



WPO SPARK KIT: Difficult Conversations

A curated facilitator kit for WPO Chairs and members

HOW TO USE THIS SPARK KIT

This kit offers you an easy way to facilitate a group discussion about **Difficult Conversations**. To get started, we recommend the following steps:

- Review the recommended reading list in the Spark Resource Summary chart below.
- Click through the links to see complete articles and videos in Spark, OR simply read the **Executive Summaries** (page 4) section for quick reference.
- Prepare to facilitate your discussion using the prompting questions & tips suggested on page 3.

TOPIC OUTLINE

Mastering the art of tricky conversations is critical for fostering growth and productivity for you and your organization.

SPARK RESOURCE SUMMARY

The chart below contains a carefully curated selection of Spark content to assist you in learning more about the topic and leading your discussion. You are encouraged to read the complete articles. However, for your convenience, we've also provided **Executive Summaries and Key Points starting on page 4** to simplify your preparation.

SPARK RESOURCE TITLE	TIME COMMITMENT
1. <u>To Guide Difficult Conversations, Try Using Compassion</u>	Article – 4 min read
2. <u>7 Tips for Difficult Conversations</u>	Article – 4 min read
3. <u>How to Make Difficult Conversations Worse, as Seen on "Succession"</u>	Article – 4 min read
4. <u>Assessment: How Well Do You Communicate During Conflict?</u>	Self Assessment – 5 min
5. <u>The Guide to Deliberate Listening</u>	Video – 3 min watch



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PREPARATION FOR SPARK DISCUSSION

WPO Chairs: Share this entire document with your members ahead of your meeting and encourage them to review content.

WPO Members: The articles and videos may help you think about difficult conversations you have had in the past and help you prepare for ones in the future.

SCOPE FOR: Difficult Conversations

Sometimes referred to as courageous conversations, tough communications usually involve conflict, big emotions and important outcomes for the parties involved. Successfully navigating these hard conversations requires preparation, compassion, critical thinking and deliberate listening skills.

This Spark kit creates an opportunity for members to share experiences and best practices related to challenging communications. Your aim as facilitator is to draw out the wisdom in the room to highlight strategies and techniques for clear and impactful communications in sensitive scenarios.

POTENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Preparation and scripting - practice, practice, practice.
- Importance of active listening and asking compassionate questions.
- How to temper your own and other's emotions.
- How to focus on solutions and positive outcomes for each party.
- **Try this self-assessment to see how you rate against other Harvard Business readers - [How Well do you Communicate During Conflict?](#)**

SPARK DISCUSSION: 30 – 90 MINUTES

Feel free to use the suggested activity below, or simply host a discussion with your members about how they manage difficult conversations. Depending on how many are at the meeting, and how long you allocate per person, you should be able to complete the activity in about 60 minutes.

You can also kick-off the discussion simply by asking for any key learnings from the Spark materials. Always encourage participants to share specific examples vs theoretical responses. We tend to learn best from our peers when we hear stories of real-life experiences.



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SUGGESTED ACTIVITY – PAIRS EXPERIENCE SHARE (45 - 60 MIN)

1. **Set the Stage:** Give members 3-5 minutes to think of a difficult conversation that either went well, or not. **Ask them to make note of the following:**
 - a. Very briefly state the context of the situation – focus on the headline vs story.*
 - b. How did you prepare (or not) for the conversation?
 - c. What behaviours are you most proud of related to the conversation?
 - d. What would you change related to conducting future conversation of this nature?

***TIP:** Encourage participants to focus on what they learned from this experience VS getting caught up in sharing details of the situation. The goal is to develop awareness of **best practices that can be applied in future**, vs the specific outcomes of the scenarios shared.

2. **Experience Share:** Organize participants into pairs to work together for about 18 – 20 minutes.
 - a. **Share:** Allocate about 7 minutes per person to share their experience with a difficult conversation. Encourage them to focus on the 3 points above, with an emphasis on questions C & D. The listener can ask clarifying questions as needed.
 - b. **Learning:** Once each person in the pair has shared (about 7 min each) take a total of 3 -5 min to have them summarize one or two key learnings from the experiences.

Summarize Learning: Allow about 10 – 15 minutes at the end to hear the highlights from each pair. Ideally use a flipchart or whiteboard to capture input so that you can add checkmarks to avoid repetition of lessons learned.

Feel free to use the note taking table on the final page of this kit, or some other tool to capture action items as needed.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY POINTS FOR SPARK RESOURCES

(NOTED IN CHART ON PAGE 1)

TO GUIDE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS, TRY USING COMPASSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Navigating difficult conversations in the workplace can be challenging, but incorporating compassion can help facilitate understanding and resolution. This article explores how to use compassion as a tool to guide difficult conversations effectively.

