

advancing women in business

every
woman

NETWORK



WORKBOOK

PREPARING FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

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ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

EVERYWOMAN IS AN organisation that works to advance women in business. Through our work with individuals and organisations, we know that tough conversations are one of the biggest challenges for women in business. Even if it is hard, initiating tough conversations can improve most issues and prevent them escalating into bigger problems. This strategy applies to tough conversations with either bosses or work colleagues.

You may know someone who manages these conversations with ease, but as with most things in life, preparation and practice has made them successful at it, as it can do for you. This workbook takes you through exercises that identify the issues before you have the tough conversation. It will help you work out why you are reticent about having the conversation and explains the potential cost of not speaking up when you should.

Our online seminars will support the key learning points in this workbook and provide an opportunity to ask our experts any questions you may have. If you are unable to join us for a liveseminar, you can watch them when they are posted as videos to the Preparing for Tough Conversations section within www.everywoman.com/development.

Good luck! We look forward to seeing you on the everywomanNetwork.

The everywoman team

PREPARING FOR TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

We understand that our success or failure in life depends on taking things one step at a time. Similarly, the outcome of our conversations can either make or break our careers. Handling difficult conversations is an art that requires finesse, and for many of us, it can be uncomfortable. This workbook provides insights into navigating such challenging conversations and offers strategies to make the process smoother, this will boost your confidence to help you approach these conversations with greater ease and effectiveness.

Ask almost any business manager or director what is the most difficult aspect of their jobs and they will often cite tackling difficult conversations or communicating contentious issues as being top of the list. Having these conversations is part of business; whether it is with your team, your boss, a client or supplier, it is up to you to do everything you can to become comfortable and confident with the task. Understand that the upside of a tough situation handled well improves relationships and trust!

Use this workbook by going through each section. You will be asked to stop and reflect; it is important to take the time to do this in order to learn and develop. We look at your own tough conversations and what happens when you avoid them. We discuss the reasons some conversations are so difficult and how to prepare yourself in order to achieve the best outcomes. This workbook also offers hints, tips and tools. It is up to you how much thought and energy you put into making your next tough conversation successful.

“While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business a marriage or a life, any single conversation can”

KENNETH BLANCHARD, AUTHOR
AND MANAGEMENT EXPERT

SECTION 1. CLARIFY THE SITUATION



Clarify the issue

WE OFTEN AVOID having necessary conversations because of how it makes us feel, even though we are smart enough to know that the discussion is critical. Of course, we are worried about the reaction from the other party and how they will feel.

EXERCISE

So...what is the tough conversation you are avoiding?

Think about 2-3 conversations you have not had over the past few weeks that you should have had..

1.

2.

3.

By taking time to think through the conversations and writing down your thoughts, you should start to get some clarity about the issue you need to address. Throughout the workbook, please refer to these examples whenever you are prompted to reflect on challenging conversations or need to devise a plan.

Is it really an issue?

BEFORE YOU GET WORKED UP about the problem, ask yourself what will happen if you avoid the conversation altogether. This is a good self-check to see if you have made an issue bigger than it really is, or even made something out of nothing.

Someone recently related how she was getting increasingly incensed by someone on her team who chewed her sandwich while sitting at her desk. After spending half an hour thinking about how to tell her, she finally realised in the scheme of things it wasn't really such a big deal. She had wasted a chunk of time she would never get back fretting over a minor irritation. Her conclusion was that the problem was actually her own, not her colleague's!

Conversely, there is the example of a business woman who said she wasn't going to worry about the erratic behaviour and attitude of her accountant because she only had two years until retirement. That is avoidance!

Look back at your answers in the previous exercise where you identified potential issues. Are there some that probably don't need to be aired? Are they seeming bigger than they are due to your current mindset? Consider if the issue will still be significant in a day or two.

Lastly, establish a realistic objective to guide your preparation. If you can't define the purpose of the discussion and what you hope to achieve, it may not be necessary.

What is your objective?

