



[5 steps for having tough conversations](#)

By [Mary Jo Asmus](#) on September 3rd, 2014 | [Comments \(0\)](#)

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You don't have to look hard to see that there are tough conversations that need to be had all around you. You may tend to avoid them, which isn't a good strategy if you're a leader. You must model the work of a leader, and that includes stepping into uncomfortable dialog with others.

Perhaps someone who reports to you is not working up to their potential, or an individual on your team is disruptive to efforts to move the team forward. Maybe a peer is undermining your efforts or your boss is not supporting you in the way you think she should.

Ignoring these things is not very leader-like. And, similar to that little light on the dashboard of your car that says, "Check engine soon," things you don't take action on can become worse. And that's when you have an even bigger and tougher problem to deal with.

If you've been in the workforce long enough, you've seen it all. Do you use any of these excuses for avoiding or ignoring tough conversations?

- The problem will go away if I ignore it.
- It's a small thing.
- I'm afraid that my emotions will get out of hand if I address it.
- I don't want to hurt their feelings.
- I don't want to make a scene and am concerned about their reaction.

What will it take to have those tough conversations? Some thoughts about how to proceed:

Set an intention for your behavior. The better you can manage your own behavior, the better the likelihood that the person in need of a tough conversation will respond well. You may expect defensiveness or blame. Yet, you might be surprised when it doesn't happen because you've managed to have a dialog while remaining calm and expressing care for the individual.

Breathe in compassion. The breath is a wonderful tool to calm yourself. Before the conversation begins, take a few moments to breathe deep belly-breaths full of compassion for the person you need to talk to, because your feedback may not be easy for them to hear. Remember that this person is a complex human being and may not be aware of the harm caused.

Let go. Release any assumptions or judgments about the other's intent; they will not serve you (or them) because, honestly, you don't know why they did what they did. You can't read their thoughts and really don't know the reasons for their actions. Letting go of assumptions and judgments opens you up to learning about them in a good way.

Be direct. Say what you have to say in a direct but respectful way. Most people will prefer that you don't beat around the bush; that can be frustrating and create misunderstanding. Tell them what you've observed and the impact it has on you, the team or the organization. Realize that this is your truth, not *the* truth. Be open to the idea that there may be more to the story than you expected.

Listen. After you've said what you need to say, stay silent and let the other person respond. This is a conversation, which means it's two-way. Check your need to control the conversation. You never know where it will go, and that's OK; go with it. If emotions get out of hand, suggest a break and resume the dialog later.

Leaders have tough conversations. Don't ignore things that require your intervention. You can manage how you conduct yourself and do it with respect and care, even if the other person doesn't.

[Mary Jo Asmus](#) is an executive coach and a recovering corporate executive who has spent the past 12 years as president of [Aspire Collaborative Services](#), an executive-coaching firm that manages Fortune 500 corporate-coaching initiatives and coaches leaders to prepare them for bigger and better things.

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