



# Difficult conversations should never undermine the success of your business...

It's easy to avoid a conversation with a key employee about their falling results.

It's easy to drift into deeper debt by not discussing outstanding invoices with a large and important customer.

Should you deal with it or should you drop it?

The risks are high - by confronting things you might make the situation worse. Your customer might walk, your employee might walk. You may be verbally attacked or rejected. You may hurt a person's feelings in a way you didn't intend.

The problems are complex, and the people you deal with might not be easy to talk to.

But such problems rarely go away by themselves, so difficult discussions are vital. They're a necessary aspect of running a successful business.

## In a nutshell

Want greater success? Then build your 'difficult conversation' skills and set yourself up for greater success with your team, with your customers and even with your family!



## All guns blazing or total shut down?

Handled badly a difficult conversation could see someone shut down and stop participating in finding a solution.

Handled badly a difficult discussion might result in fierce emotions and things said that can't be taken back.

## Successful resolution is more likely when you...

...apply new thinking and a few core skills for those awkward and challenging conversations.

## Get clear on the purpose of your conversation

How unlikely is this?

Asking the Head of NASA the purpose of a

## Here's a proven solution for your business...

Rather than treat difficult conversations as a 'blame game message delivery' exercise; treat difficult conversations as 'learning conversations.'

Genuine learning conversations dissolve difficulty.



**Treat difficult discussions as learning conversations...**

space mission and getting the answer “Urm, I’m not sure, we thought we’d just launch it and see where we get to.”

So why would you launch into a difficult conversation without being clear on the purpose for it?

If your purpose is unclear or not constructive, then no matter how you handle a difficult conversation, it’s going to go badly.

**Your purpose – seek out the three truths...**

Their truth, your truth and a third truth which moves you both towards resolving the issue or the conflict.

**From certainty to curiosity...**

The gold standard here, the thing to keep front and central, is not seeking mutual agreement! Instead your purpose should be to go for...

*...mutual understanding.*

**Transformational skills...**

What if you could build skills that help you transform disagreement from a drag on your business performance to a driver for competitive advantage?

***“We don’t outgrow difficult conversations or get promoted past them. The best workplaces and most effective organisations have them.”***

– Douglas Stone et al, from their book ‘Difficult Conversations’

Easy this is not, but try this...

**Seek first to understand...**

**1. Learn their story, their truth:**

The more difficult the conversation, the more you’ll benefit from a learning approach. To start with, see your job as asking questions.

Avoid starting a difficult conversation by describing your view of things. Instead, set out to learn about what happened from their view point and how they feel about it.

When they feel you understand them, they’ll be more open to understanding you.

Adapting what Stephen Covey suggests in his landmark book ‘The 7 Habits Of Highly Successful People.’

***“Seek first to understand, demonstrate you understand, then be understood.”***

3 key skills to develop are:

- A. Ask great questions
- B. Seriously listen
- C. Demonstrate you understand

Download the supporting tools on the back page of this report and you’ll find more on how these three skills work for you.

**2. Share your story, your truth:**

Express, as well as you can, what is important for you to say. Share your views, your feelings, your intentions and your issues.

WARNING: Avoid blame like you’d avoid throwing petrol on a barbecue! For example:

***“You aren’t pulling your weight. You’re lazy, you leave me to do everything!”***

Yes you’re expressing yourself but these blame statements provoke a defensive, aggressive or possibly an explosive response.

Rather than venting your spleen, state your feelings carefully from your point of view:

***“I’m feeling overwhelmed by work at the moment! I feel abandoned and isolated.”***

This carefully crafted feelings statement can provoke an engaged and possibly a

caring response.

Cautiously express your feelings about your experience and you avoid the flammable nature of casting blame on them.

**3. Solve the problem together, the third truth:**

Seek a third way. Avoid the pursuit of your specific solution.

Instead, work together towards a mutual understanding that you then turn into a new solution for both of you.

Asking great questions can again be your best friend when exploring options, standards worth pursuing and ideas worth testing. For examples of great questions, download the supporting tools on the back page of this report.

**The paralyzing difficulty of discussing feelings...**

Feelings are an unavoidable part of every difficult conversation.

Fail to get your colleague to express their feelings and they will not hear you. People stop listening because they are thinking about how they are feeling.

As a result it’s unlikely they’ll want to, or be able to, understand you.

Fail to express your feelings and your feelings prevent you from listening and also understanding.

A successful learning conversation is peppered with feeling statements and questions.

You can ask about how people feel about what’s happened. You can share what you think they are feeling. You can share your feelings. Why not test this out and see what happens? Being genuinely curious and careful about how people feel can help dissolve your difficult conversations.

## TIME TO DISAGREE

**“Some people have no interest in reaching a resolution or solution, they are just impossible to deal with”**

True. A small minority are happy to be destructive just for the fun of it. Thankfully these people are rare.

Yes, the impact of someone’s behaviour can be negative or destructive but their intentions may not be. Be aware that the impact people have may not be what they intended.

Adopt a position of ‘curiosity’ rather than ‘certainty’ about people’s intentions and you’ll better understand what your people think.

Yes, you might seek understanding and they might seek out who’s right. You can bend over backwards to listen and acknowledge feelings and they’ll interrupt, judge and even verbally attack you.

Be persistently curious about their experience, their story. Be curious about their feelings and their intentions. Be willing to share your contribution to the problem. Be curious about finding a better way – not your way, not their way, but a third way – and you’ll be better able to resolve things together.

