

# HOW TO STAY CONNECTED

IN A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION



**A CRAFTING CONNECTION GUIDE**  
**FELICITY DWYER**

## Welcome to this guide

Thank you for downloading this guide on how to stay connected in a difficult conversation.

There are broadly two conditions which can potentially make a conversation a difficult one.

Firstly, it may be down to something inherently difficult in the situation. For example, dealing with an unhappy customer or tackling poor performance at work, or raising something awkward with your spouse.

Or it may be that the challenges arise from the nature of relationship between you and another person. Maybe there has been miscommunication in the past, or there are significant differences in your communication styles or worldview.

There's no magic wand to convert difficult conversations into straightforward ones. But you may find the process easier if you go into it with a focus on building connection at all stages. When we feel connected with someone, we are more likely to be able to relate to them on a person-to-person level, and more open to finding joint solutions.

This guide is based on an article I wrote for *Edge* magazine, the journal for members of the *Institute of Leadership and Management*.

It includes six tips for staying connected, followed by a workbook section, with a series of reflective questions to help you prepare for staying connected, in a potentially difficult situation.

The logo for Felicity, featuring the word "Felicity" in a stylized, cursive font. The letters are pink and purple, with a thick, dark purple underline that sweeps across the bottom of the word.

## 1. Connect with your thoughts and feelings

In preparing for a difficult conversation, take a few minutes to connect with yourself first.

What are you telling yourself about how the other person may react? A danger of over-thinking possible negative reactions is that you can end up building up anxiety which can colour the way you approach the conversation. As part of your preparation, consider a few scenarios and think about how you might respond. But put these hypothetical responses onto the back burner once you go into the conversation. Allow yourself to respond to what the other person says and does in the moment.

And what do you notice in your physical body when you think about the conversation. Perhaps you feel a slight increase in your heartbeat for example. Take a few gentle breaths, breathing from your abdomen and allowing the outbreath to be a little longer than the inbreath. This will calm your nervous system and help you stay present in the situation.

## 2. Connect with your desired outcome and message

Take time to think through your ideal outcome from the conversation. Clarify what you want to say as you go into the discussion, and make sure you're well informed. Have you done your own research and found credible evidence to support your point of view?

Remember the difference between objective and subjective information. Objective information is that which you can observe – actions, words, tone of voice, body language and so on. Subjective is how you feel and think about a situation. So be prepared to “own” your own views. *“I noticed this... and I felt...”*

And think too about what the other person might want. But be careful of making assumptions that are not based on facts.

## 3. Connect with the intention to listen

A powerful way to relate during a difficult conversation is to go in with an intention to listen to the other person. Be interested in learning how they think and feel about the situation. It can be helpful to bring an attitude of gentle curiosity, asking yourself *“I wonder how they see this?”*

You may wish to start a conversation with open questions, to encourage the other person to answer in the way they choose. *“What are your thoughts?” “What would you like from this conversation?”*

Check your understanding and acknowledge what you see as valid points in the other person's view. Make it clear if there are factual inaccuracies that the other person is unaware of. And put your perspective clearly, distinguishing between facts and opinions.

Stephen R. Covey's maxim *“Seek first to understand, then to be understood”* can't be bettered here. Once people feel they have been heard, they are more likely to be willing to listen. And by listening to understand, you will be better able to learn something new.

## 4. Aim to work together on a way forward.

Once you have connected to the extent that you have heard the other person's perspective and shared your own, you can move in the direction of decision making and action planning.

For example, a performance conversation may move towards agreeing specific improvements, in a personal situation it may be coming up with an agreed set of expectations on childcare arrangements, that mean you both have some time to yourself each week.

Where possible, aim for joint problem-solving approach, identifying options together and looking for ways forward that meet both your needs. There may be some areas where negotiation isn't possible, but other areas where there is much more flexibility.

## 5. Check understanding and agree next steps

Even when you're able to move the conversation into a positive phase, and find ways to agree decisions and actions, don't forget to keep checking understanding. It's important to surface any misunderstandings or assumptions as you agree a way forward.

Most people can accept a difficult message, or an outcome they may consider less than ideal. It's more damaging when someone goes away feeling that they haven't been heard, or believing they've been offered something that it turns out isn't possible.

