



Difficult conversations

Take a few minutes for this practical refresher on managing difficult conversations. It is for audit leaders and auditors alike. Everyone experiences difficult conversations and the tricks and tips to get through them are the same.

Difficult is a label that we put on things, if we choose to write opportunity instead, just think how much more rewarding and engaging those conversations could be.

Why is this important to me?

Some people are able to dodge difficult conversations their whole career. Auditors do not have that luxury. They cannot be avoided. The skills to manage them must be developed. As auditors we are often the bearers of uncomfortable truths or the generalist in a room full of subject matter experts.

Have we fully honed the skills for delivering findings, effecting change and garnering information?
Is too much time spent recovering relationships rather than celebrating the success of an audit?

We are going to take a little time to explore the power play of conversations and the role of self-talk. And also share tips to help turn those potentially stressful exchanges with stakeholders into opportunities for constructive dialogue.

Top tips

We have put together 10 top tips consolidated from a range of coaches and psychology experts worldwide thanks to the internet.

1. **Put yourself in the shoes of the other person:** why should they trust what you are saying?
2. **Auditors are naturally curious:** always approach discussions with an open mind, be prepared to adapt and be reasonable if their suggestion/alternative works.
3. **Be kind:** conflict helps no-one in the workplace. Close conversations with compassion, preserve and build relationships.
4. **Plan the exchange as much as is practical:** be confident, consider role play in a safe environment with colleagues who will be honest.
5. **Focus on the purpose:** it is a professional not personal exchange. Using the word 'I' encourages constructive change, 'I hear what you are saying, can we...'
6. **Self-awareness is key:** manage your own emotions and match your body language to your words.
7. **Take care with language:** avoid ambiguity, stick to the facts and steer clear of emotive words.
8. **Let the silence be:** do not rush to fill it and allow thinking time for your audit client. Make space for the conversation to be two-way, to debate and share.
9. **Be mindful of making false promises to break tensions:** agree to disagree but do not back down

if you are right. Suggest a break or seek mediation.

10. **Justify to yourself the necessity of the discussion:** are some audit findings trivial when directors are pushed for time. How much detail is really necessary when something is obviously wrong?

You may have others that work for you. Please share them with us.

Defining difficult

Any subject matter or information can be challenging to deliver if potentially contentious or sensitive. Conversations become difficult though when powerful emotions are uncontrolled or the stakes are high. It is too easy to say that tough topics are to be expected in our profession.

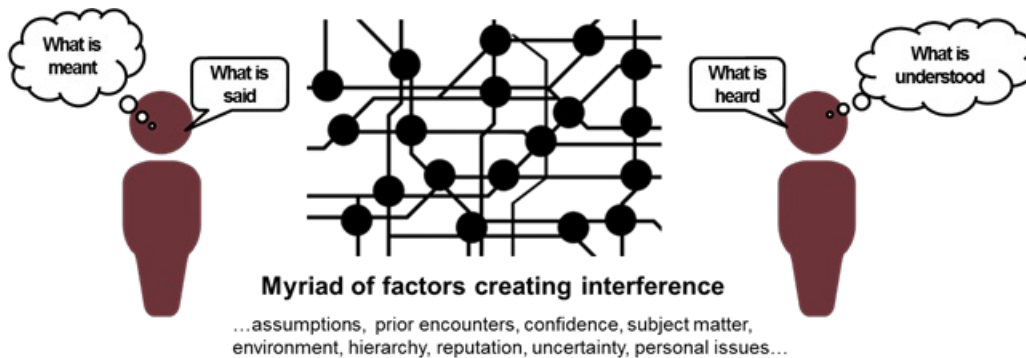
What difficult conversations can you think?

Possible examples include the discovery of fraud, redundancy, control failings and highlighting the incompetence of a trusted colleague. There can also be clashes of personality or style that make for difficult dialogue. Essentially a conversation is difficult when the person in the hot seat is feeling the heat.

As auditors the question we have to ask ourselves is; are we powerful, adept communicators?

Are there times you'd rather be anywhere than walking into an audit meeting?

- A difficult conversation begins and ends with the messenger, the sender of the information.
- The power of the dialogue is with the person delivering the message.
- We can only control our own behaviours and actions.
- We cannot control the other participants or the many hidden influences that affect our message.



