

great{with}meetings



How to Handle Difficult Content

A calm, supportive way to approach meetings
where tension is likely

Read time: 12 minutes

Know the cost. Make it count.

Difficult meetings aren't difficult because people are 'too sensitive'. They're difficult because the stakes feel real: fairness, impact, identity, workload, trust, or uncertainty.

The goal isn't to make it painless. It's to make it safe, clear, and respectful – so people can be honest without the meeting becoming harmful or unproductive.

01 Decide What This Meeting Is For

Before you schedule a difficult conversation, be clear about what you're actually trying to do. A fuzzy outcome creates confusion, tension, and often makes things worse.

What is the outcome you're aiming for?

Outcome _____

Common good outcomes

- **Share information** so everyone understands the same facts, constraints, or decisions
- **Understand perspectives** so you genuinely know how different people see the situation
- **Make a decision** collaboratively or as a leader, with input from people affected
- **Create accountability** clear expectations about what happens next and who does what
- **Build trust** by addressing a concern transparently and showing you care about fairness
- **Solve a problem** together, where the conversation surfaces options or ideas

Quick reality check: When NOT to meet

- You're not ready to listen – you've decided the outcome already
- You're trying to control someone's feelings instead of addressing the real issue
- You don't have the authority or information to actually address the concern
- The person is in crisis or acute distress – they may need support first

02 Prepare People Properly

A difficult meeting that feels like an ambush creates fear. A prepared meeting creates the possibility of honesty. Let people know what to expect.

What to include in the invite

- **Purpose** what this conversation is about, in one sentence
- **Outcome** what you hope will happen or decide by the end
- **Scope** what's in and what's out of bounds for this conversation
- **Ground rules** like 'no emails about this afterward' or 'what we say here stays here'
- **Questions channel** a way for them to ask questions or share concerns before the meeting

How to word the invite

I'd like to talk with you about [specific situation]. The purpose is [what you're trying to do], and I'm hoping we can [outcome] by the end. I've set aside enough time, and I want to make sure we can be honest without it becoming damaging. Are you open to meeting?

About the pre-read

- If there's context people need (data, a decision, a complaint), share it ahead of time
- This prevents the first half of the meeting being 'wait, what?' or 'I didn't know that'
- Give them time to process, not hours to rehearse a defense

03 Choose the Right Set-Up

The physical or virtual setup matters more than people realize. A good setup removes distractions and creates safety.

People

- Keep it as small as possible — add people only if they need to be there for a decision or full context
- If someone's advocate or trusted colleague should be there, say so upfront

- Never surprise someone by having an 'audience' or unexpected person in the meeting

Roles

- **Facilitator** keeps the conversation on track, makes sure everyone can speak, watches for escalation
- **Decision owner** the person with authority to make a call or next step (often you)
- **Note-taker** documents what's said, decisions, and action items so there's a shared record
- **Timekeeper** makes sure you're tracking time and can land on decisions

About timing

- Schedule it early in the week if possible — people don't want to sit with this over a weekend
- Not at the end of the day when everyone's tired and emotional
- Not right before something else demanding — give space to decompress
- 60 minutes for most conversations; add time if multiple people need to be heard



04 Open the Meeting with Safety

The first two minutes set the tone for the entire conversation. Openness comes from safety, not from being nice.

Opening script

Thanks for being here. I know this conversation might feel uncomfortable. I want to be direct about what I'm hoping for. [outcome]. I'm committed to listening, and I want you to be honest too. We're not trying to hurt each other — we're trying to understand what's happening and move forward. My ground rule is [ground rule]. Does that work for you?

Three ground rules that matter

- **Honesty first, tact second** say what you actually think, not what you think is safe to say
- **Assume good intent but focus on impact** someone doesn't need to be malicious for their actions to hurt

- **What we say here stays here** unless it's something that must be documented (in which case you said so upfront)



05 Use a Structure That Holds the Room Steady

When tension rises, people need structure. A clear flow helps them stay present instead of escalating or shutting down.

