# Navigating difficult board conversations

## What costs are you willing to bear by being silent?

Boards often coast without questioning the status quo, just for the sake of keeping things comfortable. However, this comfort may come at a significant cost. A culture in which board members avoid questioning what they are seeing, hearing and reading could lead to:

* straying from the organisation’s vision, strategy or purpose by accident
* pent-up frustration about things they have not actually ever communicated
* a culture of not questioning assumptions shared by others
* making decisions without adequate data
* making decisions without full board support (i.e. people say or support things they do not believe)
* a gradual slide away from following processes that serve the organisation well
* making decisions on the basis that things have always been done that way, rather than in response to a changing environment
* lack of board diversity, meaning lack of representation of the membership and the wider community.

## What is a difficult conversation?

When we are in a group whose members agree with us, we often feel gratified and vindicated. This suggests we are on the right track. However, the world around us changes, and this means that our behaviour and decisions are constantly required to adapt in order to so that we can continue to steer ourselves and our organisation successfully.

Some people feel excited at the prospect of disagreeing because it can be fun to throw around intellectual arguments, and try new thoughts. Others find this confronting and aggressive. Many of us are nuanced: there are times we would like to have fun with a topic, and other times when we feel vulnerable when people ask questions. Our feelings vary depending on:

* the topic at hand
* the other people involved in the conversation (your boss? your stakeholders? family members?)
* the words used, and the tone in which they are spoken
* the assumptions made
* the way an argument is constructed (is it about data? Is it about emotion?)
* our other worries that have nothing to do with the conversation.

A difficult conversation is one in which it is most likely that all in the room will feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, offended or emotionally heightened due to the material to be discussed.

## Considerations for difficult conversations

Difficult conversations are just that: difficult. They are uncomfortable for all parties. This does not mean they should be avoided. Instead, there are some things we can keep in mind to help all in the room to feel they have gained something:

* What do you want to see change as a result of the conversation?
* What solutions can you suggest?
* Who is in the room? Is this a conversation best had in private, or might people feel left out?
* What are you feeling? Sharing how you are feeling can help others to understand your perspective and what is motivating and concerning you.
* What do you all agree on as a starting point? Is there a ‘higher purpose’ you wish to centre the conversation on – e.g. the shared commitment to and belief in the organisational mission?
* Are there learning points for everyone involved? One-way feedback is rarely effective in leading people to embrace change.
* What are you willing to concede, for the sake of agreement and moving forward?
* Are you listening properly to what someone is saying and not saying?
* Have you paraphrased to ensure you have understood correctly?
* Do other parties feel listened to, and understood?
* Are you aware of the things that often cause you to feel frustrated, and can you manage your own behaviour through this self-awareness?
* What is the sensitivity surrounding the topic at hand? Can you think about why this might be?
* What might others in the conversation feel they stand to lose in this conversation? E.g. respect, autonomy, control.

## Practices to avoid in a difficult conversation

* Interrupting
* Raising voices
* Assuming you are correct before you start
* Assuming you understand how someone else feels or thinks
* Walking away from the conversation before all have agreed that it’s finished
* Apportioning blame

## Practices to include in a difficult conversation

* Exhibiting empathy
* Suggesting solutions
* Enabling all to ask questions
* Being specific about why you want to have the conversation
* Being realistic about outcomes
* Inviting other parties to join you in a team to consider ways forward together