

THE TACKLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS POCKETBOOK

By Peter English

Drawings by Phil Hailstone

“This book tells you everything you need to know to handle difficult conversations. It doesn't flinch from giving tough advice. I recommend it wholeheartedly, and will use it as a resource for my coaching clients.”

**David Megginson, Professor Emeritus,
Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University**

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CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

WHY ATMOSPHERE IS IMPORTANT



The outcome of some difficult conversations is decided in the first few moments of the interaction. If you get these right, you have a greater chance of a successful encounter. This chapter takes you through the different aspects you need to consider when creating the right atmosphere, namely:

- Acknowledging, and adapting, your habitual approach to conflict
- Thinking through your opening lines
- Taking into account some practical considerations
- The golden rule of influencing



CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT



Taking some time to create the right atmosphere at the start of the conversation can make a big difference as to whether it goes well or turns into an unpleasant argument. The first thing to think about is whether you are naturally a competitor or an accommodator.

Most people have an habitual way of approaching difficult conversations – I call this our **default setting**. Our default setting is a combination of:

- How much we want to win the conversation, and get a result that we are happy with. This is our **competing** inclination
- The extent to which we want the other person to feel good during and after the conversation – how concerned we are that they get their needs met. This is our **accommodating** inclination

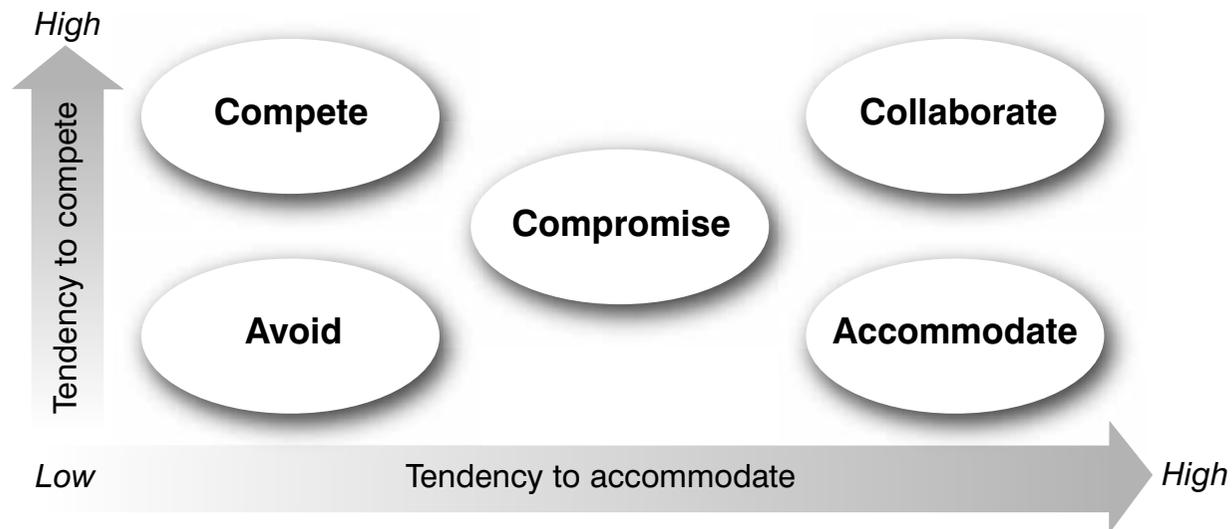
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HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

FIVE APPROACHES TO HANDLING CONFLICT

In 1974 Kenneth W Thomas and Ralph H Kilmann created a model which combines our tendency to compete and our tendency to accommodate, giving five approaches to handling conflict.



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HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE STYLES



Each of us has a preference for one or two of the five styles.

- Competers** > Natural inclination in a difficult conversation is to win. Less concerned about the other person's feelings.
- Accommodators** > Want to maintain the relationship on good terms. They don't mind if they don't get their needs met so long as the other person is happy.
- Compromisers** > Prefer to 'do a deal' that both can live with rather than spend ages thrashing out an agreement that fully meets their needs.
- Avoiders** > Strong preference to avoid the difficult conversation. The issue doesn't get resolved: they aren't happy and neither is the other person.
- Collaborators** > Want a result that meets their needs and those of the other person. Prepared to invest the time and energy in fully resolving the issue.

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HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

WHICH STYLE TO USE?

Style	When to use
Compete	When you want to get your needs met, and you are not concerned about maintaining a relationship, for example, when asking for a refund in a shop.
Accommodate	In situations where the relationship takes priority, with your immediate needs taking second place.
Compromise	When time is short and you need to agree a practical resolution that you can both live with.
Avoid	This means you don't have the difficult conversation at all! It can be appropriate in situations where things are likely to change anyway (eg, if one of you will be leaving the organisation shortly).
Collaborate	When you will be having an ongoing relationship with the other person and you both need to feel that your needs are being met.

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HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

HOW TO BEGIN THE CONVERSATION

Once you have decided which style you want to use, you can create the appropriate atmosphere at the start of the conversation.

Style	Examples of what to say
Compete	<i>'I'm really unhappy about this faulty product and I want a refund.'</i>
Accommodate	<i>'I know that you are concerned about this situation and I want us to find a resolution that you are happy with.'</i>
Compromise	<i>'I'd like us to sort this out and strike a deal that we can both live with.'</i>
Avoid	<i>'Either you don't have the conversation, or you say, 'I think it would be better if we didn't discuss this' when the other person raises the issue.'</i>
Collaborate	<i>'I'm really keen that we take the time to resolve this issue fully and that we both walk away happy with the outcome.'</i>

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YOUR OPENING LINES



When deciding how to start the conversation you need to think about whether you want to downplay or emphasise the importance of what you are going to talk about. You might want to **downplay the importance** if you are concerned that the person might have an overly strong emotional reaction to what you are about to say. If this is the case, you might say something like:

'I want to have a chat with you about something that is bothering me a little. It's not a big deal, but I do want to talk about it.'

You may want to **emphasise the importance** if you suspect that the other person may not realise the significance of what you want to talk about, or that they might try to be dismissive. You could say:

'I want to talk to you about something that I am concerned about. I think that we both might find this a difficult conversation, and I want us both to be as constructive as possible during it.'

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PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS



The venue

Generally, somewhere that you won't be overheard is best, and if you are working in a glass-walled office you might want to draw the blinds. If you are in a work setting, think about whether you need to book a meeting room so that you are both on neutral territory.

Giving the other person notice

Sometimes it is helpful to give the other person some notice that you want to talk to them: *'I'd like to talk to you about x, could we fix a time tomorrow?'* This gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. If you don't give the other person notice, ask them, *'Is this a convenient time?'* when you approach them. If they say that it isn't, then arrange a time that is convenient for both of you.

Timing

Don't try and have the conversation when either party is feeling particularly stressed.

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THE GOLDEN RULE OF INFLUENCING



When you are trying to get a positive outcome from a difficult conversation, it's worth remembering that the golden rule of influencing is:

CREATE RAPPORT BEFORE YOU TRY TO PERSUADE



This means taking some time at the start of the conversation to create an atmosphere whereby, even though you and the other person might have different views, you are approaching the issue as a shared problem to be solved rather than a fight that you each want to win.

There are two powerful techniques for creating rapport:

1. **The emotional bank account** (described in the previous chapter).
2. **Mirroring.**

About the Author

Peter English

Peter English has over sixteen years experience of helping thousands of managers and professionals to develop their interpersonal effectiveness. He has a particular interest in helping people at all organisational levels become more assertive and confident in tackling difficult conversations.

Contact

Peter can be contacted by email at pete@peterenglish.co.uk

