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A Template for Difficult Conversations

Do you sweat when your boss calls you into the office? Do you want to be more effective giving feedback to your team members or manager? Are you stuck in a co-dependent pattern with your partner at home? Do you have an authority complex? What do you say when your teenage children start drifting away?

In the book, ***Crucial Conversations*** (2002, Kerry Patterson, et al.), the authors define a crucial conversation as one where the stakes feel high. What's at stake could be someone's respect, income, identity, sense of self, or even income. Out of the nine principles presented, I have found that in most cases, the first principle, ***Start with Heart***, does the trick.

I added my own spin to the ***Start with Heart*** principle and created a template. I've used it personally and professionally many times, I've taught it to others, and sometimes I help my clients use it. Try it out!

Preparing For the Conversation

Take a breath and journal through the following steps. Go back and edit to say the same thing but with fewer words. Ask the other person to schedule time to have a conversation, bring your template, and let them know that you'll be reading from your notes to be thoughtful and effective.

Part One – I Statements

Try not to project by saying “you!” Instead, describe things factually and from your perspective to avoid putting the other person on the defense. Take your time and journal your thoughts about these components of the conversation.



I see . . . Share your observations about the event or issue, and try to stay with facts and data points, such as, “I have noticed that . . .” or “I have seen a tendency . . .”

I think . . . Share the natural consequences of continuing the behavior, such as, “This pattern will lead to . . .” or “If this continues . . .”

I feel . . . This is where you can be emotional, for example, “Your response to this situation causes me to experience a lot of shame,” or “When you do . . . I end up feeling like you don't trust or respect me.”

I want . . . This is where Start with Heart comes in.

- I want . . . for me.
- I want . . . for you.
- I want . . . for our relationship.
- I want . . . to know what you think about how to fix this.

Part Two – Start with Heart Principle

Ask yourself what you really want from this conversation. Being emotional may feel good in the moment, but it doesn't accomplish anything and makes it even more difficult to deal with the cause of the difficult situation. Take your time and journal your thoughts about the components of this part of the conversation.

What do I want for myself? What do you really want from the other person? Respect, trust, validation, affirmation? Challenge yourself to think more deeply about why this conversation is important to you.

What do I want for the other person?

This is the part that makes the conversation more effective than other approaches. Whether you like the person or not, genuinely caring about the other person makes a difference. Negative behavior from others reflects their own inner struggles. This does not excuse inappropriate behavior, rather realizing this increases the likelihood that they understand your perspective.



What do I want for the relationship? If you're stuck working together, or being together, don't you want it to be more pleasant? Don't you want to stop being on edge? Don't you want to grow closer with your partner or children? This is where you articulate that you care about your relationship.

How would I behave if I really wanted these results? Here is where you might suggest a strategy or approach, or just throw it to the other person and ask for their feedback.

Part Three – Listen

You don't need to have answers or even ideas. In fact, having no agenda is powerful. Just sit back and allow the other person to process in whatever way they can. Being present in the moment will allow you to see the truth of the situation more clearly. This is the opening gesture that can result in transformation for you, for them, for both of you.

If you'd like some help preparing for a difficult conversation, this is a perfect scenario for a one-time depth psychology coaching session (\$135 for 75 minutes) or for my new email services (\$25 to respond per email request). View my profile and schedule a free exploratory chat at heal.me.

Deborah is a Depth Psychologist, Author, Speaker & Blogger. She's on a mission to grow a movement of self-reflecting humans, by teaching the language of the unconscious.

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Using the “Start with Heart” Template From Crucial Conversations and

Use these instructions and the template which follows to script out and prepare for difficult conversations. It is okay to have this with you during your conversation.

Step #1: Use this language and approach to begin the conversation. Never say “you!” Instead, describe things factually and from your perspective to avoid putting the other person on the defensive. You need the other person to step up and take responsibility for their actions.

1. **I see . . .** (Here, you share your observations and try to stay with facts) (i.e., I have noticed that monthly reports have been two weeks late for three out of the last six months)
2. **I think . . .** (Here, you share the natural consequences of continuing the behavior) (i.e., If these reports are not submitted on time, I cannot complete the department report that then goes up to everyone's boss. This will reflect badly on all of us.)
3. **I feel . . .** (I want to be able to brag about my team. In fact, I know the people on my team can outperform the other teams in the department. I feel disappointed that I'm not providing the direction or leadership needed to get everyone to understand that.)
4. **I want . . .** (Here is where the Start with Heart items come in).
 - I want . . . (for me).
 - I want . . . (for you).
 - I want . . . (for our working relationship)
 - I want . . . (to know what you think about how to fix this)

Step #2: Ask yourself what you really want from this conversation. Being emotional may feel good in the moment, but it doesn't accomplish anything and makes it even more difficult to deal with the cause of the difficult situation.

1. **What do I want for myself?** (i.e., to receive reports on time, follow through, initiative, to feel productive)
2. **What do I want for the other person?** (i.e., to trust me, to feel successful, to reach their goals, to feel valued)
3. **What do I want for the relationship?** (i.e., to complement each other, to focus on reaching department goals, to understand each other's goals or strengths and weaknesses)
4. **How would I behave** if I really wanted these results? (i.e., ask the person for helping in solving the issue, try to understand the motivation for the behavior, focus on the issue not the emotion)

Try It Out

Step #1 – Begin the Conversation with “I Statements”

- I see (share facts)
- I think (natural consequence if behavior continues)
- I feel (emotions)
- I want (go to Start with Heart)

Step #2 – Start with Heart “Want” Statements

- I want (for me)
- I want (for you)
- I want (for our working relationship)
- I will (how I should act)