

How to Win Over Difficult People

A Practical Guide to Difficult Conversations at Work

A difficult person changes their mind when they feel respected, understood and safe enough to open up. The quality of your arguments comes after how you make them feel. Before you start, remember one rule.

Be kind, not nice.

Nice avoids the hard conversation because it wants to be liked. Kind sets boundaries because it cares about the person and the relationship in the long run.

Start by getting clear on your objective:

What do I need this person to understand or do, and what do I want our relationship to look like afterwards?

Then hold one principle through the whole conversation, from Roger Fisher and William Ury, authors of *Getting to Yes*:

Soft on the People. Hard on the Problem.

8 TECHNIQUES TO WIN OVER DIFFICULT PEOPLE

1 SET CLEAR BOUNDARIES

When someone attacks you personally or crosses a line, letting it slide teaches them they can do it again. Retaliating turns the conversation into a fight. The optimal response is to state the limit kindly but firmly.

THEY SAY

"With respect, this is what happens when someone who's never run a P&L writes a strategy."

INSTEAD OF

"Ha, fair enough." (and the comment passes, again)

TRY

"I'm happy to debate the proposal. Comments about my experience aren't part of that discussion. Are we clear on that?"

Then treat them normally and with interest. You set a boundary on the behaviour, not the person. The FIRM method at the end of this guide shows you how to hold one.

2 SURPRISE THEM

To show them you care, change one thing they don't expect: the setting, the format, the timing or the order of the conversation. Ask yourself:

What is this person afraid of losing?

What do they expect me to do next?

Someone who has opposed you several times has their objection ready before you walk in. Do the one thing they haven't prepared for, and make it answer their concern.

THE SITUATION

Your head of IT security has blocked your last three software requests.

INSTEAD OF

A fourth business case.

TRY

"Before I choose a vendor this time, I'd like you to write the security criteria. I'll only shortlist tools that meet them."

3 USE EMOTION AND VULNERABILITY

In a study by psychologist Deborah Small and her colleagues, people who read statistics about hunger in Africa gave Save the Children \$1.14 on average. People who read about Rokia, a seven-year-old girl from Mali, gave \$2.38. People who received both gave \$1.43: the numbers cancelled out the emotion.

INSTEAD OF

Another slide of engagement scores to show your team is under too much pressure.

TRY

"Last week, one of my best people told me she was close to burnout and thinking of leaving. She's been with us eight years. My sister went through burnout, and it took her months to recover. I'm worried, and I feel responsible."

4 TAKE AN INTEREST IN THE PERSON BEHIND THE BEHAVIOUR

Fisher and Ury separate what someone asks for, their position, from the reason they ask for it, their interest. Work on the interest.

POSITION

"We can't take this on this year."

INTEREST

"My team has missed two targets already. One more failure and my job is on the line."

When you think you've found it, name it:

TRY

"It sounds like you're worried this change will land on your team, and you're already at capacity."

5 GET COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE

Researchers at MIT measured every pause of three seconds or more in recorded negotiations. Breakthroughs were more likely to come right after a silence than at any other moment.

If you fill the silence after a difficult point, you add a softer version of it and give away ground.

INSTEAD OF

"I think we should delay the launch. I mean, obviously it's your call, and we could also look at a smaller version, or maybe..."

TRY

"I think we should delay the launch by six weeks." Then wait for their answer, however long it takes.

6 USE HUMOUR AND PERSONAL STORIES

A difficult person often deals with your role, the manager pushing the project or the expert with the slides. Laughing together at something that happened to you shows them the person. Pick a moment where you looked a bit ridiculous and learned something that applies to the discussion.

TRY

"I once fell on my butt at 100 km/h in a downhill ski race because I didn't inspect the course again after a 30-minute wind delay. I spent the next week in bed, so bruised I couldn't even sit on the toilet. I learned it the hard way: when conditions change, you test again."

7 ASK QUESTIONS THAT LET THEM REACH THEIR OWN CONCLUSION

When you tell someone they're wrong, they defend their position. When your questions lead them to the flaw, the conclusion becomes theirs.

INSTEAD OF

"Your forecast is wrong. It's based on last year's numbers."

TRY

*"What would have to be true for these numbers to hold next year?"
"Our two biggest clients would have to renew at the same volume."
"How confident are we that they will?"*

8 FIND COMMON GROUND

In a Stanford and Kellogg study, email negotiators who first spent five minutes on the phone getting to know each other reached deadlock in 41% of cases, against 61% for the others. The strongest common ground is a difficulty you've both been through.

THE SITUATION

You need a colleague to put his project on hold.

TRY

"Two years ago, my project was stopped three weeks before launch, after eight months of work. I know what I'm asking of you, and I want to find a way to keep your best people on something that matters."

USE FIRM TO HOLD A BOUNDARY

My client John sat on an executive committee where discussions regularly escalated into shouting. Here is how he used FIRM.

F

FEEL THE DISCOMFORT

Notice the unease instead of running from it, then choose to act in spite of it.

I

INTERVENE EARLY

Resentment grows from a boundary you never set. Speak before the situation festers.

"I'm telling you now that I'll step out of the meeting at the next shouting match."

R

REDUCE WORDS

Say it plainly, without over-explaining or justifying.

M

MAINTAIN THE BOUNDARY

Someone will test it. What you do next is what makes it real.

As John stood to leave, a member said, "You're too sensitive." He didn't argue: "I'll be back in five minutes to see whether we can carry on."

If you'd like support with this

Difficult conversations get easier with practice. If you'd like help applying this across your organisation, I work with senior leaders through two programs:

Speak to Resonate

My six-module flagship program, one-to-one or group, rated 4.95/5 by over 192 leaders at Nestlé, Nespresso, Incyte, Tandem Diabetes Care and more.

shannonjenkins.co/speaktoresonate

The Influential Leader

A premium two-day in-person leadership training in Switzerland, for senior leaders.

shannonjenkins.co/theinfluentialleader

Or write to me directly at hello@shannonjenkins.co