Look back at your examples. What needs to happen as a result of the conversations? What are your desired outcomes?

1.

2.

3.

Reasons to avoid tough conversations

THERE ARE MANY REASONS why we might choose to avoid the conversation.

You think that the other person is aware of the situation

Don't talk yourself out of dealing with the issue because you assume the other party knows the impact they are having. Often they may not know or understand the full depth or implications of the problem. This is where thorough preparation will help you to fully communicate your thoughts and feelings.

You think that nothing will change

It is how you prepare and deliver the message that will determine whether or not you can make an impact and potentially make a difference. We can easily become frustrated by the issues we hold back and don't acknowledge or discuss, so there is merit in communicating in the right manner. With any feedback and discussion, it is up to the other party to decide what to do with the information, but it is always better for you, your team and your business to get issues out in the open.

Give the person you are dealing with the opportunity to voice their point of view. Don't dismiss their ability to change or their own desire to develop. Continue to state what you need in order to achieve a successful outcome.

You think that you might be wasting their time

If the conversation is with someone more senior, or someone perceived to be incredibly busy, we may talk ourselves out of it by thinking it's not the best use of the other person's time. If you are sure it is an issue, and are confident that doing nothing will be detrimental, then it will definitely not be a waste of time. You will only waste time if you haven't thought through the issue, identified the impact, and have ideas for action. There will be more on this further in the workbook.

Other (inadequate) reasons you might tell yourself to avoid the conversation might be:

- They will never listen
- I don't have the time
- It will iron itself out

Most barriers to these conversations are perceptual rather than actual. You need to identify these to properly communicate your desired outcomes.

EXERCISE

Refer back to the conversations you identified earlier. Make a note of the reasons you avoided having them and list the outcomes you wanted. This is an important step and will be referred to later in the workbook.

REASONS YOU ARE AVOIDING THE CONVERSATION	DESIRED OUTCOMES/HOPEFUL CHANGES
<p>Example</p> <p>They may get defensive about their presentation and preparation skills and blame the client.</p>	<p>Example</p> <p>Once I point out to them the importance of preparation and planning the next client meeting will be less stressful and more effective. This will eventually lead to us closing the deal.</p>

The cost of avoiding tough conversations

THE TIME AND ENERGY it takes to have the conversation will only increase the more you put it off.

Having one or two small, but difficult, conversations directs focus and ensures other people involved are aware of potential problems. The impact of growing dissent can be reduced by creating a change in approach. Bear in mind the worst case scenario could be missed deadlines, failed projects, lost clients and possible HR involvement. The company may even be held liable.

everywomanAmbassadors have identified that it is the difficult conversations they had earlier in their career that had the most impact.

Take some time to quickly write down any tough conversations you have had that made a mark on your career? What would have happened had it been avoided?

An example:

Businesses want leaders who will speak up when it is needed. Organisations can't afford to have people who sweep issues under the carpet or won't stand up for what they believe in. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book 'The Outliers', gave several examples of failures because people did not feel comfortable communicating their concerns. In one example, there is a vast lack of communication between the first officer and the pilot of an Air Florida plane in 1982. The plane had been de-iced once but it had been held for a long time before being cleared for take-off.

Here is some of the conversation, captured on the black box, in the cockpit prior to take-off:

FIRST OFFICER

See all those icicles on the back there and everything?

FIRST OFFICER

Boy, this is a losing battle here on trying to de-ice those things, it gives you a false feeling of security, that's all it does

FIRST OFFICER

Let's check those wing tops again, since we've been sitting here a while?

CAPTAIN

I think we get to go here in a minute.

That plane crashed minutes later because of problems caused by ice on the wings. The co-pilot clearly felt he needed to say something but hinted at the issue instead of being clear, concise and making a change.

This is one of the fundamental principles of preparing for a tough conversation. You need to make the penny drop for the other person. Until then, we will often think 'we told them' but we didn't tell them in a manner and with language that they could understand and do something with.

