



Resolving Difficult Relationships with Workmates

Workplace & Social Engagement

Introduction

Every human relationship has its difficulties and the partners in the relationship experience the highs and lows of life. A workplace relationship is no exception.

The swings between euphoria and disappointment at work are often more frequent and extreme than elsewhere.

In challenging circumstances, when humans communicate, there is always a significant emotional element which must be acknowledged and considered. The valuable work of [Dr. Albert Mehrabian](#) has provided much useful insight in this regard.

It is important to remember that there are at least two fallible humans involved in every relationship, and both of you are being affected by not only workplace influences like pressure, demands, deadlines and unhappy colleagues and customers but you are also affected by the environmental stresses of our post-covid society and economy. All of us are operating with less emotional and intellectual margin than we were used to before March 2020.

Preparing Yourself:

If we do not prepare ourselves for difficult conversations in the workplace, we will highly likely create an unsafe circle around us. People will be wary of us, on edge and, therefore instinctively defensive. With both of you in a negative state, any healthy conversation is unlikely.

- A. First, we need to be self-aware. Recognise and acknowledge that you are more sensitive than you normally are, and more reactive. Even that you are having trouble keeping it all together. Cut yourself some slack, but do not assume you are not capable of behaving in very unpleasant ways at times.
- B. Then cut our workmates the same slack. Recognise and acknowledge that they too are struggling, and forgive them when they act out a bit, or even a lot.
- C. Only then will we be able to engage with our colleagues in a healthy, purpose-driven conversation that could rectify the situation currently on your mind.

To prepare ourselves, then, for a difficult conversation with any colleague, customer or supplier, we may have to adopt one or more self-soothing practices.

Self-soothing practices include quick self-control exercises like taking 3 or more deep breaths, with 6- second holds, to still your nerves and your mind. Or you may need larger-scale preparations like a morning meditation or prayer time, a walk on the beach, a round or two with a punching bag, or a full workout in the gym. Recognising the powerful hormones in our bodies also plays a significant part in our capacity to handle stress, so your diet of food, drink, entertainment, rest and sleep, and your monthly hormone cycle should all be considered influential.

If they are at your door or waiting in the reception area for you, ask them politely to wait. Use that acquired time to prepare yourself well.

Many SME Owners are also couples in business together and so the added complication of “taking work home” can make life difficult at home. Relational stress at home can easily be taken to work, affecting other important relationships. Be aware and take steps to minimise the cross-over between home and work. Boundaries and even rules may be needed. Consider, for example, use of work-related cell phones at home. Some couples leave both work phones in their cars when they arrive home and have one mobile phone between them for personal contacts which stays at home while they are at work.

Whatever it takes, you need to be in a good place before you engage in a difficult but healthy conversation.

Planning for a Difficult Conversation.

First, determine the purpose of the conversation, and prepare to message that purpose with your colleague when you meet, to agree on the final purpose.

Here is a model which may help you plan for any difficult conversation. Simply stated, remember this:

1. There is *what you think you said* (we tend to focus on our words), and *what you said* (which always includes how we said it (tone, volume, body language)).
2. Then there is *what the other person hears* (all of it) and *what they think they heard* (including their interpretation of what they heard).
3. In that alone are several opportunities for miscommunication and consequential problems.

Therefore, avoid planning a speech. Instead, prepare for a dialogue, with the 2 or 3 most important discussion points.

During the Conversation.

In some situations, the involvement of a **mediator** can make a tense situation calm. An investment in a professional mediation service could save you many times as much in the outcome.

Remember that we were given two ears and only one mouth. A good rule of thumb, especially in challenging situations or with “difficult” colleagues, it is wise to speak no more than one third of the time and listen well at least two thirds of the time. Learn about and practice [Active Listening techniques](#). What you will gain will surprise you.

Avoid going in to fix something. Instead, approach the person with a sincere desire to jointly resolve the situation. Learn how to [brainstorm](#) together with others. Pursue agreement, not victory.

Any dialogue can go in any direction unless directed. Control the direction of your dialogue by staying focused on the agreed purpose, and redirecting the conversation back onto its purpose when necessary.

After the Conversation.

In more situations than we may think a written summary of an important conversation will be productive. It can reveal any remaining misalignments but it always affirms alignments and agreements.

At the conclusion of your conversation, ask your colleague if he or she would like to write up a summary. If they do, this will transfer a considerable amount of respect and power to your employee or contractor, and this will be appreciated. If they decline your invitation, then ask if they mind if you do so instead. If they agree, then do so and share the summary within a day or two and ensure the employ is genuinely happy with it as a fair summary. In any event, it is wise to write your own summary of critical or highly influential conversations and keep your summary on file. Mark it as “Viewed & Agreed” or “Not Shared,” as is appropriate.

The Biggest Factor

Mental toughness and resilience are determinant factors in the outcomes of decisions and conversations made in stressful environments. The pioneering and ongoing work of [Dr. Martin E. Seligman](#) is a reliable source of insight and advice.

Healthy human relationships are not only critical to business success, they are also a major factor in our own health. How valuable, then, are the relationships you have at work and at home? Will these tools be useful? If so, what will you start doing differently from now on?