



# *Navanter*

*Knowledge Bites*

**Difficult Conversations  
cheat sheet**



## About the cheat sheet

This cheat sheet has been written to help anyone who has to have a difficult conversation with a colleague or co-worker. What is a “difficult conversation”? I like to think of it as any conversation where two people have a different opinion about how they should work together, what should be done in the future, what’s acceptable in an office environment, and so on. It’s a conversation where that difference of opinion causes stress or discomfort to either or both parties.

The key thing for me when thinking about these difficult conversations, is to remember that (most) people do not get up in the morning with the sole intention of making someone else feel uncomfortable. In general, people behave the way they do because they feel strongly about what should be done in a situation. So strongly, that they forget to care about the feelings of the other person. And of course that other party feels equally strongly in the other way.

The structure we’ll look at on this cheat sheet is based on work done by [The Center for Nonviolent Communication](#), which has added massively to the body of work on this topic over the years. It is used here, in a modified form by Navanter Knowledge Bites, in line with their content guidelines.

The key is to have a conversation structure which recognises the feelings and needs of both parties, as well as which suggests a reasonable next step to resolve differences. And it’s helpful that this structure is both clear and repeatable to be used in a variety of situations.

## The structure

CNVC defines the structure as follows:

1. Observations
2. Feelings
3. Needs
4. Request

I find it clearer to add a qualifier to each of these words:

1. Blameless observations
2. Accurate feelings
3. Stated needs
4. Reasonable request



Let's add some notes to each of these stages to clarify what we mean:

### **Blameless observations**

Remember my point from earlier that (in general) people don't wake up with the intention of making others feel uncomfortable? That's what the "blameless" piece is all about. We need to avoid words which blame the other party for the way we feel, and recognise that they're behaving the way they are for a valid reason.

### **Accurate feelings**

I don't know about you, but when I'm in a bad mood and I tell others how I feel, I tend to default to simple words such as "angry", "frustrated" or "fed up". But there are many more words to describe the way we feel (how about "concerned" or "alienated" for something more descriptive?) and the more precise we can be with how we feel, the better.

### **Stated needs**

Sometimes, particularly when we're feeling stressed, we expect the other party to magically guess what we need in a situation, and we're surprised when they can't. None of us is psychic, so we need to make sure we spell out our needs to the other person. And try to avoid "I need you to..." – it's about what I need *inside* rather than throwing my orders about. Think about things like "I need clarity" or "I need to feel confident".

### **Reasonable request**

Now we've opened up with the other person and helped them to step into our world, they will (hopefully) be more willing to listen to a reasonable request to move forward. The key word here is "reasonable". It's no good saying "please agree with me" – how about "could we sit down and weigh up the situation?". And be careful that your request doesn't cause negative feelings in the other person – this is two-way, remember!

## **Putting everyday language onto the framework**

I like to think of the structure with "real language" rather than descriptors. My language is as follows, but feel free to try whatever feels right within your personality of communication style:

1. When you...
2. I feel...
3. I need/I need to feel...
4. So, would you mind...

Of course, no structure is ever the magic bullet to solve a situation, but in many cases, this structure can bring people together and foster a more productive working relationship.



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