Four-phase structure

1. **Context:** you explain what prompted this conversation, the facts as you see them, and what's at stake
2. **What matters:** each person shares what they care about, what they're worried about, or what they need
3. **Options:** you explore what's possible — different approaches, compromises, or decisions
4. **Next steps:** one clear decision or action plan, with clarity on what happens next and who does what

Key technique: Ask questions instead of making statements. 'What was your experience in that moment?' opens conversation. 'You did this wrong' closes it.



06 Make It Easier to Speak

In a difficult meeting, people often go silent even when they have something to say. Help them find their voice.

Participation methods

- Round-robin: go around the room so everyone speaks once, even if it's brief
- Think then speak: give people 2 minutes of quiet time to collect thoughts before asking for input

- Written first: have people write their thoughts before speaking — it levels the playing field
- Small groups: break into pairs to talk before coming back to the full group
- One-on-one after: if someone doesn't speak up, talk with them privately after

A gentle invitation

I notice we haven't heard from everyone yet. I want to make sure we're hearing your perspective. What's on your mind?



07 How to Handle Heat in the Moment

Heat happens. The question is how you handle it when someone gets emotional, angry, or defensive.

Scenario: Someone gets emotional

I see this matters to you. That's important information. Take a breath. We can slow down. What do you need right now?

Scenario: People start arguing

I hear both of you. Let me make sure I understand what each of you is saying. [Pause. Summarize each person's position]. Is that right? Let's focus on what happened, not on intent.

Scenario: One person dominates

I want to hear from you, and I also want to make sure we hear from everyone. Can we pause here and come back to you in a moment?

Scenario: The conversation spirals

We're moving away from the actual issue. Let me reset us. The question we're trying to answer is [restate outcome]. Can we focus on that?

Scenario: Someone is blaming

I hear that you're frustrated. Help me understand what happened from your perspective, not why they did it. What was your experience?

Best tool: name what's happening without judgment. 'I notice emotions are rising' or 'We're going in circles' gives everyone a chance to reset.

08 Close with Clarity and Care

The last few minutes matter as much as the opening. Don't let the meeting just trail off. Close with care and clarity.

Closing script

Here's what I heard, and here's what we've decided. [Restate decision, next steps, timeline, and owner]. I appreciate you being honest with me. I know this was hard. Is there anything else you need right now?

09 Follow-Up Matters More Than You Think

The conversation doesn't end when the meeting ends. What happens next determines whether people trust you.

Within 24 hours

- Send a written summary of what was decided and next steps
- Include any agreements you made, timeline, and who owns what
- Check in briefly with each person — 'I want to make sure you're okay and know what's next'
- If you promised to look into something, do it
- Don't let people wonder what's happening next

The biggest trust-killer: having the hard conversation, then not following through. People forgive difficult conversations. They don't forgive being ignored after.

Mini Templates

Meeting agenda template

Difficult Conversation Agenda

Purpose: Why are we meeting?

Outcome: What do we hope to accomplish?

Scope: What's in and out of bounds?

Ground rules: How do we want to show up?

Time: How long do we have?

Notes format

Meeting Notes

Context: What prompted this meeting

What people care about: Key concerns from each perspective

Decision made: What are we doing?

Next steps: Who does what by when

Follow-up: What needs to happen after this meeting

One-page cheat sheet

Before, Start, During, and Close

Before the meeting:

- Know your outcome – what are you actually trying to do?
- Prepare the person – no ambushes
- Choose the right people and setup
- Brief the note-taker and facilitator on roles
- Have a backup person or support if emotions might be very high

Start the meeting:

- Acknowledge it's difficult and why
- State the outcome and ground rules
- Ask if they're ready to go

During the meeting:

- Listen more than you talk
- Ask questions, don't make accusations
- If heat rises, name it and slow down
- Make sure everyone who needs to speak gets heard
- Take clear notes

Close and follow-up:

- Restate the decision and next steps
- Send a summary within 24 hours
- Follow through on what you said
- Check in with people after

A Quick Reminder

Difficult meetings aren't about eliminating tension.

They're about creating enough safety for honesty — and enough structure for progress.

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