

Preparing for and Entering into Hard Conversations

Preparation Phase

1. **Take the time to prepare for hard conversations.**
2. **Let off steam by yourself or with a trusted confidant.** Express your judgments, blame, criticism, exasperation. Let yourself feel what you are feeling.
3. **Then, when you are ready, name what happened.** Name what happened without exaggeration, generalization, or judgment. For example, instead of, “The parent was rude and condescending to the teacher — this parent is always that way,” state what happened: “I heard the parent say to the teacher, ‘You don’t know enough about Judaism to be teaching here.’”
4. **Find words for the values that are at stake here.** Look for what is getting under your skin about what happened. Don’t focus on the other person, but on what you want for everyone involved. What is the problem with what the person did? Examples: “What the person did bothers me because I want everyone to feel welcome here.” OR “What the person did bothers me because I want everyone to be treated with kindness and gentleness.” Take some time to see what really matters to you about this situation. “What the person did bothers me because I want _____ [insert values].”
5. **What you arrived at in #4 are core values — let them help keep you centered.** These are your touchstones, your center, the simple truths you can hang on to so that you can keep steady in this conversation. This is not about whether the other person is out of line or irresponsible or unkind. It’s not about the other person. You’re going into this conversation to talk about your values. Now, in preparation, take a breath as you center on those values, e.g., “I want kindness for everybody who works at the synagogue.”
6. **Do you have a request?** Take some time to think about what you might want to ask the person to do to address the situation, if relevant. Do not ask a person to make promises they can’t keep, e.g.: “Would you be willing never to speak that way again?” Something more do-able might be: “If you are upset with a teacher, would you be willing to come talk it through with me, first, so we can decide together how to approach the teacher?” You want the request to be very concrete.
7. **Imagine hearing a “no” to your request.** If you get a no to your request, that is an opportunity to try to understand the situation more deeply from the other person’s point of view. Take a moment in preparation to see if you can find curiosity in yourself about why the person might say “no” to you. If you’re not ready for a “no,” your request will come across more as a demand than a request.

8. **Get ready to shift your attention to the other person.** Hopefully, you now feel pretty clear about what you are hoping to express in this conversation. The other person, of course, will want to be heard, too. Ready to shift to prepare for that?
9. **Consider the other person.** When you feel steady and clear about your values in this situation (as opposed to your judgments of the other person), and if you have a particular request, take some time to consider what might have been going on for the other person on a values level. In other words, even if you really dislike what the person did or said, what might they have been going for, in the best possible interpretation? In our example, one guess might be that the parent really loves Judaism and wants students to share that passion. This does not justify the behavior. It turns out, though, that people do a lot of painful, harsh things in the name of values that you might share with them or be able to relate to. If you can guess what some of those shared values are, these will go a long way in helping you see eye to eye.
10. **Take some time to center yourself on your desire to approach this person with both strength and kindness.** The goal is to be both empowered and responsive.
11. **See if you can find a mutually agreeable time to talk, if at all possible.** People do better when they are not taken by surprise.

Conversation Phase

12. **Decide whether to listen first or to try to be heard first.** In general, people hear better once they have been heard. And it's super important not to do a ping-pong, where both of you are trying to be heard. Set it up so that one person gets heard fully, then the other.
13. **When you are listening, reflect what you hear without arguing.** E.g., "It sounds like you were really worried about what has been going on in class." "It sounds like you are really passionate about Judaism and want all the kids to get really rich content."
14. **Summarize what you have heard in a rich and respectful way, and ask, "Did I get it?"**
"Here's what I think you were saying. _____. Did I get it? Is there more?"
15. **Check for readiness.** If and when you decide to try to get heard, check if the other person is ready and willing. Eg, "Would you be willing to hear how I'm looking at this?"
16. **Talk in small amounts.** If you get a yes, talk in bite size pieces about what happened and your values around it. "When I heard you tell Zach that he doesn't know enough about Judaism to be teaching here, I felt concern, because I really want teachers to get a lot of kindness and support." If you say more than this, it is very likely that the other person will get flooded.

17. **Ask for reflection.** After you've said just a little, ask for a reflection of what you said. This is highly counter-cultural. And it is crucial in many circumstances. "I think what I said might have been a little unclear; I wonder if you could tell me what you understood me to be saying?"
18. **Offer thanks for the reflection or ask to try again.** If the person was able to reflect, thank them! If not, say something like, "That was different from what I meant to get across. Would you be willing for me to try again?"
19. **Summarize the conversation in terms of the key values on both sides.** Now both people have been heard. Name the values each of you really cares about. See if there is agreement about these.
20. **Work together on figuring out if there is a way to address what both sides care about.** E.g., "You really want the students to be learning a lot of Judaism, and in particular, for teachers to get feedback about their teaching. I want the teachers to be treated with care. Shall we talk about how we can have all of that . . . " This is the point where the request that you came up with earlier might come in handy; or you might want to shift it, based on what you heard the other person say.