

# How to Have Difficult Conversations

A **difficult conversation** is a planned discussion about an uncomfortable topic or a negative experience where the goal is to share different perspectives, build mutual understanding, and develop respect (not to persuade or “win”). While it’s common to want to avoid these conversations, addressing them skillfully can help strengthen relationships. Here are some tips for having productive difficult conversations.

## Preparing for the Conversation

Before starting the conversation, take time to collect your thoughts and acknowledge what emotions you feel.

To prepare for the conversation, ask yourself:

- What is it that I want to address?
- What emotions am I feeling about this topic?
- Why am I feeling this way?

## Assertive Speaking

After you’ve reflected on your thoughts and emotions, draft and use an I-message to communicate those thoughts and feelings. Remember that the goal is to be heard, not to “win.”

An effective I-Message is brief and has three parts:

- I feel... (use one emotion word)
- When... (describe what happened in a phrase)
- Because... (state why it matters to you)
- *Example:* “I feel frustrated when you don’t respond to my texts because I have something important to tell you.”

## Active Listening

When we are actively listening to another person, we are fully engaged in what they have to say. We are listening with our mind, body, and heart. We are not listening to respond; we are listening to understand what is being communicated.

Through active listening you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What does the person want me to know?
- What emotion(s) is the person feeling in this moment?
- Why are they feeling that emotion?

## From the Conflict Resolution Program at the Institute for Public Administration

After the person finishes speaking, repeat the main points back to them to see if you've understood what they said the way they intended. Ask if you got the message.

- *Example:* "I hear you saying that you are frustrated when I don't respond to your texts because you have something important to tell me. Is that right?"

### Ending the Conversation

At the end of the discussion, thank the other person for listening to you openly and for sharing their thoughts and feelings with you.

## About the Conflict Resolution Program

The Conflict Resolution Program (CRP), part of the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) is a resource dedicated to supporting transformational and organizational change in nonprofit, public, government, and educational settings. This is done primarily through teaching and promoting effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

To learn more about our programs, visit  
<https://www.bidenschool.udel.edu/ipa/serving-delaware/crp>



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