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Illustration by Aron Vellekoop León

Difficult conversations are difficult for a reason, and when you're anxious or stressed out, it's easy to say the wrong thing. And it doesn't matter how prepared you are. Your best laid plans will go to waste if you offend or anger the other person.

Over twenty years of teaching and research, which I describe in my new book *Choosing Courage,* I've found that people often forget a critical point: When navigating a difficult conversation, you need to craft your message while keeping *the other person's* feelings and opinions in mind.

Below are some of the most common mistakes I've observed — words and phrases that can slip into our vocabulary — and explanations for why they often cause trouble.

Don't assume your viewpoint is obvious

Sometimes, if you feel like you're 100 percent right, you may use words such as "clearly," "obviously," or "beyond doubt." If you do this, you're falling prey to naive realism — the belief that you're privy to some objective reality that others will clearly see and agree with.

We're seldom in such an objectively black-or-white situation, and reasonable people may see things differently than you or need more convincing to come around to your viewpoint. Not surprisingly, when your words (inadvertently) suggest that any divergent views are stupid or inconsequential, others may feel railroaded or insulted. If you've really made your case persuasively, there's no need to potentially derail the outcome by stating your own views about how obvious or beyond a doubt something is.

Don't exaggerate

When you're speaking with someone who has upset you on multiple occasions, you may find yourself inadvertently resorting to using phrases such as "You *always* …" or "You *never*…"

Exaggeration will undermine your overall credibility and lead to a debate about frequency instead of substance. "That's not true," the person is likely to retort, before proceeding to tell you about the specific date or occasion that runs counter to your claim.

If your intent is to get someone to start or stop doing something, keep the focus on that.

Don't tell others what they *should* do

Telling someone what they should do contains an implicit value judgment. "You should do X" implies that X is the way things *ought to be.*

Sure, if you're a leader responsible for a group's values and culture, sometimes it's necessary to be very clear about what should be done or how people should treat each other. Other times, though, especially when you're not the boss of the person you're speaking to, "shoulding" won't make them willing to comply.

People feel judged by "should" statements — as if they wouldn't come to the right conclusion without your input — when they'd prefer to decide for themselves what to do.

Phrases like, "You might consider" or "One possibility is" or "Have you thought of?" increase your odds of having the conversation and influence you seek.

Don't blame others for your feelings

If you're upset about something someone said or did, it's natural to have an emotional reaction. You're human. But stating the *cause* of those feelings is unhelpful and counterproductive.

For example, imagine your colleague interrupts you when you start to speak and you immediately experience physical reactions — your face flushes, your heart rate spikes. You may feel the urge to say, "You make me so angry when you interrupt me," but, if you do so, there's a good chance you'll end up in an argument.

Why? Because people hate being blamed for things — especially for words or actions that harmed others. So instead of apologizing or agreeing to change their behavior, they'll defend themselves — their specific words and overall intentions or character.

You could choose to say, "Hey, when you interrupt me so quickly like that, I feel disrespected (or hurt or angry). Could you please not do that?" Or you could say, "Could you please not interrupt me until I'm finished?" Or you could not say anything about your feelings at all and stick to the topic at hand.

Don't challenge someone's character or integrity

You may feel that what someone has done is "unprofessional," "wrong," or "unethical." But, if you use words like these, there's a good chance the target will become defensive. Humans have a strong need to see themselves as decent and moral. If you describe their problematic behavior in ways that threaten their core sense of self then the person is more likely to shift from the issue at hand to a defense of their character.

Instead, try starting with phrases that only question if or convey something is undesirable or sub-optimal. Suggest that missing deadlines "detracts from our mission" rather than labeling it "unprofessional," or that changing numbers to make your unit's performance look better is "inconsistent with our core values" or "likely to undermine trust and our focus on learning" rather than calling it "wrong" or "unethical."

Don't say "It's not personal"

In my experience, people say "It's not personal" or "Don't take it personally" when they (subconsciously) know it's quite personal for the other person.

There's a great example of this in the movie *You've Got Mail* when the big-box bookstore executive (Tom Hanks) tells the small, independent bookstore owner (Meg Ryan) that it's not personal that he's going to put her multi-generational family bookstore out of business by opening a massive store nearby. That's deeply personal to her so, understandably, hearing this phrase only makes Meg Ryan's character even angrier.

When someone is hurt, angry, or otherwise clearly affected by something you've said or done, telling them it's not personal only adds insult to injury. If you actually care, why not acknowledge and own that it *is* personal to them, even if not to you? If you can't do that, don't say anything about "personal" at all.

Let me end by commenting on one more phrase: "Don't sweat the small stuff." Unfortunately, that's not great advice in the realm of difficult conversations. You can get a lot of stuff right (your persuasive core arguments, your data and solutions, the setting and timing) and still see your objectives derailed by the seemingly small communication missteps described above.

The good news is that getting the small stuff right too is imminently doable — it just takes commitment to notice and minimize the use of these problematic words and phrases.

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