Reflect back on the tough conversations you avoided. What will happen if you don't have them? Think about you, the other party, the team and the business. What is the cost of avoiding the conversation?

THE SITUATION	THE COST OF AVOIDING THE SITUATION
<p>Example</p> <p>John doesn't prepare thoroughly for client meetings</p>	<p>Example</p> <p>I look like I don't know what I'm talking about; for the business, we don't look like a credible supplier.</p>

SECTION 2. PREPARING STRATEGIES



What makes a conversation difficult?

- Conflicting viewpoints
- Insufficient preparation
- Emotional overload
- Reacting rather than responding
- Assuming the issue is obvious to all concerned

Conflicting viewpoints

Everywhere in life we are faced with different versions of the same story. Take a news article and read it in four different papers and you will quickly see how easy it is to believe that what you read and see is the right and only perspective. We all have histories that form our world views. We believe our perspective to be the right one, so it is hard to accept that others don't see it the same way. On top of this, we often repeat our story until opinions become facts. This is a good politician's greatest asset, getting you to believe their version of the truth.

Remember...what may be logical to you may not be logical to others.

Preparing for a tough conversation

Consider what is going on in the world of the other person. What could be happening that could cause the issue in the first place? Is there undue pressure due to staff shortages? Should we recognise they are managing a difficult client? There could be a number of reasons that might give a perspective on the issue. If nothing else, it prepares you for their explanation or defence. This is not about letting them off the hook, but it is about being empathetic and shifting your view to understand the whole situation. Avoid oversimplifying the problem. If it was simple, it probably wouldn't be causing you an issue in the first place.

Make sure you consider the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). This is a term used to explain that we tend to attribute people's behaviour to their core character rather than to their situation. In work terms, we can often look at ourselves one way and colleagues another. One worker might explain lateness because the alarm didn't work, the baby was up sick all night, or trains were delayed. Those events caused lateness. However, when another colleague comes in late, instead of affording them the same perspective, it's easy to attribute their lateness to character flaws. They are lazy; they don't care about work, and they are bad time managers. We attribute their behaviours to their core character rather than external factors.

Think about the example earlier in the workbook where it was assumed someone had not prepared for a client meeting. What could be the other party's perspective? What haven't you considered that you should have? Do you judge yourself against different standards from those applied to others?

Before you move on, what might someone else who is not involved - your boss, a colleague, even your partner - say about the situation? What might their perspective add to help you understand the situation?

Reduce emotional involvement

As we mentioned above, our perception becomes our reality and our story. Think about the path you took to get to the facts. What do you subconsciously feel about the person concerned? How they treated you a few months back in a meeting? How important the client involved is to your next bonus? Reality is actually very complex and in order to understand it, we have to peel back our history, bias and baggage.

We also have to avoid inferring information and letting it become our reality. Recently, a friend said she was becoming increasingly frustrated with a fellow-worker who, during certain periods of the year, always insisted on leaving exactly on time no matter what was happening at work. She inferred the work-mate just didn't care about her work as much as she should have and wasn't willing to sacrifice the odd late night for the business. This became her mind-set and her attitude and behaviour towards her colleagues shifted negatively. She became emotive and let frustration take over. When she finally had her tough conversation with the colleague, in a rather heated moment, the colleague explained that it was because the walk from the train to her house was ten minutes down a long, dark road. Therefore, when it was winter and dark, and her partner could not meet her train, she made sure she arrived home on a busy train so there were other people walking in the same direction.

Don't assume intention. Find out the facts.

How do we consider this when preparing for our conversation?

What are the facts? Cut away the feelings and emotions and try to establish what is the actual situation. Ask yourself about the wider issues. In certain cases, it may be appropriate to involve someone else who may have greater insight. Go back to the basics - try and eliminate your emotions and focus only on the actuality. Don't assume this is easy to do but some time spent considering possibilities may identify different factors.

