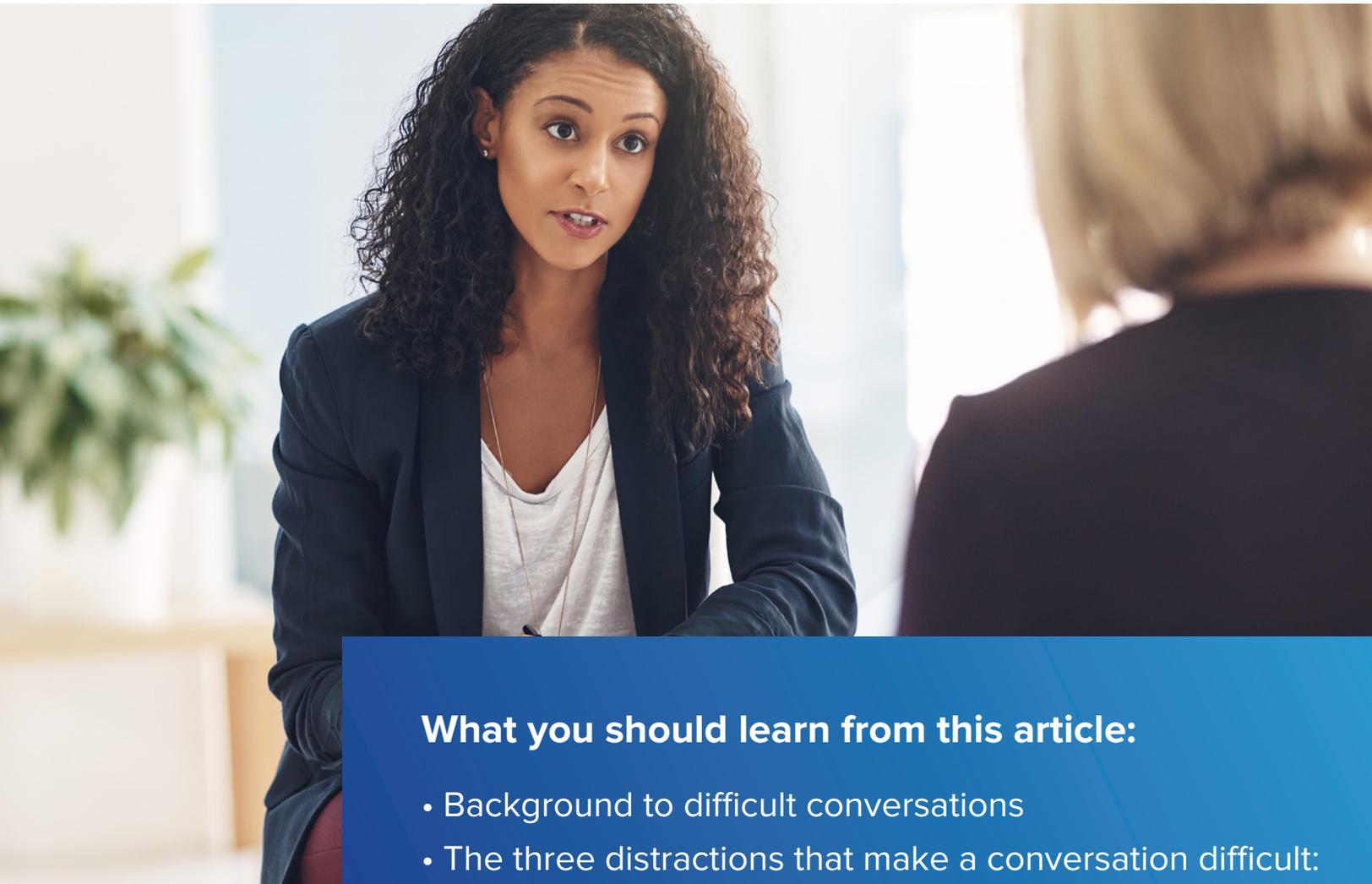


# How to Approach Difficult Conversations at Work



## What you should learn from this article:

- Background to difficult conversations
- The three distractions that make a conversation difficult:
  - What happened?
  - How do you feel?
  - How is it affecting your identity?
- How to approach the difficult conversation

# AN INTRODUCTION TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

It is inevitable that sometimes we won't agree or will have an issue we need resolved. When this happens, how should you approach the conversation?