**“My lot would prefer to put hot pins in their eyes than tell me how they genuinely feel”**

Unexpressed feelings prevent people listening because they’re thinking about their feelings whilst you talk or they talk. Unexpressed feelings leak into, or burst into, your difficult conversations anyway so you might as well acknowledge them and discuss them.

Sharing feelings can be challenging.

### Use the Business Bitesize Support Tools And Resources

to help you make the most of this edition of Business Bitesize – go here: [www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands](http://www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands)

True resolution requires feelings to be expressed rather than suppressed. Start by simply describing the way you think they feel or invite them to share the way they feel about a specific incident or specific aspect of the difficulty. Share your feelings too, but remember to avoid any suggestion of blame.

**“I just don’t have the time for such a long-winded approach to difficult conversations – I have work to do, deadlines to meet, kids to pick up!”**

When you’re juggling so many balls who wants to tackle a difficult conversation? No one.

However, difficult conversations rarely disappear into the ether. They’ll still be there nagging you in the morning (after a night fretting about it!). Avoiding it may well make it worse or harder to resolve.

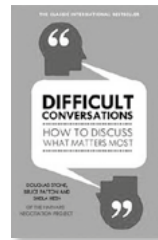
So why not improve your thinking and skills around difficult conversations? You’ll have a better result, better business and better life.

### Tell me more

We hope this 4-page report has inspired you to dig deeper into this important subject? A great next step is to get your hands on the book that inspired this edition of Business Bitesize. It’s well worth your time.

Based on fifteen years of research at the Harvard Negotiation Project, ‘Difficult Conversations’ walks you through a proven step-by-step process. It shows you how to prepare yourself; how to start the conversation without being defensive; and how to keep it constructive and focused regardless of how the other person responds.

Or if you want an easy stepping stone to greater insights check out the quick and easy examples, exercises and insights in the downloadable tools – simply go to the link listed on the back page.



**Your feedback is important to us.** We’d love to know what you think of this edition of Business Bitesize and how you use it or plan to use it. Also we’d welcome your suggestions for future editions of Business Bitesize. To give us your thoughts please use the simple feedback form here: [www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands](http://www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands)



## 4 helping hands for you...

Mastering the art of difficult conversations can help reduce the hassle, the stress and the challenge in your business.

Managing difficult conversations well, using the skills shared in this edition of Business Bitesize, can propel you to both greater profits and to more success in your business.

When faced with a difficult conversation:

- 1. Decide on whether to deal with it or drop it**
- 2. Extend an invitation to have the discussion**
- 3. Pursue a learning conversation and seek out a third ‘truth’**
- 4. Acknowledge the differences and the feelings in your two contrasting views**

**ULTIMATE ARGUMENT:**  
**“How do I know tackling difficult discussions this way will benefit me and my business?”**

Your most productive people will have a dip in performance at some time. You will experience the need to have difficult conversations with customers or important suppliers. Get it wrong and you risk losing these important relationships.

Get better at managing difficult discussions and you’re less likely to upset, offend or even lose your good people, good customers or good suppliers.

**STOP** assuming your view is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

**START** treating difficult conversations as a learning opportunity and uncover a better way for everyone.



## Your next steps:

Difficult conversations, when handled well, can result in big leaps forward for your business.

When handled badly, difficult conversations can undermine the success of your business.

Follow the steps laid out by the Harvard Negotiation Project in Stone, Patton and Heen's book and you'll be more successful.

## Start by being curious rather than certain – treat difficult conversations as opportunities to learn.

Improve your ability to ask great questions and you'll be more skilled at understanding.

Clearly demonstrate you understand and get better at expressing your own story too.

You'll then be able to seek out a solution together.

## More tools and information for you:

As well as the steps on this page, use the insights, stories and tools by downloading the supporting resources.

# Difficult conversations should never undermine the success of your business

Difficult conversations can be constructive or destructive. You make a leap towards making them more constructive when you:

### 1. **DECIDE** whether your difficult conversation should be dealt with or dropped...

Will your difficult conversation move your business forward if handled well? If so, then apply the following process...

### 2. **Like NASA has a purpose for every mission, have a clear PURPOSE** for your conversation...

Make your purpose to seek understanding. Be curious. Make your conversations *learning* conversations.

### 3. **Accept that BOTH PARTIES CONTRIBUTE** to the difficulty in some way...

Joint responsibility demonstrates you're serious about reaching a solution. Joint contribution helps make your difficult conversation more open and more constructive.

### 4. **AVOID THE BLAME GAME** like you'd avoid throwing petrol on a barbecue...

If you set out to deliver a judgement or allocate blame your conversation will be destructive. Stay curious and accept responsibility for contributing to the difficulty.

### 5. **Be curious about THEIR STORY, their truth, including how they are feeling about the difficulty...**

Ask questions and be serious about learning their truth.

### 6. **Share YOUR STORY, your truth, including how you are feeling about the difficulty.**

### 7. **Curiously pursue a solution TOGETHER.**

**Find more insights on these 7 steps by downloading the support tools and resources.**

**YOUR SUPPORT TOOLS ARE HERE:** Go to the link below and you'll find a selection of practical support tools to help you work out how to better manage difficult conversations and make your business more successful as a result.

**Find the support tools to help you here - [www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands](http://www.businessbitesize.com/pentlands)**

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