Start with Who, What, Where, When, How and Why? Be careful with the Why question - don't infer - stick to the facts at hand. Thinking through the situation impartially and examining what you have learned helps you connect with the other person.

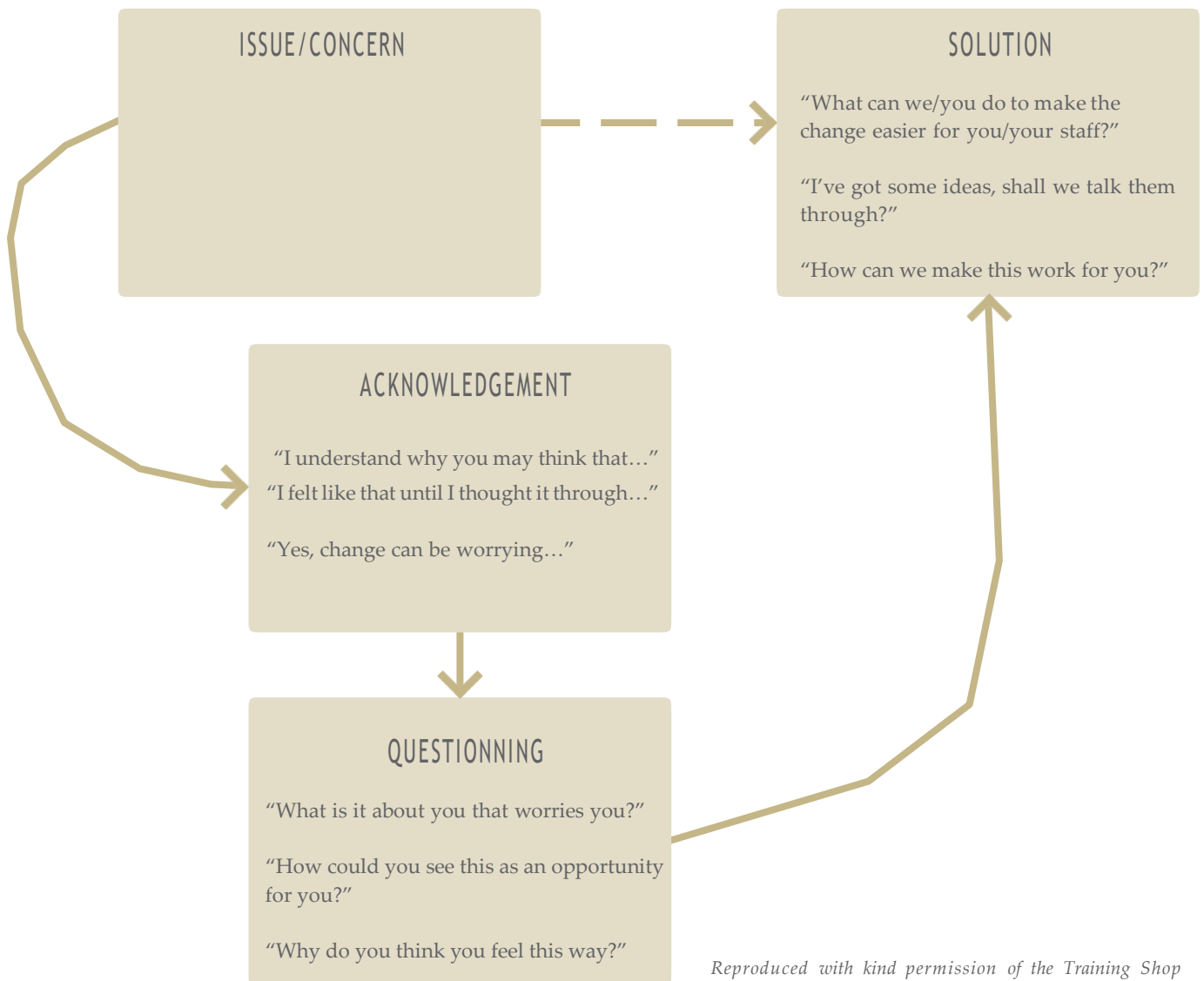
Look back at the conversations you identified at the beginning of this workbook. Fill in the blanks with facts, not opinions, or emotions or inference. This ensures you do not derail your conversation with your own version of reality.

