

# SPEAKING TRUTH & RESPECTFUL CONTRARY: A GUIDE FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

This approach can be used peer-to-peer, employee-to-power or power-to-employee.

Here is a quick example from a broader case study:

## 1. Start by stating the purpose and intent

a. Performance at a leadership level involves a balance of contributions (technical expertise) and behaviors (mastery of behavior). When one factor gets seriously out of balance, we have a responsibility to bring each other back into alignment.

b. If “Joe” is resistant to this format, tell him that this is a difficult conversation for you and that these guidelines will make it easier to discuss the content of issues. It will be awkward and it will be important.

ii. This approach also forces you to deconstruct the issues and deal with them one at a time.

c. In “Joe’s case,” I would recommend breaking down the issues this way:

i. His cynicism and use of snarky humor undermines your approach to employee-driven solutions. If he has better ways of solving problems he needs to speak up in an inclusive manner not complain behind the scenes.

ii. His relationship with Sales also undermines your authority in that people do not feel everyone is being held to the same standards.

## 2. One person speaks at a time

This ensures that both people will get heard.

## 3. State your “emotion” before describing the issues.

a. This may seem like an odd direction but there is clear research that shows acknowledging the emotional context early actually reduces the tension in the room, allowing you to focus on the issues.

b. Example: “I am (mad, disappointed, sad, apprehensive) because, while we have had a long, positive relationship, I fear your behavior is undermining the goals of the organization. That may not be your intention, so I want to address this before we end today.”

i. Stating the emotion and having him repeat the emotion back to you will prevent both sides from having to “demonstrate” the emotion through tone or body language.

## 5. Before adding anything repeat what the other person says (to their satisfaction)

a. This allows each person to realize that they were correctly heard; clarifying points if they were not understood the first time.

b. It slows down the dialogue, which reduces tension and contributes to increased understanding. When heard, a speaker can relax and listen to others with less stress

## 6. Speak in turn.

a. This reduces competition for airtime, allows quiet or scared people a chance to share and lets talkative members hear fresh wisdom.



b. Repeating what the other person says reduces the chances one of you will “pass.”

## 7. After you have outlined your concerns, ask him to INTERPRET what you’ve said.

You do not have to repeat it back but you could summarize his interpretation to make sure you understand.

## 8. Now ask Joe, based on your assessment, does he have any specific responses.

a. Ask him to start by stating his reaction first, such as “I’m shocked” or “I’m mad” or “I feel betrayed because ...” or “You’ve gotta know I’m a loyal guy, John.”

b. Remember that by getting him to start with his reaction he shouldn’t have to spend a lot of energy ‘Proving’ it to you.

c. Your main role at this point is to keep him “on point” and away from bringing in non-relevant issues.

## 9. Next steps

a. If both individuals feel they’ve been heard correctly, the person who called the meeting should propose a solution.

b. Allow Joe to either propose an alternative plan or propose alterations to your plan.

c. It is appropriate to leave “the process” to negotiate a solution.

d. Assign specific responsibilities, milestones and set a concrete time to revisit the issues.

## 10. Be prepared to fail

Because we are all human, it is wise to agree on what response is appropriate if this issue surfaces again.

**End with a handshake**

## Tips for Complicated Conversations

### Speak with respect and sincerity

- Use language that honors differences and promotes peace.
- Be impeccable with your word
- Avoid speaking against yourself or gossiping about others.

### Take no offense at another’s views

- This allows everyone to speak without concern that others will take their words personally.
- Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of the story they are telling themselves.

### Give your views by citing specific examples

## The Neuroscience of Emotions

Mad, Sad, Glad and Scared are the “primary colors” of emotions. Other feelings are mixtures or shades of these emotions. These Four Feelings drive human behavior, adding energy and motion to thought. They can be effective for identifying the real cause of problems. Remembering that all emotions stem from these four helps you navigate difficult conversations.

### Emotions are NOT problems, so don't try to solve them.

Instead, emotions need to be processed. You'll be amazed by how people respond if you simply acknowledge how they feel and repeat it back to them. This tool, **Repeat Back**, is designed to calm the Reactive brain and show respect to how individuals may feel about an issue without making them talk in detail and at length about it, which most of us are hesitant to do.

### Simple language

People tend to use words such as “frustrated” or “concerned” to make basic emotions sound more nuanced and/or complicated. This tends to take people off point. We use simple language – mad, nervous, glad, disappointed – because it helps us take one issue at a time. In addition, do not blame others or our circumstances, but rather keep ownership where it belongs. For example, say, “I get mad when ...” not “you make me mad when ...”