

Preparing for the Dreaded Conversation

Thinking things through will lead you to a more constructive confrontation.

Ephesians 4:15–16

When we know we need to confront someone, one of the most dangerous inclinations we can succumb to is to do it immediately—when we’re still agitated. Sometimes we’re so angry that we can’t stop from venting. A better idea is to plan for the difficult conversation. Like painting a room, use the following steps to prepare the walls of your heart before you make that first stroke.

1. Clarify Your Intentions

Is your goal to set the person straight? Get your way? Make sure they know you’re in charge? For a confrontation to be effective, the purpose must be to find truth. When we approach a confrontation as a way for everyone to grow—instead of an opportunity to “fix” someone—we pave the way for success.

2. Begin with Empathy

Have you ever gotten a traffic ticket and had to tell your spouse? What happens if they respond with anger and accusation: “A hundred bucks? Nice going! How are we going to afford that?” Now examine your emotions. Who are you mad at? Your spouse! Your mind immediately begins retrieving all sorts of data to prove they are just as guilty as you. Now imagine a different response from your spouse: “Oh, how awful! There’s nothing worse than seeing those lights in the rearview mirror.” How are you feeling now? Like hugging your spouse, probably. Who are you mad at? Yourself!

Empathy opens a pathway for learning to occur. When preparing for a difficult conversation, I ask myself: *Is there any way to show empathy here? Can I put myself in their shoes in some way?* That allows me to confront without the heat of anger.

3. Is This a Matter of Taste or Truth?

Paul tells us to speak the *truth* in love—not to force our preferences on someone else. Am I upset because something is wrong, or because I don’t like it? I was once all set to confront a small-group leader when I asked myself this question. I finally had to admit that I was dealing with a matter of taste, not truth. The leader wasn’t violating Scripture, just not doing something the way I would.

4. Clarify the Issue

Try to narrow down the central issue to one word. Is it trust? Confidence? Competence? It’s tempting to list all the things we’re upset about, but more productive to narrow things down and keep them clear. “You’ve been late to the last four training meetings. That behavior is communicating disrespect to the rest of the team.” That keeps the conversation from dangerous rabbit trails.

5. Hold Up the Mirror

Get real with yourself as you prepare. How have you contributed to this issue? Are you bringing any of your own issues into it? Is the person you are confronting exhibiting a behavior that you struggle with yourself? Own up before you show up.

6. Project the Consequences

Look ahead a few weeks, months, or years. What will happen if the situation goes uncorrected? Who will be affected and how? What would a good result look like? How will the future be shaped by a positive outcome? It’s important to identify what is at stake, and to be able to communicate it truthfully and as objectively as possible.

7. Trust the Holy Spirit to Do His Job

It’s tempting to feel that it’s all up to us to get the issues solved. The truth is, we can’t control what another person thinks, feels, or believes. We can bring truth and love, but it is the Spirit of God who brings change to a person’s heart.

After going through these steps, it’s time to initiate the conversation. It’s helpful to construct an opening “statement” that reflects your preparation. Write it down and read it through until it’s clear in your mind.

—DENISE VAN ECK; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2004 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. When was the last time someone empathized with me? How did that make me feel?
2. Which of the above steps comes naturally to me? Which will I have to work at?
3. How can I practice these steps now so that I'll be prepared when I really need them?