conversation.

Step 2: Check your intention and decide whether to raise the issue

Ask yourself what you hope to accomplish by having a conversation. Is it a productive intention (e.g. trying to solve the problem) or is it a nonproductive intention (e.g. proving a point, blaming the other person). Sometimes, the right thing to do is not to raise the issue at all. If you decide to raise the issue, try shifting into a mindset that supports curiosity, learning, and problem solving. If you decide to have the conversation...

Step 3: Start from the objective "third story"

The third story is the way things happened from the perspective of an objective third-party, like a reporter, who is aware of the whole situation. It's the best one with which to start a difficult conversation as it is most likely to help you form a common ground with the other party.

Step 4: Explore their story and yours

Listen to their story. Empathize and actively practice an attitude of seeing similarities and offering kindness. Then share your story. Explore together how you each perceive the same



situation differently. Reframe the stories from one of blame and accusation to one of learning about how each contributes to the situation and the emotions involved.

Step 5: Problem-solve

Invent solutions that meet each side's most important concerns and interests. Find ways to continue keeping communications open and taking care of each other's interests.

Most important... this takes practice. It gets easier as you continue to apply and learn!

