

DISCUSSION GUIDE

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Brought to you in partnership with Fred Kofman, director of the **Conscious Business Center** at Universidad Francisco Marroquín and president of the academic board of **Axialent**. For more information, tools and tips please refer to Kofman's book, *Conscious Business*, and his [articles](#).

Table of Contents

This discussion guide includes everything you need to discuss Fred Kofman’s lecture, “Difficult Conversations” and to practice the skills it introduces

3 KEY POINTS
Discuss the key takeaways from the lecture 10 mins

5 PERSONAL INVENTORY
Reflect on a difficult conversation you had recently 15 mins

6 PRACTICING SKILLS
In pairs, evaluate your performance against the seven steps of an effective conversation. Identify the step you struggle with the most and practice it with your partner 40 mins

8 ONE ACTION
Commit to changing the way you address the next difficult conversation you have and use the worksheet to prepare for it 5 mins

Key Points

High-stakes conversations are prone to break down

It is precisely at those times when communication is most vital to achieving your goals that it breaks down most dramatically. Difficult conversations are scary because the stakes are high and there is a real cost of failure, raising everyone's defenses.

Pushing with your words is like pushing with your hands

If you "push" with words, you will get push back from your counterpart. If you listen to your counterpart with respect, you are more likely to be heard. The goal is to understand each other's perspective and find a mutually agreeable solution.

There are three ingredients for a successful conversation

- **I** - Express your values with integrity
- **WE** - Relate to your counterpart in a positive way
- **IT** - Achieve your practical goals

An effective conversation goes through the following seven steps:

- **Listen** - Listen quietly, with no interruption, trying to see the world from the other's perspective
- **Ask** - Inquire openly, with curiosity, trying to understand why your counterpart thinks what he or she thinks
- **Summarize** - Let the other person know that you heard what he or she said. Summarize what you heard and ask them if you understand it correctly
- **Validate** - Acknowledge that what your counterpart said is reasonable even if you interpret things differently
- **Express** - Share your truth, your assessment of the situation, your examples, your reasoning, your goals and your suggestions. Speak in first person. Use "I". Avoid using "you", "we", and "it"
- **Negotiate** - Engage creatively and try to find a solution that addresses everyone's concerns
- **Commit** - Formalize your agreement with a series of commitments and a timeframe

Key Points

Consider using these powerful questions:

- “What do you think?” (*general interpretation*)
- “What leads you to think what you think?” (*facts and reasoning*)
- “What would you like to accomplish?” (*goal*)
- “What is the most important thing to you?” (*concern*)
- “What do you suggest we do?” (*proposal for concrete actions*)

Do a process check together to evaluate how the conversation went, and how to make it better next time

- How do you each feel?
- Have you related positively to each other?
- Have you each gotten what you wanted?
- Is there anything you could do next time to make the conversation even better?

Personal Inventory

Recall a difficult conversation you had recently. Take 5 minutes to reflect on what happened and answer these questions:

ACTION

1. What was this difficult conversation about and who did you have it with?

2. What did you say? What did your counterpart say?

3. What was the outcome?

Analyze this conversation against these three questions:

ACTION

1. I - How did you feel about yourself?

2. WE - How did you relate to your counterpart?

3. IT - Did you accomplish your goals?

Share one of the following with your Circle. 1 minute each. 10 minutes total.

- What do you typically do when you have to confront a difficult conversation? (e.g., avoid the conversation, place blame on the other person, accept all the blame yourself). Why?
- What are you most afraid of when you face a difficult conversation?

Practicing Skills

Break into pairs. You have 20 minutes to complete this exercise. Plan to spend the first 10 minutes focused on one partner and the remaining 10 minutes focused on the other partner.

ACTION

1. Share the difficult conversation you reflected on in your personal inventory with your partner.

2. Evaluate how you did against each of these seven steps:

Listening: _____

Asking: _____

Summarizing: _____

Validating: _____

Expressing: _____

Negotiating: _____

Committing: _____

ACTION CONT.

3. Identify which step you found most challenging. With your partner, brainstorm three things you could have done to be more effective at that step in the conversation.

- _____
- _____
- _____

4. Practice that step with your partner. Have them play the role of your counterpart in the difficult conversation you are re-enacting. Try practicing the strategies that you brainstormed.

Share both with your Circle. 2 minutes each. 20 minutes total.

- Which of the seven steps do you find most challenging?
 - Of the strategies that you and your partner discussed, which do you think will be most helpful?
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One Action

Commit to using the strategies you've practiced today in your next difficult conversation. If you already know what your next difficult conversation will be, share it with your Circle now to help yourself commit out loud.

Once you have identified the difficult conversation, use this worksheet to prepare for it.

ACTION

Think about each of the steps of an effective conversation. Write down one or two goals for each step — either phrases you want to use or tips you want to keep in mind. Then use this as a roadmap for your difficult conversation.

Listening: _____

Asking: _____

Summarizing: _____

Validating: _____

Expressing: _____

Negotiating: _____

Committing: _____

For your next meeting

Start your next Circle meeting by sharing the difficult conversation you chose and answering the questions below.

- How did you feel about yourself (I)?
- How did you relate to your counterpart (We)?
- Did you accomplish your goals (It)?