Respond rather than react

WE WOULD NOT BE WHO WE ARE if we weren't able to use emotions to get through life. However, if we allow our emotions to dominate when things get tough or stressful, we often react inappropriately, rather than using the stimulus to think about how we can respond. Responding implies thought, reaction implies emotions. This is especially true in a business environment. With proper preparation, the tough conversation will lead to a change for the better for both individuals and the company.

How do we consider this when preparing for our conversation?

We worry about having a conversation because we fear the other party might become emotional or resentful. Resistance can happen when we neither listen to the other person nor let them voice their concerns. We tend to state the issue and prescribe the solution. Use the Handling Resistance model as a step process to finding solutions and action plans.



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Expose the issue. Then listen to the other side and make sure you acknowledge the facts and concerns they may have. Question appropriately to make sure you have their whole story and opinion and you understand it correctly. Only at this point can you move onto discussing the appropriate solution.

In almost any conversation we think and feel a lot more than we actually say. This in itself is difficult, because when the thoughts and feelings are uppermost in our minds, we tend to assume the other party must somehow 'know' or have access to those feelings and thoughts. Also, everyone has their own way of thinking, either logically or emotionally. This has a direct impact on how the whole conversation evolves, especially if participants cannot grasp the opposing perspective.

Many of you will have come across various personality profiling techniques in your careers. One that is particularly useful in looking at how you handle tough conversations is the Myers-Briggs profile known as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). As an overview, MBTI identifies 16 personality types; the two that we are concentrating on here are the difference between thinkers and feelers. Thinkers are more comfortable dealing with impersonal facts, and feelers consider personal concerns and people involved. The table below gives you some examples of the differences between thinkers and feelers.

THINKING	FEELING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use objective thinking • Firm-minded • High regards for laws • Detached from the situation • Firmness • Clarity is key • Analytical • Detached 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use subjective thinking • Tender-hearted • Looks first at the circumstances • Intune with what others think or feel about a situation • Persuasion • Harmony is vital • Appreciative of others • Involved

As Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz pointed out, you need both a brain and a heart. Don't believe that this means thinkers can't feel and feelers can't think. It just means it's your preferred way of approaching the decision.

How does this apply to your tough conversation? Not only will you have different perspectives, your thinking approach might be different. Your decision to have the conversation at all may be based on this preference.

How can you consider this when preparing for a tough conversation?

The Zigzag model (Gordon Lawrence, 2004), often adapted by many people, is frequently used for decision-making to ensure all the different angles of a problem are examined. It can be equally helpful to make sure you consider all viewpoints when preparing for your conversation. We start with our natural preference but can get stuck there or move directly to our next preference, inadvertently missing some critical perspectives on the way.

How can you use the Zigzag model?

Start by considering the facts, details, and what has happened to this point. Only then move onto the bigger picture and consider how the issues may link to other areas or problems. What are the future considerations? Think through what the consequences might be. Look at cause and effect. Examine reality, logical analysis and a rational point of view. Often we stop here if we are a Thinker. However, it is essential to also consider the emotional impacts and what is best for all the people involved, not just business priorities.

EXERCISE

Look back at the conversations you are thinking of having. Map out the background and impact using the zigzag model.



Now plan your side of the conversation, using what you have mapped out above.

Don't assume the issue is obvious to all

WE OFTEN SOOTH OURSELVES by saying “they must know, they must realise and will make the change for themselves.” We also get irritated that they don't or can't see the problem. Our attitude and mind-set will then be reflected in the conversation we have.

