

How to Have a Difficult Conversation

Ask **Open** Questions Throughout the Conversation

- Difficult conversations often require a negotiation to come to an agreeable outcome for both parties. Skilled negotiators ask twice as many questions as average negotiators.
- You can use questions throughout the conversation to:
 - Gather information about the other party's position and interests
 - Manage the discussion and keep the other party engaged
 - Avoid direct disagreements and gain thinking time while the other party responds
 - Break up pro/con debates and enhance the possibility of creative solutions

Open Questions	Closed Questions
Start with "Who, what, where, when, how, why...?"	Start with "Is, Are, Do, Can, Have...?"
Elicit further explanation	Can be answered yes or no, or with a single phrase
Allow for more information to be shared and for individuals to move beyond their position	Most frequently used
<i>Examples:</i> "How do you feel about the proposal?" "Why do you want this data?" "What items are important to you?" "When are you expecting to hear back from them?"	<i>Examples:</i> "Will this lab space meet your needs?" "Have you been talking about this with your peers?" "Is this the only time you are available to meet?" "Can you start the case before 7a?"

Illuminate Meaning and Expand the Discussion

- Create a window into where they are coming from by asking what their definition is of a key term
 - E.g., "We need to discuss why you are always late to work."
 "What? I don't think I'm always late; how do you define being late for work?"
 "Cases start at 7a, so you need to be in the PACU by 6:30 a.m. at the latest."
 "Oh! I don't remember hearing that during my onboarding. At my last job, 6:50 a.m. was acceptable, now I know the expected start time and will arrive then!"
- Expand the discussion by exploring the larger context. This will make the other party's interests more visible and allow the two parties to build trust and foster understanding.
 - e.g., "We need to discuss why you are always late to work."
 "Yes, I'm sorry about that. My nanny is always late; I told her she can't be!"
 "It's okay; that's why we are here to have a discussion and find a solution. You are a great clinician, and we wanted to know if there were ways that we can support you."
 "I've talked to her over and over again about being on time, but I don't feel comfortable interviewing and possibly switching nannies during the pandemic."
 "I understand the position you are in, and I have a few ideas. There's a daycare at the hospital that you could check out, or you could temporarily switch to a later start resource shift until the pandemic calms down and you can find another sitter."

References and Further Reading:

1. Putnam, L. L. (2005, March). Are You Asking the Right Questions? *Negotiation*.
2. Tannen, D. (1995, September-October). The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why. *Harvard Business Review OnPoint*.