




# Handling Difficult Questions


World of Work

## - Teacher's Insights -

### At a Glance

-  60-90 minutes (see below to reduce class time)
-  **C1, B2**
-  strategies for handling difficult situations, speaking, reading, role-play

### Preparation

-  0-5 minutes
- Print one worksheet for each student.
- Print the Teacher's Insights or keep them at hand as they contain the answers to the quiz.
- If you have a shorter class time, you can ask students to do the Reading at home before or after the class.

### Exercise Summary

- Kickoff:** questions about personal experiences
- Reading:** Learn about strategies for handling difficult questions
- Odd One Out:** Learn practical sentences for handling difficult questions; Identify misplaced sentences
- Collocations:** Match sentence fragments by identifying collocations from the previous exercise.
- Controlled Practice:** Ask and answer difficult questions using new language.
- Role-Play:** Practise handling difficult questions in three different scenarios.
- Homework Activity:** Practise responding to a difficult question in a written format.

**Kickoff:**                      **Read and answer the questions.**

① Students will answer questions to get them thinking about the topic of handling difficult questions in professional settings. Encourage students to share their experiences and opinions. However, remember that the strategies and sentences come in the following activities.

1. Do you ever have to respond to difficult questions at work?
2. Can you recall a time you responded to a particularly difficult question?
3. What strategies can you use to effectively handle difficult questions at work?
4. How important are body language and tone of voice when dealing with difficult questions?
5. How can you stay positive and professional while dealing with difficult questions?
6. How can you prepare yourself to be better at handling difficult questions in the future?

**Reading:**                      **Read the article and answer the questions.**

① Students read an article on handling difficult questions in the workplace. After reading, they will answer comprehension and reflection questions. This text is designed for B2+ and C1 students. If they have a lower level, be prepared to help them with some of the vocabulary.

### Article

In the professional world, encountering difficult questions is inevitable. Regardless of your industry, position, or experience, there will always be situations that require tactful and strategic responses. Mastering the art of handling difficult questions can greatly impact your professional success and workplace relationships.

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One key strategy in handling tough questions is to remain calm and composed. Maintaining a level-headed demeanour will not only help you think more clearly but will also demonstrate professionalism and maturity to your colleagues. This will also help you to show empathy and understanding to your client, or whoever it is that is asking you the difficult question.

Another crucial approach is to be honest and transparent. When you're unsure of the answer or require more information, it's best to admit it and commit to finding the solution. This level of transparency will foster trust and respect among your coworkers.

At times, you may need to buy yourself some time to gather your thoughts or research the matter. Politely request a moment to think, or offer to follow up on the issue at a later time. This allows you to provide an accurate and well-considered response.

It is also worth remembering that you will not always know the answer to every question. It is okay to admit that you do not know the answer and to offer to find out. The other party will appreciate this more than if they receive a response which is not true or incomplete.

Lastly, don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you're unsure of the intent or context of a question. This helps ensure that you're addressing the issue accurately and effectively.

By implementing these strategies and practising regularly, you can develop the confidence and skill needed to gracefully handle difficult questions in the workplace.

1. Do you agree that encountering difficult questions is inevitable in your job?
2. Do you find it easy to stay calm and composed and keep a level-headed demeanour?
3. How important do you think it is to be honest and transparent?
4. Do you think that it is helpful to know how to buy time to give yourself a moment to think?
5. Do you find it easy to admit when you do not know the answer?
6. Are you able to ask for clarification when you need it?
7. Do you think that working on these four skills could help you to better handle difficult questions in the workplace?

### **Odd One Out: Identify the sentence which has been misplaced.**

① In this activity, students will identify the misplaced sentence in each group and determine which group it should belong to. The idea here is for students to pay close attention to the sentences which will help them to answer difficult questions and what they are used for. The reason for the Odd One Out activity is to ensure they read them properly and understand them, rather than just skimming over them.

Below are example sentences for each of the techniques for handling difficult questions. However, in each group, there is one sentence which is misplaced, as it belongs to a different group. Identify the misplaced sentence in each group and which group it should belong to.

① The misplaced sentences are underlined below.

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### Buying Time

- a. Let me think about that for a moment before I give you my answer.
- b. Would you mind giving me a few seconds to gather my thoughts on that topic?
- c. Can I get back to you on that one after I've had some time to think it through?
- d. [I want to be transparent about the situation: we're facing some setbacks.](#)  
→ [BEING HONEST AND TRANSPARENT](#)

### Showing Empathy and Understanding

- a. [I'm afraid I don't have that information at hand. I can find out who does, though.](#)  
→ [ADMITTING YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER](#)
- b. I can see why you feel that way, and I want to help address your concerns.
- c. I appreciate your honesty and willingness to share your concerns with us.
- d. I absolutely get where you're coming from, and I'm here to help you with that.

