

# Starting a Difficult Conversation

## Harsh Versus Soft Startup

One of the most obvious indicators of how well a conversation will go is how it begins. Leading off conversations in ways that are accusing, judgmental, critical or sarcastic are known as “harsh startup.”

Research shows that if your discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end on a negative note, even if there are a lot of attempts to “make nice” in between. Statistics tell the story: 96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first 3 minutes of the 15 minute interaction. A harsh startup simply dooms you to failure.

## Examples of a Harsh Startup

- You never...
- What are you going to do to prevent/stop...
- You are too...
- You have got to...

## Rules for Soft Startup

### Be Concise

It’s hard to hear a complaint if it goes on and on, or if it seems like a lengthy diatribe, even if it is about one thing. You usually don’t need a lot of examples of the issue. Just describe the complaint, be brief, and then stop.

### The Initial Complaint Sentence

Complain but don’t blame! Let’s assume you have a complaint to make, or a gripe you want to discuss. Complaining is okay if you also provide solutions or recommendations, but criticizing is not. Take the *blaming* out of the complaining. Talk about what you are feeling and how you perceive things, presenting these as your perceptions, not as absolute truth.

### Start with Something Positive

Posing problems in a positive context can often make it easier to hear a complaint. Think of a time when this issue was better and give an appreciation of the other person’s actions during that time.

### Make “I” Statements

Make statements that start with “I” instead of “you.” “I” statements tend to be less critical than statements that begin with “you.” It is very common for people to think that problems are caused by the other person’s

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shortcomings, so it is easy to fall into the trap of blaming by starting the conversation with statements that begin with “you.”

### **Describe What Is Happening, Don't Evaluate or Judge**

Instead of accusing or blaming, just describe what you see happening. For example, instead of saying “You don't help with clean-up,” say “I seem to wind up doing most of the clean-up lately.”

### **Talk Clearly About What You Need**

Instead of asking the other person to guess what you need, or to read your mind, just say it explicitly.

### **Be Polite**

Make requests politely, adding such phrases as “please” and “I would appreciate it if...” Politeness can go a long way, and it is contagious.

### **Give Appreciation**

If the other person has, at some time, been better in this situation, then ask for what you need and couch it within an appreciation of what the other person did right in the past.

### **Don't Store Things Up**

Address issues early before they fester and build up.