

# Tips for steering a difficult conversation - TalkWise worksheet



Ideally, we can anticipate and prepare for a difficult conversation (see our Preparing for difficult conversations worksheet for support with that), but sometimes, we find ourselves in a difficult conversation we were not expecting.

What do we do when this happens? Three TalkWise strategies are particularly useful in these situations.

**Familiarise yourself with the three strategies, and the key questions to ask yourself when you next find yourself in a difficult conversation you are not prepared for.**

**Noticing** is essentially about attending to the conversation as a whole, not just your own spoken contributions. Noticing involves being mindful of all the available clues and signals - both external and internal - about 'how this is going' - whether it is working or not. Listen to your gut and your instinct for this initial 'going well or going badly' feeling, then act on your noticing! Intervene to make it go better, by moving to a different voice which better serves the conversation.

**Signposting** is a very valuable facilitational skill. We are typically too quick to assume that others understand our intention when we speak. Starting with a short but explicit statement of intent - a signpost - safeguards against any misunderstanding of where we are coming from when we are speaking. By letting others know where you're coming from and which voice you are using, you help to align your impact with your intention. This could sound like:

- 'Let's just weigh up what we've heard'
- 'Let me tell you where I stand on this.'
- 'Can we just pause for a moment...'

**Framing and reframing** help to maintain a shared focus of attention. Too many interactions become shapeless or sprawling, either because they were poorly framed from the start or/and because of the natural tendency for difference to pull them apart. This is a particular risk during difficult conversations where tensions may be high and opinions may differ.

- Start with an explicit framing, e.g. 'What we're here to do is...'
- When the process gets stuck, reframe, e.g. 'We've been looking back at what happened and why; let's turn our attention to possible courses of action.'

**In summary, during a difficult conversation, ask yourself:**

- What do I notice is happening?
- How can I signpost my intention?
- How can I reframe to get us back on track?