

# Powerful Phrases for Difficult Discussions

For best results, be sure you have the right words in your skill kit.

By Liz Uram

**D**o you ever come up with your best responses an hour after a conversation has ended? Do you ever say to yourself, “I wish I would have said . . .” or “I wish I hadn’t said . . .”?

It helps to have a handful of compelling phrases at hand. Here are the five most effective ones to keep nearby and ready to use:

**1. “That sounds really hard.”** Whether it’s the co-worker who vents non-stop or employees who complain about how overworked they are, remember this: They don’t want your advice. They aren’t complaining because they want solutions. They just want you to listen. They’re looking for empathy, not advice.

It can be difficult to listen to problems without giving solutions, especially when you know exactly what they should do. But trying to convince them that you have the answer will only lead to frustration and a potential argument.

Resist the temptation to tell them what to do and instead try saying, “That sounds really hard.” You’ll find that a phrase like this will validate people’s feelings and help them move on.

**2. “What are you going to do about it?”** After you’ve expressed empathy, follow up with a question such as “What are you going to do about it?” Most people know what they should do and by nature they’ll put more energy into their own ideas than yours. Avoid any statement that starts with “You should” or “You have to.” Instead ask them what they think.

This question will reveal whether they have any interest in solving the problem or if they just want to continue complaining. If you sense that they aren’t interested in finding solutions, then you may have to distance yourself.

**3. “I agree.”** This short, powerful phrase will stop an argument in its tracks. It’s nearly impossible to argue with



“They’ll put more energy into their own ideas than yours.”



someone who is agreeing with you (although some people will try).

For example, say team members didn’t complete a project, and when you ask why, the answer is, “There’s too much work. We’re too busy. I can’t do everything around here.” Simply say, “I agree. It has been really busy around here.”

Once you’ve agreed, then you can follow up with the expected job performance. “I agree, it has been really busy lately. However, you know we promised to send the project results tomorrow.”

**4. “I need your agreement.”** Dealing with performance issues can be challenging. Given a choice, many managers prefer the “wait and see” approach. That usually doesn’t work. When someone isn’t meeting performance or behavior standards, a coaching conversation is needed to help the team member get back on track.

The goal of a coaching conversation is to get team members to agree to improve their performance or behavior. Because many managers don’t have this phrase in their skill kit, they never come out and clearly state what they want. The words “I need your agreement that you will . . .” makes it clear exactly what the goal is.

Negative attitudes can be especially challenging, but they must be addressed. Negativity is contagious. It leads to poor performance and low morale. If you allow bad attitudes to go unchecked, you risk losing your top performers.

Don’t avoid having these difficult conversations. There’s too much at stake. Say “I need your agreement that you will maintain a professional, respectful attitude in the workplace.” And then hold them to it.

**5. “I noticed . . .”** The phrase you use to start off a potentially difficult conversation is the key to positive results. When addressing a performance issue, you’ll have the best outcome if you focus on the observable behavior rather than on the person. Keep in mind that the principles of good communication include being positive and helpful.

For example, when addressing an attitude issue, try saying, “I noticed that you don’t seem like yourself lately.” Not, “What’s wrong with you?”

If you choose the wrong words and the other person gets defensive, you might as well end the conversation and come back to it later.

Be aware that even if you use all the right words and say all the right things, there’s no guarantee that the other person will respond in the same professional way. That’s okay. Good communication is about taking ownership of what you do

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and say regardless of the outcome. You’re responsible for making the effort. You’re not responsible for how the other person chooses to react.

These five phrases will help you remain calm, confident, and in control in tough situations. Take them out and get comfortable with them. The more you use them, the more smoothly your discussions will go. 

*Liz Uram ([lizuram.com](https://lizuram.com)) is a nationally recognized speaker, trainer, consultant, and author. She equips leaders with the tools they need to communicate so they can make a bigger impact, get better results, and motivate others to do their best. Uram’s written four books packed full of strategies leaders can implement to get real results, real fast.*