

Eleven Tips for Making a Hard Conversation Work

1. If you feel misunderstood, clarify what you mean (“let me put this another way...”) or ask the listener to repeat what she heard you say. Then you can affirm or correct their statement.
2. If you feel confused, ask a question that seeks clarification or more information. Or you can paraphrase what you have heard. (“Are you saying that...?”)
3. If you feel hurt, angered or disrespected, say so. If possible, describe exactly what you heard or saw that triggered your reaction. (“When you said X, I felt Y.”) If it is hard to be specific, just flag your reaction.
4. If you feel angry, express the anger directly (e.g. “I felt angry when I heard you say X...”) rather than expressing it indirectly, for example, by trashing another person's statement or asking a sarcastic rhetorical question.
5. If you feel cut off, say so or override the interruption. (“I want to hear what you have to say, but I'd like to finish first...”)
6. If someone asks a rhetorical question, ask them to rephrase it. (“That seems like a rhetorical question. Is there a question you're genuinely curious about that I could answer?”)
7. If someone makes a sweeping generalization, ask them to name a specific person she is referring to and/or to speak about his personal experience with people she knows.
8. If someone makes assumptions, point it out. (“It sounds like you assume everyone in X group thinks Y. Is that true? Is there a personal experience you can share that led to that belief?”)
9. If you feel uncomfortable with the way the conversation is going, say so and ask what others' experience is. If others share your concerns and you have an idea about what might improve the conversation, offer that idea. (“How about taking a minute to reflect on whether this is the kind of conversation we want to have together?”)

10. If you think the conversation is going off track, share your observation and check in with others. (“I thought we were discussing X, but it seems we bypassed it and are focusing on Y. I'd like to go back to X and finish that conversation. How does that sound?”)
11. If you made communication agreements and someone forgets to observe one or more of them, share that observation. (“We agreed not to use labels, and you just called my political party X...”) If someone draws your attention to a lapse on your part, make sure to thank them. Either way, you are creating an opportunity to honor a prior commitment.