



DIFFICULT DISCUSSIONS  
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*"Do one thing every day that scares you." - Eleanor Roosevelt*

Have you ever found yourself dreading a conversation? Perhaps you have had to deliver bad news to someone and anticipated it landing badly. Perhaps you were concerned about how the person would react to what you have to say – and worried that you would be yelled at or, worse, that the person would end their relationship with you. You may have found yourself second guessing if you needed to have the discussion at all or otherwise taken steps to postpone it.

It is not uncommon for people facing such situations to feel awkward; to hesitate, stress and endure an array of negative emotions which can contribute to a loss of sleep and anxiety. Many times, opportunities to have the dreaded conversation are missed as it is easier to ignore the circumstance. Unfortunately, it is also often the case that avoiding the conversation does not make the conflict go away - sometimes, it only makes it worse.

Parties participating in mediation are challenged to have the conversation. To make the most out of the mediation opportunity, one must be open to sharing one's own perspective and appreciating the perspective of others. Both the act of speaking about and listening to the subject matter may be uncomfortable; however, having the conversation now can go a long way in avoiding an escalated dispute.

The following are some suggestions to help with having difficult conversations, in the course of a mediation session or otherwise:

1. **Consider what makes the situation difficult.** Often, it is not the subject matter itself that invokes a strong reaction; rather, emotions are usually ignited when an underlying value is compromised or challenged. Consider how your message will be heard by the other side – what they may feel you are saying about them and how that may affect them.

If, for example, honesty may be a value that the person holds dearly and you need to address an incident that may question the integrity of his/her actions, consider ways of doing so that can isolate the incident or which otherwise acknowledge the other party's underlying value; confirming that you are not challenging them with respect to it. By contrast, name calling or "calling out" the person can ensure that their value is violated, serving to escalate the situation. Causing someone to become defensive does little to encourage conciliatory resolution, which is often the goal in having difficult discussions.

2. **Plan what you are going to say.** Many times, the selection of the words you use can impact perceptions and reactions. Advanced consideration of how you want to say what you would like to say can help ensure your message is appropriately delivered. If you are not communicating in person, take time to safeguard against your words or intentions being misinterpreted, both now and in the future. If you are communicating in person, keep in mind that verbal cues (such as tone) and non-verbal cues (i.e. body language, eye contact) will factor into how your information is received.

There are several ways in which you can approach the subject. Particularly when a situation poses a real challenge, taking the time to practice, write down what you plan to say and/or brainstorm different approaches can help you prepare.

3. **Focus on what is important.** While it may not be appropriate to disregard the past, what has happened cannot be changed. Many people get wrapped up in trying to ensure that their recollection of events is recorded as the “truth” and that they are “right”, though it is remarkable how seldom people can agree on exactly what took place. As a mediator, one of the biggest challenges I face to keeping parties on track in examining settlement options surrounds the role of past exchanges. It is often important for parties to “get off their chest” emotions stemming from prior events, yet it is also easy for parties to become focused on clarifying what they perceive to be the other’s erroneous recollections. Progress can be made by saying what you need to say, agreeing to disagree about particulars which are no longer significant and concentrating upon moving forward.

In the course of the difficult conversation, do not discount any comments on past events which you feel are important to make; however, do not get stuck in the past. Stay focused on the important aspects of the information you would like to share and use past experiences as leverage for a better outcome. Keep in mind the purpose of having the discussion and what you would like to accomplish.

4. **Know yourself.** There is only so much you can do to anticipate how the other person is going to react; however, how you react is entirely within your control. Just as you analyze the values of the other, do the same for yourself.

Why is this conversation uncomfortable for you? How might the other person respond and, with the benefit of time and reflection, how would you like to react? Knowing your buttons, how they can be pushed and how you will carry yourself in such a circumstance may not prevent the conflict from escalating – though such insight can help you stay in control of the situation and ensure that it unfolds in a desirable way, even in a worst case scenario.

5. **Face the music.** As conflict rarely imposes a deadline for resolution until it escalates into a larger dispute, it is often tempting to put off dealing with the issue. However, running away from your conflicts or ignoring them altogether does little to resolve them. Sometimes you simply need to deal with a situation.

People often make situations worse by failing to address them early on. If you do not communicate your feelings or brush aside a concern, the issue can grow into something much larger. It may not be easy or pleasant, yet neither is the uncertainty or discomfort that comes from anticipation, letting your imagination consider what could take place or bottling up an issue until the relationship is unsalvageable.

Many times, difficult discussions go far better than you expect and conflicts are more easily resolved in the early stages. Just as you should not ignore the problem, do not ignore your concerns about addressing it. Rather, take the time to ensure that you approach the situation appropriately.

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In the course of earning his Executive Certificate in Conflict Management from the University of Windsor's Faculty of Law, Marc Bhalla participated in the Stitt Feld Handy Group's *Dealing With Difficult People* workshop – this is the workshop that you may have heard Marc speak about on the radio this summer during Toronto Blue Jays broadcasts.

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**Marc Bhalla, Hons. B.A., Q. Med.** Marc has serviced the condominium industry since 2002 and has been engaged in Alternative Dispute Resolution since 2005. He holds the Qualified Mediator (Q. Med.) designation of the ADR Institute of Canada.

Marc actively manages condominium conflict and advocates for mediation in the early stages of condominium disputes. He earned an Honours Bachelor of Arts at the University of Toronto (Trinity College), holds an Executive Certificate in Conflict Management from the University of Windsor Faculty of Law and is a member of the ADR Institute of Ontario, the ADR Institute of Canada, the Toronto & Area Chapter of the Canadian Condominium Institute, the Association of Condominium Managers of Ontario and the Institute of Law Clerks of Ontario.

Marc brings unique insight in mediating condominium conflict through the knowledge and experience he has gained as a condominium director, resident and law clerk. His mediation practice is focused exclusively on condominium disputes.

Marc Bhalla carries professional liability insurance and is a regular contributor of articles to **CONDOCENTRIC.ca**



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