Have you ever found yourself saying something like “How do you think that presentation went?” You hope the person responds by pointing out that they know they weren't really prepared and therefore were not able to engage with the audience or show expertise. Instead, you hear “Great thanks!” So what happens next? You are now on the defensive and can look tactless if you express your thoughts without having been transparent enough to ask properly in the first place.

With any of your tough conversations, have you hoped the other party would recognise the issues by themselves? Have you ever been on the other side, where feedback has been hinted at but not made obvious?

Group feedback is not the best way to avoid a tough conversation with one person. Think of a team where someone is notoriously late for work. Everyone else has to pick up their phone and deal with their clients until they arrive. Everybody becomes frustrated. Then a general statement is made to the team – “Don't forget, our core hours are nine to five and everybody needs to be in the office ready to work at nine.” It seems an easy way to deal with it, but think of the rest of the team, who do ensure they are present on time. Because the team as a whole are addressed, those to whom it is directed at can completely miss the message and a change in behaviour is not forthcoming.

EXERCISE

Recall a situation where you used a group format to give what should have been individual feedback. If you haven't done that, then think about when you may have been part of a group getting constructive feedback that should have been directed to a specific person.

- a. What was the situation?
- b. What was the reason you addressed the group rather than the individual?
- c. Did you get the desired change in behaviour or outcome?
- d. What should you have done differently?

Summary

YOU SHOULD NOW BE CLEAR about the conversations you need to have, the reasons for having them, a plan to get to the preferred outcomes and the preparation tools to help you avoid common pitfalls.

Pull all the points and comments here together, so you have a clear plan and impetus to get these conversations going! There is a lot to think about when preparing for your tough conversation. Just like having the conversation, you should aim to get better one step at a time. Think about the key elements we have listed in this workbook. Next time you need to have a difficult conversation, use these tools to consider the best approach.

To help you remember the key areas to consider, remember this...the next time you have a tough conversation use your POKER face!

P= PAUSE, PONDER, PLAN - think before you speak

O= OBJECTIVE - What is your objective? What are you really trying to accomplish? What is the best way to go about this?

K= KNOW - Your audience. What is their perception of the story? Why did they act the way they did? What were they trying to achieve? How are they feeling? What are they thinking right now?

E= EMOTION - Remove it and other baggage from the equation – it's business.

R= RESPOND - Don't React. Stop, think and then respond.

It's all about you and how you handle yourself. Be honest about your intentions and the outcome you are looking to achieve. If you have done everything you can to prepare and think about the right way to approach the conversation, then you will be best placed to make it successful.

It is called a 'tough' conversation for a reason. Every time you have one, learn from it, consider what worked well and what you would do differently next time. Keep on doing the best you can.

Preparation- the right environment

Always ensure you use the right environment for conversations. You need to make sure there is real understanding with who you need to speak to. If you fail to make your ideas clear, there will be no impact or behaviour change. If you feel you have had this conversation many times before and they still just don't get it, make sure you have taken into account the other factors discussed in this section. If the other person feels you haven't listened or you don't see their side of the story, they probably won't prioritise the need to make a change.

Reflect

If you feel you have had this conversation many times before, think about what you can do differently this time, both in your preparation and in the conversation.

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This workbook has been produced and edited by everywoman, with content commissioned from associate expert Sara Parsons. And is part of the everywoman portfolio of resources that have been specially created to support and develop women as they advance their careers and businesses.

everywoman Expert



Sara Parsons is an everywoman associate and has worked in the field of Personal Development globally for 16 with clients such as; Paramount Pictures, The RSA, Ipsos MORI, RNLI, Oxford University Press. She holds an honours business degree and is a qualified expert in many professional assessments including Belbin and MBTI - the Myers-Briggs profile. Sara is passionate about inspiring and supporting women to reach into the potential they often don't know they possess.

Further reading

- *The Outliers* - Malcolm Gladwell
- *Walk a mile in my shoes* - Eric Harvey and Steve Ventura
- *Fierce Conversations* - Susan Scott

Go to everywoman.com/development for more personal development workbooks, tools and a schedule of our online seminars.

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