



# What to say ... when you don't know what to say

Tackle tough topics with this simple advice from the authors of a new book, *Difficult Conversations*.

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**A**T HOME, at work and across the backyard fence, difficult conversations are attempted or avoided every day. A new book has insights and advice that can help. Here, the authors of the book *Difficult Conversations*—from the Harvard Negotiation Project, the group that produced the best seller *Getting to Yes*—comment on five conversations people commonly describe as challenging.

## “I DESERVE A RAISE”

Do your homework. That's the difference between simply “wanting” a raise and having the information to back up your belief that you “deserve” a raise. Too often, people base their request for a raise on a vague notion that they are “underpaid” or that they've “been at the company for a long time.” Learn what others at your company and other companies are paid for similar work. Be clear about the value you add to the enterprise.

This doesn't mean you should be boastful, and you certainly shouldn't make demands (unless you are prepared to go elsewhere if you don't get a raise). Think of the conversation as a joint inquiry into whether you deserve a raise. A low-anxiety but effective way to begin is like this: “I'd like to see if a raise makes sense for me. On the basis of the research I've done, I think it does. I want to share my numbers and thinking with you. Also, you probably have information I don't have that would be useful for us to discuss.” This gets you off to a good start.

## “HONEY, I'VE HAD AN AFFAIR”

You are terrified the news will deeply wound your spouse. You want desperately to find a way to deliver the information in a way that won't leave him or her devastated, angry or depressed. The problem is that you can't control other people's reactions, and you'll get into trouble if you try. Your spouse will be upset. The key is to allow the space for his or her full reactions.

Trying to smooth over or stifle the reaction by say-

ing “It meant nothing” or “Everything will be fine” will likely only make things worse. Rather than feel comforted, your spouse will hear, “You are not allowed to be upset,” or “This shouldn't mean anything to you,” or worse, “I don't understand how you feel.” Let go of your desire to make everything OK; let your spouse feel however he or she feels, and at first just listen.

Over time, you may be able to jointly ask why it happened and how to move forward. But for now the most important thing is giving your spouse the space to react.

## “PLEASE STOP ASKING ME OUT, CO-WORKER”

Most companies have procedures for dealing with issues of workplace harassment, and you should take advantage of those procedures when necessary. But what if a co-worker is asking you out and you want to manage the matter on your own? Begin by recognizing that a large proportion of awkward interactions between men and women on the job are not the product of a conscious plan to harass, but instead involve unreturned interest and misunderstandings. Rather than assume that the co-worker is trying to make you uncomfortable, begin by assuming he or she is not—and just hasn't caught on that you aren't interested.

You might say, “I really value you as a colleague and enjoy working with you. But there's something that's been upsetting me. I'm guessing you don't intend this, but when you make suggestive jokes and invite me for a 'rendezvous,' I feel uncomfortable. I may not have been clear that I'd prefer our relationship to remain a strictly professional one, so I want to be clear about that now.”

Clarifying your intentions and the impact of his behavior on you will stop most innocent misunderstandings. And if it doesn't stop, you now know that his behavior is intentional.

## “WHAT YOU DID LAST WEEK REALLY UPSET ME”

One of the biggest reasons we don't raise our concerns with others is that we assume it's too late. “I should have said something at the time,” we reason. “It's not fair to bring it up now.” Don't fall into this trap. Regardless of when the problem first arose, if something troubles you now, then now is the time to raise it.

It's easiest if you begin by admitting that you wish you had raised the issue sooner: “I probably should have brought this up before. That would have been better for both of us. So I apologize for that.” Other people may respond with, “You're right, you should have brought it up earlier. It's over now, so there's no point in talking about it.” If they do, hold your ground. “I agree I should have said something earlier,” you might say, “but for me, it's not over, because it's still upsetting me. It's important to me that we discuss it.”

You can take full responsibility for raising the matter late while being clear that it's still important to you to raise it now.

## “I LOVE YOU”

Sometimes, even expressing positive feelings can make you feel vulnerable or anxious. You're worried about rejection, you feel uncomfortable uttering the words, or perhaps you're just not sure it's true.

There is one piece of advice that's useful regardless of what's causing the difficulty: Saying “I love you” is a conversation, not a message. “I love you” as a conversation is different from the “love ya” you offer as you rush out the door or hang up the phone. If you wonder if the other person loves you, if you wonder whether you're making him or her uncomfortable, if you wonder whether you love the other person the way that person wants you to love him or her, talk about it. Don't wait for clarity to strike. It may not arrive, and by the time it does, it may be too late.

## TIPS ON HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

■ **Assume good intentions.** It's tempting to assume the worst about those we don't like or trust. But you're almost always better off assuming that the other person isn't aware of how his behavior is affecting you and that it's probably not the case that he is trying to drive you crazy.

■ **Share your feelings.** Most difficult conversations are, at their core, about feelings. The issue isn't just whether your bonus was exactly the right amount; it's how you feel treated - whether you feel appreciated, acknowledged, valued. When feelings are at the heart of the issue, consider raising them explicitly.

■ **Think about your purposes.** Hold as your purpose sharing your perspective and feelings, and learning more about theirs. Listen as much as you speak. Mutual understanding should move you toward problem solving.

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen's *Difficult Conversations: How to Talk About What Matters Most* (Viking, \$24.95) is new in stores.