KEY POINTS:

1. **Acknowledge Emotions:** Recognize and acknowledge the emotions involved in the conversation. Empathy and understanding can help de-escalate tensions and foster a more constructive dialogue.
2. **Listen Actively:** Practice active listening by giving the other person your full attention and suspending judgment. Allow them to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption, demonstrating that their perspective is valued.
3. **Show Empathy:** Demonstrate empathy by validating the other person's feelings and experiences, even if you disagree with their viewpoint. Acknowledge their concerns and express a genuine desire to understand their perspective.
4. **Communicate Respectfully:** Maintain a respectful tone throughout the conversation, avoiding blame or defensiveness. Use "I" statements to express your own feelings and avoid assigning blame to the other party.
5. **Focus on Solutions:** Shift the focus of the conversation towards finding solutions and resolving the issue at hand. Collaborate with the other person to explore potential solutions and agree on a course of action moving forward.
6. **Follow Up:** After the conversation, follow up with the other person to ensure that any agreements or actions discussed during the conversation are implemented. Reiterate your commitment to working together towards a positive outcome.



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7 Tips for Difficult Conversations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article addresses the challenges leaders face when engaging in difficult conversations, such as delivering bad news or discussing sensitive topics. It highlights strategies from the book "Difficult Conversations" by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, offering practical tips for navigating these conversations effectively.

KEY POINTS

1. **Realistic Goals:** While it's impossible to eliminate the stress of difficult conversations entirely, preparation can help reduce it. Focus on developing a specific script to guide the conversation.
2. **Clear Communication:** Deliver tough messages upfront and clearly to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. State the purpose of the conversation in the first sentence.
3. **Adopt the "And Stance":** Take control of the conversation by preempting distractions, objections, and blame. Acknowledge multiple perspectives using "and" to foster understanding and empathy.
4. **Avoid Blame:** Focus on managing better outcomes in the future rather than assigning blame for past mistakes. Recognize that each person involved may have a different interpretation of events.
5. **Active Listening:** Paraphrase what the other person is saying to demonstrate understanding and promote clarity. Encourage them to do the same to ensure mutual comprehension.
6. **Anticipate Reactions:** Be prepared for various emotional responses, such as finger-pointing, denial, or arguments. While you can't control the other person's reactions, you can emotionally prepare yourself to handle them.
7. **Perspective Shift:** Put the difficult conversation in perspective by imagining how it will seem in the future, whether it's three months or ten years down the line. This can help alleviate immediate stress and anxiety.



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How to Make Difficult Conversations Worse, as Seen on "Succession"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even if you don't watch Succession (I don't, but apparently there are is an abundance of intense and confrontational dialogue), this article is a good exploration of how to avoid exacerbating tensions and worsen outcomes.

KEY POINTS

1. **Lack of Preparation:** Failure to adequately prepare for a difficult conversation can lead to unclear objectives, ineffective communication, and heightened emotions. Leaders should invest time in planning and strategizing before engaging in these discussions.
2. **Poor Timing:** Choosing the wrong time or context to initiate a difficult conversation can escalate tensions and hinder productive dialogue. It's essential to consider the recipient's state of mind and external factors that may impact their receptiveness to the conversation.
3. **Emotional Reactivity:** Allowing emotions to drive the conversation can cloud judgment, derail communication, and escalate conflict. Leaders should strive to remain calm, composed, and empathetic, even in challenging situations.
4. **Deflecting Responsibility:** Avoiding accountability or shifting blame onto others can erode trust and credibility, undermining the effectiveness of the conversation. Leaders should take ownership of their actions and focus on finding solutions rather than assigning fault.
5. **Failure to Establish Boundaries:** Neglecting to set clear boundaries or expectations for the conversation can result in confusion, miscommunication, and unresolved issues. Establishing ground rules and maintaining a respectful tone can help ensure a productive exchange of ideas.



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CAPTURING COMMITMENTS & KEY LEARNINGS

Who	Commitment / Action	Insights / Learning
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How to Access and Use Spark

Q: How do I log in to access HMM Spark?

A: The HMM Spark login page can be accessed online [HERE](#). You can also access it from the WPO Homepage: www.women-presidents.com > Login (top right) > Login under Spark.

Q: What is my username and password?

A: Your username will be the email you have on file with the WPO. You will be prompted to create your own password prior to logging in for the first time.

- a. Please select the “Forgot Password” link under the HMM Spark portal login.
- b. Enter your email, and the system will prompt you to create a password.
- c. Once you have created a password, you may log in using your email address and newly created password.

Q: I am being prompted with "What skills would you like to develop?" Are my skill selections permanent?

A: After the initial account setup, you **must** select at least one skill in order to receive personalized learning pathways and full access to the HMM Spark portal. Please note that the skill selections can be updated at any time by going to **Your Profile > Skills**.

Q: I forgot my password. What are the steps to reset my password?

A: To reset your password, please select the “Forgot Password” link under the HMM Spark portal login.

Q: Am I able to adjust the frequency at which I receive emails from HMM Spark?

A: Yes! Each member is automatically set up to receive a daily digest email with information that is relevant to their interests (based on their initial selections). Members can adjust the frequency of the digest emails at any time by going to **Profile Settings > Communications**.

If you are still having issues, be sure to reach out to Tomi Jane.