According to the Harvard Negotiation Project, and the book: "Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most," there are three separate conversations embedded in the difficult conversation, that can act as distractors (Stone, Heen, & Patton, 2010). These conversations are about what happened, our feelings, and our identity. This makes it extremely difficult to untangle what is going on between us and someone else.

## THE THREE CONVERSATIONS

### The "What Happened" Conversation:

Both people have a point of view about what happened, and we are usually focused on who is right or who is to blame. The "what happened" conversation is about the disagreements over what occurred, and the assumptions about each other's intentions. We think we know people's intentions, when that's not the case. We need to explore what each person's intentions were and the impact those intentions have on the situation (Stone et al., 2010). Interestingly (and probably not surprisingly), we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. A theory in psychology called, "fundamental attribution error," states that when something goes wrong for us, we tend to explain it based on external factors, rather than taking responsibility. However, when something goes wrong for others, we tend to assume it is their fault and put less weight on external factors (Passer, Smith, Atkinson, Mitchell, & Muir, 2011). Imagine your colleague is late for a meeting. Perhaps, you think: "Wow! Cara is late again. Time management is definitely not her strength." You believe it is Cara's fault, and that she is late because of poor time management skills. Whereas, if you are late for a meeting, you think to yourself that it is not your fault and simply due to the situation: you had so much to do and did your best to get to the meeting as early as possible. It is important to recognize this tendency when we approach a difficult conversation with another person, and to ultimately talk about each person's perspective on what happened.

### The "Feelings" Conversation:

The common belief is to keep feelings out of a difficult conversation, especially at work. However, it is important to acknowledge feelings in the context of a problem. When expressing your emotions, keep in mind the "temperature" of the emotion – cold vs. hot (David, 2017). Scholars recommend that you should talk about your feelings when your emotion is "cold," i.e. manageable and with intention, rather than "hot," i.e. urgent and immediate; an urge to speak your feelings without deep thought. In a similar vein, Stone et al. (2010) recommend that before talking about your feelings, "negotiate" your feelings, that is, take time to understand the situation from another's perspective as your point of view and feelings may change, and become more manageable.

## The “Identity” Conversation:

Our identity; the way we see ourselves, may be at odds with what is being brought up in a difficult conversation. We may take someone’s comments about the situation as a generalization about how we are as a person (Stone et al., 2010). In fact, according to the work done by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), negative feedback is perceived at the “self-level,” meaning that the feedback becomes not about the task, but about oneself. For example, when we hear that our presentation last month wasn’t as organized as we thought, we may perceive that feedback to mean that we are generally disorganized, which interferes with our self-concept. We need to think about our identity issues: what is the other person saying that makes me doubt what I think about myself? Acknowledge what they are saying in terms of what it means for your identity. Simply coming to the realization that you’re reactive because the feedback interferes with your identity will help you focus on the real issue at hand. In addition, remember that what they are saying is about a behavior or task, rather than your whole self.

## HOW TO HAVE AN EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION:

To try and limit these distractions, here are five tips, according to Stone et al. (2010) for approaching a difficult conversation:

- **Figure out the purpose.**

Is it to understand what happened from both perspectives, and/or figure out what to do going forward?

- **Acknowledge what you are aware of and don’t know about.**

You know what your experience was, and how you felt about it. You don’t know about the other person’s experience or feelings.

- **When you start your conversation, make a point of saying you want to explore each person’s perspective.**

State what happened objectively. For example, say that you don’t see eye to eye on an issue and want to explore both point of views.

- **While the other person explains their view, listen and acknowledge their feelings.**

It also helps to paraphrase what the other person is saying to show that you understand where they are coming from. Ask open-ended questions and for clarification, to understand the whole picture and why they feel the way they do.

- **When you explain your view, highlight that both of you are experiencing difficulties.**

Ensure that the conversation is about sharing each person’s views, rather than placing blame.

## CONCLUSION

When having a difficult conversation, it is important to keep in mind how the conversation may get off track – such as, differences in understanding what happened, ignoring our feelings, and interfering with our identity. When you prepare for the conversation, it may be worthwhile to walk yourself through each of these distractors to better understand the situation. Ask yourself what your perspective was and imagine what the other person may have been experiencing (this helps you to know what happened). Acknowledge everyone’s intentions, the outcomes of everyone’s actions, and how everyone contributed, including yourself! Think about how you felt, and how your identity was threatened (Stone et al., 2010). Understanding all of these aspects of the conversation will help you stay on the right path to problem solving and understanding the full picture.

## References

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