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STRATEGIES FOR

# Mastering Your Toughest CONVERSATIONS



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## All of us have faced conversations that we would give anything to avoid:

Dealing with the lack of accountability on the part of a coworker, friend, or offspring

Telling your boss that his or her “brilliant” idea has flaws in it

Disagreeing with a colleague’s strong point of view

We especially want to avoid these types of conversations when they have been difficult for us in the past. That’s because we have become “conditioned” to fear the other person’s response—and its effect upon us.

We find ourselves wondering if we can ignore the situation so that it will resolve itself, or we find reasons to postpone having the conversation. But in the back of our mind is a voice saying that such conversations cannot be put off or avoided because the problem/situation won’t go away on its own.

## Avoid the Drama and Trauma

Is it possible to have a tough conversation without trauma and drama? Yes, it is. We all know people who seem to be able to have these conversations successfully. The key to their success is that they follow some basic principles. And, as a bonus, sometimes doing so can actually eliminate the need to have the tough conversation.

So, what do masters of these conversations do? How do they seem to come up with the right words and phrases that melt away resistance and create a willingness to engage? They do what masters of all kinds do—they prepare, they plan, and they practice specifically for each conversation.

## The First “P”



## PREPARE

**The process starts in the preparation phase with a conversation with ourselves. A conversation with that voice in our head that, as the T-shirts say, is “resisting the urge to choke the life out of someone who deserves it!”**

This conversation—not the one with the other person—is the toughest one we will have. Why? Because it involves an exceedingly honest examination of the issues, our feelings, and our expectations as we identify and succinctly articulate the real issue and what we expect the outcome to be.

That voice in our head needs to come to terms with the fact that these conversations always have some degree of discomfort. All of us, over the years, have learned how to defend ourselves against what we perceive as attacks—in other words, criticism. When we initiate a “tough” conversation, it’s natural for the other person’s ego to try to defend itself against what it will likely perceive as criticism. This has nothing to do with whether the conversation is doable. If you go to the gym, there are some uncomfortable moments before you feel the benefits of the training!

One of the most common reasons I hear for avoiding these conversations is not wanting to hurt the person’s feelings (the person might get angry or upset and shout or cry). We think we’re being sensitive to the other person, but it’s mostly not his or her feelings we are being sensitive to, it’s ours. When we are uncomfortable around other people’s uncomfortable emotions, we avoid doing anything that might stir them up. Another way to say it is that we try to take responsibility for the other person’s emotional state—which immediately gives that person power over us (watch small children exploit this one with their parents!).

Masters of these conversations don’t take responsibility for other people’s emotions. It doesn’t mean they don’t care, it just means they will allow them to have whatever emotions they choose.

Be sure that you clearly accept that **YOUR** problem is how to help the other person take some ownership of the “issue.” Determine what you think might get the person’s attention. Also, figure out what you will do if you can’t get his or her attention.

## The Second “P”



# PLAN

**Plan in detail what you intend to say and do. Determine what questions you want to ask and specifically how you will ask them.**

The most effective approach is to use an “I” statement. For example, “I have a problem.” Avoid “you” statements (such as, “you have been...”) because such statements tend to make the other person defensive and less open to hearing what you have to say.

Let the other person know that you want his or her help and that you intend for the discussion to be collaborative. For example, “I’m having difficulty keeping track of expenses, and I would like your help. The last few weeks your expense report has come in on Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week, and I really need you to give me your expense report every Friday. So, I would like to understand what is happening that is making it difficult for you.”

Anticipate how the person might respond to your statement. In addition to being more prepared to respond, putting yourself in others’ shoes might help you realize things you missed when thinking about your questions.

It’s very important to determine an appropriate time and place for the conversation. In general, such conversations should take place in a private, one-on-one setting at a time when both of you can give your full attention to the conversation.

## The Final “P”



# PRACTICE

**The third and final “P” is practice. You might begin by practicing the conversation silently or aloud by yourself, but don’t neglect to practice with someone.**

The other person should play the role of the person with whom you intend to have the conversation. Recruit a co-worker (if the co-worker can keep the session confidential), friend, or family member to help you practice. Ask the person to make the conversation difficult so that you can work through the tough spots.

Practice active listening. This means checking—by briefly paraphrasing—to make sure that you understand what the person has said or is feeling. It also means not interrupting or mentally formulating your response while the person is talking. It’s okay to finish listening and then ask the person to give you a few seconds to think through your response.

**Don’t worry if the first practice session doesn’t go as well as you’d hoped. Allow yourself as many “do overs” as necessary until you feel confident that you can handle the conversation successfully.**

## In Conclusion

Having great coaching conversations is like building muscle—the more you exercise, the stronger you get. The more you prepare, plan, practice, and have coaching conversations, the more you will improve your ability to have conversations that remove interference and get people’s hearts and minds engaged in the task at hand. You will see their performance improve, their engagement intensify, and their productivity increase. And your ability to prepare, plan, and practice will also improve.

In terms of impact, there probably isn’t another activity that would provide you with a better or similar return on your investment of time. Think of a conversation you need to have, and get started by preparing for it today. It will be time well spent.

## About Alan Fine



Alan Fine is an internationally sought after performance innovator, the co-creator of the widely recognized GROW® Model, and pioneer of the modern-day coaching movement. In addition to his work in human performance, Alan is also a New York Times Bestselling Author, keynote speaker, and well-respected business executive and professional athlete coach. He has dedicated the past 35 years helping people from all walks of life elevate their performance and unlock potential.

Alan’s work has significantly impacted the organizational culture and business results of the Fortune 1000 and touched the lives of athletes such as Davis Cup tennis star Buster Mottram, and PGA golfers Phillip Price, David Feherty, Colin Montgomerie, and Stephen Ames.

Alan’s thought leadership on the nature of performance and the art of coaching for performance improvement includes his New York Times Bestselling book, *You Already Know How to Be Great*, as well as numerous other research articles and publications.

**To learn more about Alan and his breakthrough message, visit [alan-fine.com](http://alan-fine.com).**