

Sample openers for difficult talks

What if this is your third conversation on the same topic—and nothing has changed? What if you don't get along with the person? Or you're talking to your boss's boss? Don't let the tension around personal histories or power dynamics keep you from starting an important conversation.

To start difficult conversations effectively, share your:

- **Purpose:** The important issue you need to raise and the progress you hope to make by talking about it.
- **Positive intent:** How you want the other person to benefit from the conversation.



When you share your purpose and positive intent, you make it clear what you'd like to discuss, and you show the person that you're not out to get them—that you want an outcome that's good for them, too.

There are nuances to expressing your purpose and positive intent well, depending on your situation. To help with your conversation planning, here are a few common situations with example openers you can draw from.

If you need to:

1. Disagree with your boss or another higher-up

It can be risky to speak truth to power. Emphasize the good outcome you want for them or something they care about to show that you aren't complaining or questioning their competence—you're trying to help them meet their goals.

And, depending on your relationship with the person and the sensitivity of the situation, consider softening your purpose by making it a question rather than a statement. People tend to react less defensively to questions. Plus, asking a question gives you a chance to hear their perspective first, which could give you vital information that changes your view.

For example, if you think your manager is making a terrible decision, you could lead with a question to invite discussion:

“What questions do you think our customers will have about this approach? I want to be sure we anticipate any issues to give customers the best possible experience.”

Or be more direct in sharing your view, while asking a question to gauge whether they're open to discussing your opinion:

“I'm concerned that our customers might find this approach complicated. Do you think that could be an issue? I'm curious to hear your perspective. I know how important it is for us to

give customers the best possible experience.”

For more, see [When you have feedback for your manager, consider reframing it as a question](#).

2. Have an accountability conversation with someone who missed expectations

Lead with your purpose so the person understands right away what the conversation is about. Stick to the facts without judging. Then express your positive intent in a way that shows that you’re open to their perspective and to working together on solutions.

“I’d like to talk with you about attendance at our promotional events. On Wednesday, you came 20 minutes late, and you missed all of last week’s event. Our team’s goal is to have enough staff at each event so that no one has to manage the booth alone—and so we all get our bonus for generating new customer leads. I’d like to hear about what’s going on so we can work together to find solutions.”

3. Admit a mistake or give bad news to a stakeholder

Don’t sugarcoat or delay the news or you risk the other person thinking, *It may not seem like a big deal to you, but it matters to me!* Instead, briefly explain the issue and describe what you’re doing or plan to do to address it. And show that you understand what’s important to them and want to make things right.

“I have an issue to tell you about: The monthly numbers I sent out to our regional offices have errors in them. I know that fixing the data is really important for our business and for protecting our team’s credibility. Let me share my plan for correcting the mistakes and for making sure it doesn’t happen again.”

For more, see [4 steps to admit a mistake in a way that preserves trust](#).

4. Talk to a work friend about something they did wrong

Have the courage to express your purpose directly so the other person understands the issue and why it’s important. Don’t deflect (e.g., “Well, I don’t see a problem with your behavior, but other people might...”), since it downplays the seriousness of the problem—and sounds like you’re blaming someone else. Instead, own your purpose.

“Could we talk about the joke you made to the warehouse team earlier? It made me uncomfortable because it called out and diminished a group of people. I’m sure you didn’t mean to offend anyone. But it’s important to me that everyone feels welcome at work. And, as your friend, I don’t want you to hurt your relationships or your good reputation.”

For more, see [One good way to respond to a noninclusive joke or statement](#).

5. Tell a customer or stakeholder that you can’t give them what they want

Briefly and clearly explain the issue—the difference between what they want and what you can provide. Then show that you understand their desires and pain points and genuinely want a good outcome for them.

End with a question to make it clear that you want to find a solution and work with the person to do so.

“We said that we’d be able to deliver your prototypes by Friday. Unfortunately, we’ve run into issues with a supplier of critical materials. Our goal is to get you the best working prototype quickly—but we can’t meet that high standard of quality without those materials. We have confirmation that your order will be delivered by Tuesday. How can we work with you to reduce the impact of this delay?”

For more, see [Help! I have a bad relationship with a customer.](#)

6. Ask for help from a colleague you don’t get along with

Since you can’t rely on your strong relationship to convince them to do you a favor, emphasize your positive intent—specifically, that there’s a good outcome waiting for them if they do what you need.

“I have the new customer data, but I need help analyzing it. I think this data will help us all better understand who our customers are and what they care about—and especially help you with your goal of refining campaigns to reach a wider audience. Would you be willing to help with the analysis?”

7. Have a third (or fourth) conversation on the same topic

Don’t give up! Most difficult issues take more than one conversation to resolve. Start by asking yourself, *What can I do differently this time to help us make progress?* Maybe in previous attempts, you weren’t clear enough about your purpose—so the other person didn’t see how important the issue is to you. Or maybe they needed help understanding how doing what you’re asking would be a win for them, too.

This time, aim to balance your purpose and positive intent. And invite the other person to play an active role in finding solutions.

“I’m still struggling with how we communicate with each other about this project, and I’d like to follow up about it. When I don’t receive your updates until Thursday, then I can’t finish what I need to do in time for the Friday leadership reviews. I’m not trying to be hard on you by bringing this up again. We all want this project to get done well and for executives to see our best work. I’m curious about your process and would like to talk through ideas to make things run smoothly for both of us. What do you think?”

For more, see [20+ phrases to de-escalate tension in a difficult conversation.](#)

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