

5 steps to say what needs to be said

Before you meet: Set up a time and place conducive to an intimate conversation. At work, choose a quiet room and change the seating from how you usually sit to protect your regular spaces and routines from being tainted by a difficult conversation. For the same reason, avoid having this discussion in your kitchen or where you usually relax.

Share this sheet with the person you are meeting with, so you both approach it from the same angle without surprises.

1 Agree to an imaginary mediator

Pretend there is a third party, a mediator or camera, observing the conversation.

This keeps emotions intact and removes blame and shame from the room. It also helps both parties listen attentively, stay quiet when the other is speaking, and ensures each person's views are genuinely heard.

2 Check facts from both perspectives

What do you each see, understand, believe and want? Take turns setting this out. Avoid "I", "we", "you" and "us" — stick to the facts, figures and details, the way an investigator would write it up in a report.

This is about listening without judgement. Each party is telling the imaginary mediator their understanding of the issue. You may each reason differently, through risk, logic, past experience or other factors. Just listen, learn and be curious.

3 Explore what each of you could accept

State what an acceptable outcome looks like, what you are willing to do to reach it, and what you are not willing to do (for example, breaching someone's confidentiality, spending money, or committing time or resources).

Make sure you have both fully said what you need to say before moving on.

4 Brainstorm freely — no idea is too small or too silly

This step is less about finding the right answer and more about shifting the energy in the room. You've both stated your positions — now let go of them for a moment. Take turns finishing this sentence: "*We could also try...*"

Build on each other's ideas rather than evaluating them. No idea gets dismissed. Go further than feels sensible, sometimes the ridiculous suggestion breaks the tension with a laugh, and that laugh often opens the door to a solution neither of you had considered. Keep going until you've genuinely exhausted all possibilities.

5 Find what you can both agree on

It may be less than you each wanted, or a different solution altogether. It could also mean agreeing to go away, think further and come back together to continue. Whatever you decide — write it down or say out loud exactly what you have agreed to. A follow-up email ensures total clarity and avoids misremembering later.