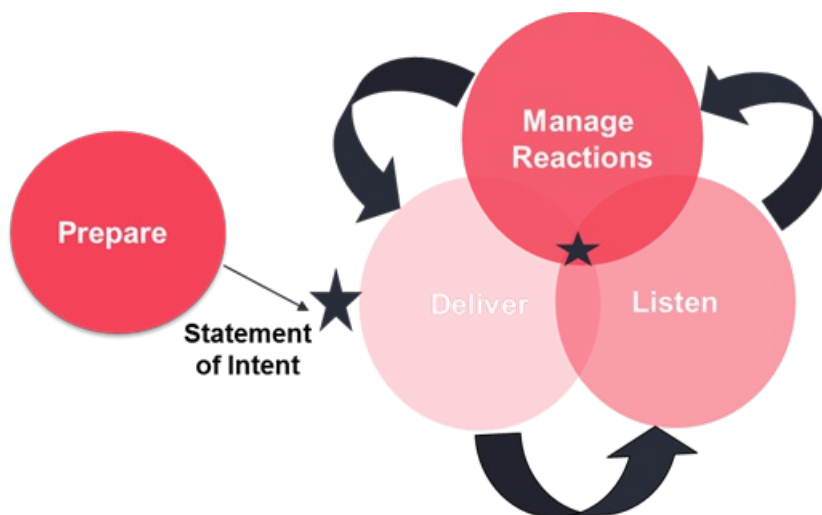
The power play of conversations

Can it really be that simple that the power sits with the auditor delivering the message?

Yes.

But that doesn't mean it's easy.

The power play works across the whole conversation. Each of the arrows in the diagram shows where power is at play.



Think about the last difficult conversation you had. Did you prepare yourself well enough? Did you feel in control? What was the power play?

Preparation

- What is your mind set going into the dialogue? Positive, ready for an argument, open...
- What do you want to achieve? What is the statement of intent?
 - For yourself, for them, for the organisation
- Do you need to challenge your thinking?
- Are you confident about the facts?
- Is the message clear?
- Do you need to reframe the message/your thoughts?
- Is the environment right for the conversation? *3 o'clock on a Friday might be free in the diary but is it really the time for a findings meeting...*

Deliver the message

- Tell the story/share the information/reveal the insight
- Animate it, bring it to life; what is the impact, what emotions does it evoke
- Avoid ambiguity

Listen to their response

- Have they actually heard your message or has it been blocked?
What is their perspective?
Actively listen, remain objective, probe to understand if there is ambiguity

Manage reactions

- Maintain control of the conversation
- Debate, rationalise, do not argue, be professional
- Redirect emotional responses

Power play summary

Throughout the entire dialogue maintain focus on the statement of intent. Keep it central to your thinking, bring the conversation back to the purpose, the value of the outcome, reframing where necessary and restating where required.

The role of self-talk

The notion of self-talk may sound like psychobabble but it is an effective strategy we can all use. Self-talk is our inner conscience, the voice that only we can hear. It can be a quiet mutter, a negative reinforcement tirade or the exuberant source of over-confidence – we all have one and they are all unique.

Take a moment to reflect on the role of your inner voice. Do you practice positive or negative self-talk? Be honest with yourself.

Self-talk is a form of neuro linguistic programming; the connection of brain (neuro), language (linguistic) and behaviours (programming). Used effectively it can improve social interactions and communication skills.

Three techniques to use self-talk in a positive way can also help improve communication skills;

- **Use of 'I am':** tell yourself, 'I am good at delivering information', 'I am confident when speaking to [insert name of terrifying person!]', 'I am in charge of this conversation'. When we say 'I am' our brains believe it. Avoid the negatives such as 'I am worried about', 'I am useless at'
- **Be careful what you say of others:** our brains do not always differentiate between negative thoughts/comments about others and what we think of ourselves. The old adage, if you haven't got anything good to say, say nothing are wise words indeed.
- **Respect yourself:** if your own self-talk is negative, then challenge it. Imagine that it is being heard aloud, would you tolerate it or defend yourself? Do the same in your head. Auditors are independent thinkers; tell your negative self-talk to take a hike!

Self-talk summary

By controlling our own self-talk we can increase our confidence. Confidence is an important part of the power play in a conversation. Auditors can often feel subordinate to the person they are delivering findings to because of hierarchy. This is negative self-talk. Auditors are the source of valuable information, it is the reason we are employed. Confident communicators are more likely to respond objectively to any negative reactions on the part of the person receiving the message.

In summary

When faced with difficult conversations, auditors might want to remember a simple, yet powerful mnemonic, **LEAPS**:

- **Listen:** understand what is being said and the responsive of your audit client
- **Empathise:** see the issue from their perspective, engage with them
- **Ask:** get to the heart of their concerns, ask the questions who, why, what, when, where, how
- **Paraphrase:** clarify their point in your own words, demonstrates empathy and takes control

- **Summarise:** briefly summarise then state solution, propose next steps, who will do what by when

LEAPS helps you maintain control of a conversation and avert potential disagreements by focusing on problem-solving and solutions. It is a positive tool to help control difficult audit conversations.

Turn all your conversations into opportunities to shine.

They are only difficult if we choose to label them that way.

Additional support

- Classroom course – **Dealing with challenging conversations**
This course gives you nine core strategies that you will learn through role play that keep you in the driving seat
1 day, 7 CPE points
- Online training course – **Introduction to negotiations**
In this course we clarify what negotiation is and provide frameworks and techniques for carrying out negotiations
2hrs, 2 CPE points
- Classroom course – **Agreeing findings and actions – a collaborative approach**
This course provides a clear structure for approaching this task and contains tips that will help to ensure success
1 day, 7 CPE points