

Ask the expert Having better conversations

Getting better at conversations helps you build stronger relationships, understand others, and make progress together. Whether you're navigating tricky moments or trying to be more assertive, small shifts in how you communicate can make a big difference.

Try a 3-step structure for better conversations:

State the topic: "I want to talk about X" or "This might be a hard conversation"

Share your goal: The purpose/outcome you're aiming for (e.g. "I'd like us to leave with a clear plan").

Get buy-in: Ask if they're open to the conversation (e.g. "Does that sound OK to you?").



"In conversations, have something to learn, not something to prove. Take a learning mindset - look deeper behind the motivations and intentions of the other person"

Jefferson Fisher, lawyer, speaker, best-selling author

5 common scenarios and ideas for action



1. Being interrupted

Let the interruption happen - some people process aloud and may not realise it. If it happens again, try:

- Using their name to get their attention: "X, I'm losing my train of thought."
- Asking: "Is now a good time?", "Are you ready to talk?", "Would it help if I shared my view?"

2. Avoiding conflict

We often hold our breath during conflict - use this as space to choose how to respond.

- Ask yourself: "What outcome do I want?", "What's the value here?"
- If the value or goal isn't clear, you might be avoiding the lack of clarity, not the conflict itself.

3. People pleasing

If you're stuck in people pleasing, try using "I need..." It helps you share personal feelings you haven't been voicing and sets clear boundaries. E.g.

- "I need more clarity/support", "I need to say no."
- If you need to make a request, turn it into a statement: "What would help me if..."

4. Same conversation, no progress

Become a student in the conversation by adopting a learner's mindset. Instead of saying "we've already discussed this," try:

- "Help me understand if things have changed - is this a new discussion or a follow-up?"
- "Is your mindset different now than it was a few weeks ago?"

5. Different communication styles

Working with someone who has a different communication style can result in feelings of frustration or friction. Respond to the situation by:

- Not taking it personally - ask, "Did you mean to...?" to clarify intent.
- Recognising each style has different strengths and that different doesn't mean difficult.

Coach yourself questions

How can I stay curious in hard conversations?



What questions help me open up conversations?



Recommended resources



The Next Conversation:
Argue Less, Talk More.
by Jefferson Fisher.



Download our 10 minute tool to help you ask better questions at work.



Sarah and Helen share 6 different ideas to have better career conversations in episode **#109** of the Squiggly Careers podcast.