So, capture decisions and next steps in writing where relevant. Of one of you is writing up the decisions or action points, ask the other for specific confirmation of agreement: *"Does this reflect your understanding? Is there anything you would like to add or change?"*

Or if written confirmation isn't appropriate, then it's worth both of you summarising decisions and agreements in your own words, so you've articulated your understanding and any differences can be discussed.

## 6. Continue to build the relationship

Beyond the confines of a difficult conversation, continue to find ways to maintain connection and build the relationship.

Regardless of the situation, a focus on connection will give you the best chance to resolve difficulties in a way that maintains consideration and respect for all involved.

# Workbook questions: Preparing to stay connected

## Exercise 1: Thoughts and feelings

What am I telling myself about this conversation?

What do I think the other person might be telling themselves about the conversation?

To what extent are my thoughts and assumptions true?

Are there other ways I can think about the situation, that may be true?

How am I feeling about the conversation?

What strategies could I use to stay calm during the conversation?

## Exercise 2: Outcomes and responses

What would be a good outcome of the conversation, from my perspective?

What might the other person see as a good outcome?

What are some of the directions in which the conversation might go? (scenarios)

How might I respond to these possible scenarios?

### Exercise 3: Preparing to listen

How willing am I to go into the conversation with an open mind, and an intention to “listen to understand?”

What will help me to stay focused on listening and understanding?

### Exercise 4: Preparing to solve a problem together

What words or phrases might I use to indicate my willingness to work together to find a way forward?

## Exercise 5: Preparing to check understanding

How might I ensure that any decisions made are captured in a way that confirms our shared understanding and commitment to action?

## Exercise 6: Preparing to continue building the relationship

What would a positive longer-term relationship look like?

What can I do to make this outcome more likely?



# Thank you!



Thanks so much for joining my mailing list and I hope you've found this guide helpful.

As a facilitator, trainer, and coach, I help people to develop enhanced communication and leadership skills. You'll find information on my website about my services.

If you, or your organisation, would like to explore possibility of working together, then please reach out, I'd love to hear from you.

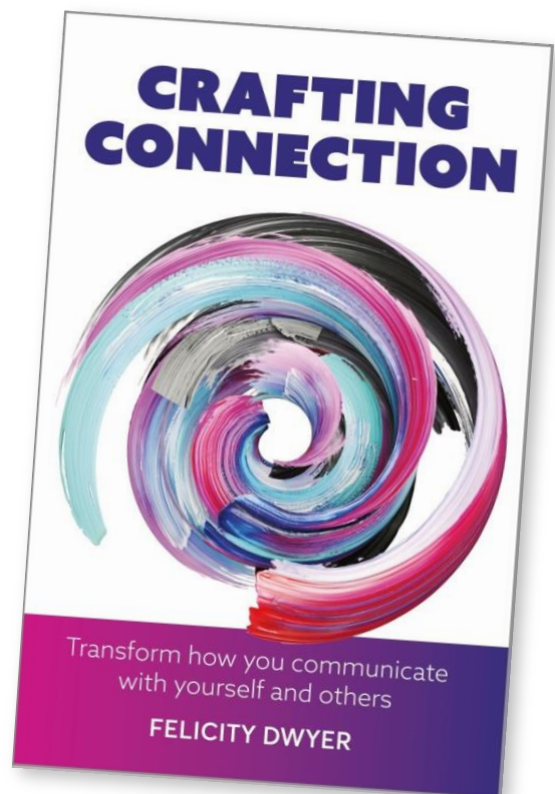
And if you'd like to read a book packed with ideas about connecting and communicating, check out *Crafting Connection*, available from all good bookshops.

*"Crafting Connection is a must-read guide to communication and building better relationships. Felicity shares her deep experience and expertise through her versatile '3-D' model, crafting connections on three levels: with oneself, with others, and as a community..."*

**Jess Annison, OBE,**

*"This book could not be better timed for our shouty, social media driven world where communication is often downgraded to scoring points and provoking reactions. Felicity provides a clear and insightful guide to what good communication should be. Connecting in 3D is a powerful building block which we can all benefit from using in every area of our lives. Highly recommended."*

**Liz Gresson**



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