

A Workplace Conversation Guide

Habits for handling hard conversations on the job.

Workplace conversations have their own rules. Power dynamics, professional consequences, and the simple fact that you didn't choose your coworkers all change what it means to talk through difficult issues. These habits are built to help you handle hard conversations at work — with bosses, peers, reports, and customers — in a way that protects both your professional standing and your basic decency.

What	How	What It Sounds Like
Know the Setting You're In Workplaces are not town squares. There are power dynamics, HR policies, and professional consequences that don't exist in personal conversations. Decide before you speak whether this is the right time, place, and audience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asking yourself: is this conversation appropriate for this setting?• Choosing a private channel over a public one when the stakes are high.• Being mindful of who is in the room and what authority you carry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Could we find a few minutes one-on-one to talk through this?</i>• <i>I'd rather not get into this in a group setting — can we connect later?</i>• <i>I want to raise something — is now a good time?</i>
Focus on Work, Not Worldview In a professional setting, the goal is usually a good decision or a good working relationship — not a meeting of the minds on every issue. Stay focused on what the team actually needs to accomplish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anchoring your point in the work, the project, or the customer.• Saving political or worldview debates for outside of work.• Distinguishing between a business disagreement and a personal one.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>For the purposes of this project, here's how I see it...</i>• <i>We may see the broader issue differently — for this decision, my recommendation is...</i>• <i>What does the team need from us right now?</i>
Disagree With Your Boss (or a Peer) Respectfully Disagreement is a normal part of healthy work. The professionals others want to work with are not the ones who never push back — they're the ones who push back well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raising the concern privately first, when possible.• Bringing evidence or a proposed alternative, not just a complaint.• Disagreeing on the substance without attacking the person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>I'd like to offer a different perspective on this.</i>• <i>Here's what I'd recommend, and here's the reasoning behind it.</i>• <i>I hear the direction, and I want to flag one risk before we move forward.</i>• <i>Can I share a concern? I want to make sure we've considered it.</i>

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<p>Listen Across the Table</p> <p>Some of the most important workplace conversations happen across differences — in role, seniority, background, or perspective. Real listening is the fastest way to earn the trust those conversations need.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking before assuming what someone meant. • Treating questions as questions, not as challenges. • Repeating back what you heard before responding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can you say more about what's driving that recommendation?</i> • <i>Help me understand the context I might be missing.</i> • <i>Here's what I think I heard — did I get that right?</i>
<p>Address Behavior, Not Identity</p> <p>When you need to give feedback or raise a concern, focus on specific behavior and impact — not on the person's character or background. This is both more respectful and more likely to produce change.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing the specific behavior you observed. • Naming the impact it had, on you or on the work. • Avoiding character judgments and generalizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When X happened in the meeting, the effect was...</i> • <i>I want to share something I noticed, and how it landed for me.</i> • <i>This isn't about who you are — it's about what happened on Tuesday.</i>
<p>Know When to Escalate</p> <p>Some workplace situations are beyond a single conversation — harassment, discrimination, retaliation, illegality. Decency in those cases means knowing when to involve the right people, not trying to handle it alone.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documenting what happened with dates, times, and specifics. • Consulting your HR team, manager, or employee resources. • Treating escalation as professional, not personal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I'd like to bring HR into this conversation.</i> • <i>I want to make a record of this, so I'd like to follow up in writing.</i> • <i>This is beyond what I can resolve one-on-one. Here's what I'd like to do next.</i>

These habits work best when both people are engaging in good faith. You can only control your own behavior — modeling these habits often invites others to do the same, but not always. If a conversation becomes abusive, dishonest, or unsafe, it is always OK to step away. For workplace conversations involving harassment, discrimination, or illegal conduct, these habits are not a substitute for involving HR, legal counsel, or other appropriate resources.

Learn more at www.decencyingov.org