### Being Honest and Transparent

- a. We recognise we didn't make the best decision, but we would like to change that.
- b. [Could you provide more context or details on that issue?](#)  
→ [ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION](#)
- c. I'd like to offer you full transparency from here on, so you can always know what's happening.
- d. I want to be upfront about the current situation and keep you posted at every stage.

### Admitting You Don't Know the Answer

- a. I'm not sure about the answer to that question, but I can look into it and get back to you.
- b. [That's absolutely comprehensible. Thank you for your understanding while we work to fix it.](#)  
→ [SHOWING EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING](#)
- c. I'm not sure and I don't want to give you incorrect information. Let me check with a colleague.
- d. I don't know the answer off the top of my head, but I'm committed to finding it for you.

### Asking for Clarification

- a. [I just need a moment to reflect on that before responding.](#)  
→ [BUYING TIME](#)
- b. I didn't quite understand what you meant. Would you mind going into a bit more detail?
- c. I'm not sure I fully understand your question. Can you rephrase it or give an example?
- d. I'd like to make sure I'm on the same page as you. Can you elaborate on your point?

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**Collocations:** Match the sentence fragments with the verb (left) to the rest of the phrase (right) to complete the collocations.

① All of these collocations have appeared on the previous page. If you are teaching a group, put students into pairs to complete this activity. Ask them to try to do it without checking the previous page, but allow them to check if they are having trouble.

If you have enough time, ask them to take note of the collocations. For example, they could write a list including “have information at hand”, “gather thoughts”, and “face setbacks”.

I don't have		my thoughts.
I need a moment to gather		you posted at every stage.
We're facing		that information at hand.
I'd like to address		your concerns.
I don't know		some setbacks.
We promise to keep		to finding the answer for you.
I want to be		the answer off the top of my head.
I'm committed		upfront about the situation.

**Controlled Practice:** Ask each other the questions from the previous exercise. Answer them using the phrases from the previous page.

① Students will ask each other the difficult questions below and practise answering them using the phrases and techniques they've learnt. If you have extra time, students could also brainstorm their own questions or write difficult questions that they have been asked at work. Encourage students to give feedback on each other's responses and share their thoughts.

1. Why did we lay off people when we're making money?
2. Can you explain why customers don't like our new products?
3. Why has our project's timeline changed?
4. How will we catch up to our competitor in the next few months?
5. What are we doing about our money loss last quarter?
6. How will the new government rules change how we work?
7. Why did we change our policies without asking anyone?
8. Why was the project given to another team halfway through?
9. Our company's rules on right and wrong seem to be changing. Can you explain?
10. What's being done about the problems we talked about last meeting?
11. Can you tell me more about the company's plan for the bad reactions to our advertisement?
12. I don't understand why our team isn't doing as well. Can you help me understand?

**Role-Play:** Choose one of the three role-play activities, assign the roles, and complete the activity using language from today's class.

① Follow the instructions given on the following page to make the most of this role-play activity you're your students.

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Preparation: Review the language and phrases covered in today's class. Make sure students understand them. If you have done this class over two sessions, be sure not to skip this step.

Setting the Stage: Introduce the three scenarios to the students. Explain the role each person plays and the situation they are facing.

Role Assignment: Divide the students into pairs and assign each pair a scenario. Within each pair, assign roles (Person A and Person B).

Role-Play: Have the students act out their scenarios. Encourage them to use the language and phrases from today's class in their dialogues.

Scenario 1: Person A, as the manager, should discuss the underperformance of Person B, the employee. A should express their concerns and suggest solutions, all while being understanding of B's feelings.

Scenario 2: Person A, the customer service representative, should help Person B, the upset customer. A should empathise with B's frustration, ask for necessary details about the faulty product, and propose a solution to help B.

Scenario 3: Person A, the team leader, should discuss project direction with Person B, the disagreeing team member. A should listen to B's concerns and try to find a balance that keeps the project on track without disregarding B's input.

Delayed Feedback: While students are role-playing, the teacher should observe and make notes of any language errors or areas for improvement. After the role-play, share these notes with the students. Offer corrections, positive reinforcement for correct usage, and discuss better ways to phrase any awkward or incorrect statements.

Remember, the goal of this role-play exercise is to provide a realistic context for students to practise and apply the language they've learnt. It should be an engaging and interactive experience that enhances their language skills and confidence.

**Scenario 1: Manager (Person A) talks to an underperforming employee (Person B) about improving their work.**

**Scenario 2: Customer service representative (Person A) helps an upset customer (Person B) who got a faulty product.**

**Scenario 3: Team leader (Person A) resolves a disagreement with a team member (Person B) about the project direction.**

### **Homework:**

**As an optional homework task, students can practise responding to a difficult question by email. You can set the question or ask them to imagine one themselves.**