

The Handel Method®

How to Have a Hard Conversation

A Hard Conversation is one in which the topics to be discussed make you (or, potentially, the other party) uncomfortable. It's a discussion that you would rather NOT have.

Hard Conversations require thoughtful planning, a sense of personal accountability and ample time to complete the conversation. No two are the same. Topics include: conflict resolution, performance review, management, upward reporting dynamics, joint decision-making, etc. Any of these topics, the relevant history, and the personalities involved determine the preparation needed. At the end of an effective Hard Conversation, all parties feel heard, respected, and are unified into a balanced, if not directly shared, point of view.

Below are the elements to include to ensure an effective hard conversation.

1) Write The Script

Literally write down your script for the entire conversation as you want it to occur. Don't be stingy; write the whole thing. Mapping out the conversation clarifies your thoughts, holds you accountable, diffuses negative emotion, and increases your strength and grace in the conversation. It enables you to use your power as an author to set up the conversation to be the way you want. *"It went so much better than I thought it would after I wrote it all down and got prepared."*

2) Ask Permission/Get Consent/Set up the time

Hard conversations should be planned in advance. Make sure in advance your counterpart understands this is a hard conversation and is ready, willing, and able to engage. Example: *"I need to discuss some things with you that are uncomfortable but I know we'll both be glad we talked about it. Is that okay with you?"*

Also, it's beneficial to begin all new relationships by establishing permission to have honest conversations that may be hard but make relationships highly productive. This is especially true with your boss or CEO, but you can tell your direct reports that you expect them to come to you for hard conversations as well.

3) Set the Context/the Vision for a Better Future

First, ask yourself the question "What's the purpose of this conversation?" Explaining your purpose to your counterpart will allow them to feel much more receptive and inspired toward resolution than if he/she feels you are leading with problems and/or complaints. When you discuss and align on an intention, both people are now in the same dialogue. *"The reason I want to talk about this is I'm committed to growing this company side by side in partnership with you to 500 million. . ."*



4) Why it is a Hard Conversation for You

Sort through your inner dialogue and list all the reasons why you don't want to have this conversation. Expressing the key reasons builds rapport and shifts the recipient's natural defensiveness towards a spirit of connection and partnership with you. By bringing your thoughts out into the open for discussion, it enables you to deal with them consciously together. *For example, "I'm nervous to offer my thoughts because I don't want to appear to be stepping on your area of expertise."*

5) Own your part

Maybe it's YOU. Ask yourself "What's my accountability in this dynamic? What did I do to cause this?" We always play a part in the dynamics in which we find ourselves. The Hard Conversation process is not a matter of blame, but if you consider how you are responsible for the situation you are in a more powerful position to improve it. Part of the reason you are having a hard conversation is because you had an emotional reaction to something. The way you are feeling is what is making it difficult. Being responsible for yourself and for your own reaction makes a real conversation possible because you are talking about your reaction and its impact on the situation. Example: *"When I heard you make that comment, it hurt my feelings and I blamed you. I have been avoiding you ever since."*

6) State the Issue/Problem/Challenge to Resolve

Make sure your script includes your key talking points. There should not be too many of them; just the critical factors that you need to investigate and address. Stay on topic so the conversation remains clear. Acknowledge that your perception is just through your own eyes, and is not necessarily THE TRUTH. Assume their version of the story is DIFFERENT from yours. By not assuming your perspective is the only perspective, you will engage with more openness. Admit that you don't know what it's like to see things from their perspective, but it's time to be curious and find out. *"I've been a chicken about telling you that I wasn't aligned with the project plan, thinking you would not be willing to listen to me, and I let our teams spin their wheels for weeks without coming directly to you to resolve my misalignment."* Bring curiosity to the interaction versus trying to prove yourself right and the other party wrong.

7) Ask his/her perspective

Listen quietly, without interrupting or disagreeing, until the other party is finished speaking. You may repeat in your own words his/her perspective to demonstrate and verify understanding for him/her accurately. You may then offer your alternate account, still maintaining the spirit of curiosity. Even if you don't agree with his/her interpretation, you can acknowledge the negative impact that his/her interpretation may have had on your relationship or their trust in you.

8) Resolve your Differences (Align)

In resolving the topic of the Hard Conversation, your purpose is to find common ground with the other party. They might adopt your point of view, you might adopt their point of view, or you might collectively negotiate a new point of view in between. Address whether apologies are needed, either by you, by the other party, and/or by everyone involved. Example, *“Oh, I never saw it that way before; of course, I see your point!”*

9) Make a plan (agreements/promises & consequences)

Outline the new rules of engagement and new expectations going forward, including steps to take when things get derailed in the future. In this step, once rapport is built, you can establish promises and consequences. Ensure that everyone will be getting what they need that wasn't in place before. Always design the new Plan B, covering what you're going to do if things start to become problematic again. Example: *Promise: “We will do X, then Y, then Z. And, if you or I hear something that concerns either of us, we have 24 hours to come directly to each other vs. going to anyone else. Consequence: If I break our agreement I have to take the bus instead of a cab to work the next day.”*

Final important note:

Once you finish writing the script, if you don't believe your counterpart is capable of change, or you believe the conversation will fail, DO NOT have the conversation. Stop, and speak with your coach. You can't create the best possible outcome if you enter the dialogue already certain that the other person is stubborn, closed, or wrong. This is not an invitation to avoid hard conversations, just a reminder to come to them fully prepared to succeed.

Find more free tips and tools for you and your organization at the HG Corporate blog at: hgcorp.coach

Interested in executive coaching or a workshop for your team or company? We have tailored solutions for you and your group. Get the (not difficult!) conversation started with an email to beth@handelgroup.com.