

Communication Techniques for Difficult Conversations

When approaching a difficult conversation, the following 3 communication techniques will help you communicate clearly and delicately. Using these techniques in your daily life will have the added benefit of improving your relationships in all areas.

Make “I” statements.

Making “I” statements means focusing on your own feelings while taking responsibility for your part. It means NOT accusing the other party or directly naming their behavior. Make it about you. Instead of saying “You ignore me when I talk,” rephrase it as an “I” statement. “Sometimes when I’m talking I feel like you aren’t listening to me.”

What behaviors do you need to address that the other party did?

How can you phrase these as “I” statements?

Use XYZ or “When, What, How” Statements

Instead of generalizing with always or never, like we mentioned previously, using XYZ statements helps you get specific. Here’s how it works:

X: When—identify a specific incident or example that you are referring to

Y: What—clearly identify the other person’s behavior

Z: How—use an “I” statement to express how it made you feel or impacted you

Being specific will make the person feel like you are not judging their whole character, but rather looking at a specific behavior.

Using the previous example, an XYZ statement would look like this: Yesterday (when), when you were facing your computer while I was talking to the team (what), I felt like you weren’t listening to me (how).

This sentence clearly tells the other party how their behavior impacted you and what they could do differently.

The great news is this technique works great for POSITIVE statements too! When you want to acknowledge or praise someone, being specific helps reinforce the positive behavior. For example, once the person in this example changes their behavior, you can respond by telling them: Today, when you were making eye contact during our meeting, I appreciated your level of engagement.

Consider the issues or behaviors you need to address and rephrase them into XYZ statements:

Issue:

When:

What:

How:

Full statement:

Make a feel-good sandwich.

When there are negative situations that you need to address, one powerful technique is to soften the negative by sandwiching it between two positives.

What is something positive about the situation or the person, such as something you appreciate or what is going well, that you can acknowledge before bringing up the issue?

What is the issue you are bringing up (from above)?

What is another positive statement, perhaps pointing out past obstacles that have been overcome or positive outcomes you already foresee, that you could bring up after approaching the negative topic?

One key thing to remember here, however, is that you want to make sure that you are praising and acknowledging others at OTHER times as well, not just when you need to create a feel-good sandwich. Otherwise, every time you begin to praise someone, they'll assume a negative is coming.