

# Conduct Difficult Conversations with Success Using These 7 TIPS

By Stacy Berg Jackson, SBJ Consulting

“What’s the  
worst that could  
happen if I didn’t  
address this issue?”



Very few people wake up in the morning, stretch out and say “I can’t wait to have this uncomfortable conversation with my colleague, boss, vendor, resident, or family member.” It’s just not done; most humans are wired to avoid discomfort, uncomfortable situations, and the delivery of difficult information.

However, when we skirt these situations, fail to conduct the challenging conversation, and allow unaddressed issues to fester, we do so to the detriment of everyone around us, including ourselves. We simply trade short-term discomfort for long-term dysfunction and the impact on our staffs, residents, and communities can be quite costly and potentially unsafe.

So as communities open up again to families, vendors, local officials, new employees and residents, how can we prepare ourselves to navigate conversations about challenging subjects in a successful and productive manner? We start by first adapting our mindset.

One of the tools professional leadership coaches employ is the “Coaching Mindset”—an understanding that what is shown and what is seen is not always the whole picture. Imagine an iceberg for a moment. The top that you see might not look that massive; the bottom, which you don’t see, can reach to depths you might not be able to navigate around. As you consider that image, the top half of the iceberg depicts the “presenting issue” that needs to be discussed and addressed. The bottom half of the image represents the various reasons, circumstances, and sources of existing conflict, of which you might be unaware. Therefore, part of having a Coaching Mindset is about entering the conversation aware, accounting for, and recognizing that you might run into the bottom of the iceberg as you begin to conduct the conversation. Just keeping this concept in mind gives you the confidence to brace for impact if something “unseen” comes your way during the conversation. This mindset also allows you to explore circumstances and solutions from a place of curiosity, seeking to understand and partner, rather than direct and dictate.

Now that your Coaching Mindset is in place and you’re aware you might learn something you haven’t anticipated, you’re ready to begin the conversation with confidence. All you lack now is a plan.

Here are 7 tips to help you successfully conduct challenging conversations with a plan in place.

“Isn’t there someone else that can conduct this conversation in my place?”

“I DO NOT want to have this conversation today.”

## TIP #1

## Begin with the END

In preparation for the conversation, take a moment to think about your end goal. What do you need and want from this conversation? How can you be open to your partner's contribution in order to "co-create" a solution together, but also achieve your ultimate goal? Never begin a difficult conversation without thinking about the ultimate outcome you'd like to achieve.

## TIP #2

## Prep in POSITIVITY

Part of being able to successfully conduct a difficult conversation is maintaining an element of positivity—even when the subject matter is serious or grave. It's important to deliver the message from a place of kindness and to always state your intentions. Staying calm and breathing deeply throughout the progression of the conversation will allow you to maintain your composure, and may even diffuse a situation that could potentially become heated. Taking time to breathe deeply slows the conversation down and allows us to formulate better questions. Breathing also provides space for all parties to think more clearly and more deliberately. Maintaining composure and positivity throughout allows you to respond versus react, which always yields better outcomes.

## ScRIPt the DELIVERY

## TIP #3

- ▶ **SITUATION** – When beginning the conversation, be mindful to only present the "what" and "when" of the issue/topic/concern at hand. By simply presenting just the facts, you'll be able to get to solution-finding more quickly.
- ▶ **RESPONSE** – Provide your partner with a statement of what they did/didn't do or what was done/ wasn't done—the behavior that occurred as a result of the situation, previously detailed.
- ▶ **IMPACT** – Provide your partner with a statement of what was/is the impact of this behavior and situation on the business, the resident(s), other co-workers, etc.
- ▶ **PLAN** – What is our plan going to be now? What solution are we going to co-create together to prevent a repeat occurrence? (And hopefully prevent a repeat of this same conversation!)

By ScRIPting the delivery, the conversation is conducted quickly, efficiently, and without emotion, and you're able to get to the solution phase faster. (Incidentally, this is the piece you've probably been dreading the most—follow this tip and you'll also temper the amount of "reasons" you might receive from your conversation partner. You don't need or want reasons; you need and want solutions.)

## TIP #4

## Include the INCLUSIVE

Whenever you're faced with having to conduct a difficult conversation, emotions and defenses can be on high alert. It's important to use the most inclusive language possible so solutions can be created and agreement and commitment on those solutions can be implemented. Blaming words like "why" and "should" have no place in these types of conversations. "Why did you do..." and "We should have done..." cause defensive feathers to ruffle. Instead, think about using inclusive language that accounts for reality, like "and" and "given." "Given that we find ourselves in this situation, what do you think we can do?" Use inviting words to maintain your commitment to Tip #2 of prepping and staying positive.

## Negotiate TOGETHER

## TIP #5

Once you've delivered the message with your ScRIPted delivery, it's time to negotiate a possible solution together. If your conversation partner doesn't have a solution to offer first, remember the goals and outcomes you previously contemplated in Tip #1. Use these ideas as stepping stones to begin co-creating the outcome together.

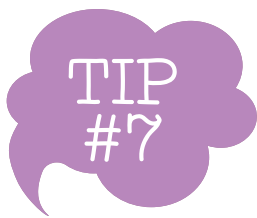
It's important that you don't PROVIDE the solution; if you provide the solution, it often doesn't stick as there's very little buy-in from the other party to commit to the outcome. You want and need them to have ownership of the solution if the outcome is to be successful and have longer staying power; therefore, your partner needs to be an active participant in co-creating the solution.

## TIP #6

## COMMIT (out loud!)

- ▶ Research shows when we verbalize our reflections, commitments, and plans, we accelerate our growth twice as fast. As a result, it's imperative that the plan or solution is agreed to by all parties and the commitment to carry out the plan is made verbally. Yes, out loud.
- ▶ Plan for the PLAN and review the commitments by asking the following questions:
  - ✱ What did we agree to?
  - ✱ When are we going to start the plan?
  - ✱ What do we anticipate getting in our way?
  - ✱ What else do we need in order to implement the plan?





## Establish FOLLOW-UP

- ▶ Always express your appreciation for the person in front of you. Although you remained positive, calm, and responsive (because you stuck to Tip #2), these conversations are often challenging for both parties.
- ▶ Set a time, before the conversation concludes, to check in on the progress of the agreements and commitments that were made. This follow-up will allow you to reconnect and ensure the co-created solution is working.

There's no doubt that conversations with co-workers, family members, residents, vendors, and officials can be challenging and anxiety-inducing. However, by tackling these conversations with a coaching mindset and following these seven tips, you will have the confidence and structure you need to conduct difficult conversations with success and long-lasting positive outcomes. ■

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