



Navigating Workplace Pinches: Disarming Defenses

We all experience “pinches” in workplace relationships - moments where conversations hit a snag, actions don't align with expectations or we leave a meeting or Zoom call feeling undervalued or misunderstood.

We know the right answer is to open a conversation. But what if the other person gets defensive things get even worse? Here are some tips to start a dialogue in a way that disarms defensiveness and strengthens relationships!

How Do You Know You're in a Pinch?

We define “pinches” as those moments when things feel yucky in a conversation or relationship at work. They are both natural and common, and also sometimes hurtful and even toxic. Here are some flags for us that a pinch is occurring (large or small):

- You see a funny look on someone's face after you spoke or feel like you're talking past each other
- You finish a meeting and think “What was that? Is it me?” You are tempted to call another participant to debrief
- You notice yourself working around them because it feels too difficult to interact
- You notice yourself or others saying “that person always ___ or that team is ___”
- You sense others are talking about you or your team in ways that irk or worry you

Why People's Defenses Are Up When There's a Pinch

What makes us avoid starting the conversation we know we need to have? When emotions are heightened, we are not our best that often triggers frustration, anger or hurt in the other person - resulting in a dialogue that at best is unhelpful and at worst further damages the relationship. (See our [Relationship Spirals tool](#) to learn about how pinches build on one another.)

The authors of the book [Crucial Conversations](#) share a useful frame to explain why humans enter conversations armored and ready to defend, or battle for their point of view. Defenses go up when we believe one of two things:

- The other person doesn't respect or like us (**mutual respect** is at risk) - e.g.
 - *They don't see me as a high performer*
 - *They don't think I'm smart*
 - *They don't see me as part of that group (or deserving a seat at that table)*

Navigating Workplace Pinches: Disarming Defenses

- Or the other person doesn't care about the same things we do (**mutual purpose** is at risk) - e.g.
 - They don't care about the impact of this decision on my team
 - They don't value equity
 - They are a micromanager, and my autonomy is important to me

Create Safety to Disarm Defenses

Starting a healthy conversation requires us to both do the inner work to get ourselves centered (stay tuned for another tool on that topic!) and also disarm any defenses the other person might be holding. That sets us up for a dialogue where they feel recognized, affirmed and able to listen.

Here are three techniques named by the authors of [Crucial Conversations](#) to make the conversation "safe" before diving in:

	Description	Sample Sentence Stems	Examples
Establish Mutual Respect and Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorm what the person may be thinking at their worst about your motivations. • Start by reassuring them of your care / respect for them, or speaking to the things you both care about 	I appreciate / admire ____ (about you or your work or expertise on this project). I know you really value _____. I know ____ is really important to both of us.	"I so appreciate the content expertise you bring to this project. This is so strong." "I know you really value autonomy in your work. I want us to get to a place where you own this independently."
Contrast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address potential misunderstandings that may cause the pinch. • Share what you don't and do want them to think. 	I don't want _____. I do want _____	"I don't want you to think I don't trust you. I do .." "I don't pretend this was a 'normal' or straightforward project. It has been .."
Take accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider and share anything you could've done differently. • Name any way you may have contributed (even if not speaking up sooner!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I realize I _____ • I should have _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I realize I didn't give you much time / context / direction..." • "I didn't take time to understand XYZ before we began..."

Note - You might employ one or more of these tactics during a conversation. There's no fixed order to follow; you can adapt based on how you want the conversation to flow.

Practice Using the Techniques

Navigating Workplace Pinches: Disarming Defenses

Before you apply these techniques to your own situation, select at least two scenarios below and practice developing your own statements.

Scenario 1

You're about to talk to Taylor who missed a major milestone on the new talent strategy rollout. You both have access to the shared project plan and you've previously requested the team notate in the project plan when things are delayed. You want to raise the missed deadline and ensure it does not become a trend. You realize you could have shown Taylor how to use the project plan as you recently introduced a new project management system to your team without training. You do not think this is reflective of their overall performance and you know Taylor holds herself to a high standard. They are often harder on themselves than others are on them.

Draft a statement to...

Establish Mutual Respect and Purpose	
Contrast	
Take accountability (if applicable)	

Scenario 2

Your colleague Jordan is in their first year and has worked intentionally to build strong relationships. You've noticed they work hard on their pieces of collaborative projects and seek to get them to a final draft before sharing with the team for feedback. They don't want to waste anyone's time and they want to show with the team what they are capable of. However your team takes a collectivist approach to the work and find the quality is higher when you work together from working draft through completion. You are confident Jordan is more than capable and you need them to grow in comfort sharing rough drafts.

Draft a statement to...

Establish Mutual Respect and Purpose	
Contrast	
Take accountability (if applicable)	

Navigating Workplace Pinches: Disarming Defenses

Scenario 3

Your colleague Chris wants to discuss a salary raise and inquire about a promotion. Based on the performance you have seen, you don't think that Chris is quite at a stage where they should have a raise or a promotion. You want to discuss with them what you see as the gap to get them there and communicate that you are committed to working with them to get there and you are confident in their ability to get there. You are worried they may feel undervalued.

Draft a statement to...

Establish Mutual Respect and Purpose	
Contrast	
Take accountability (if applicable)	

Application

Consider an upcoming challenging conversation you need to have with a colleague. What might offend them? What might they think that you are thinking that could make them defensive? What do they need to have recognized and affirmed before they are able to listen?

Circle or highlight the technique(s) you want to use and use one of the sentence stems in the table above to plan for how you might ease any tension. Draft your statement to lower defenses below.

Establish Mutual Respect and Purpose

Contrast

Take accountability

Connect

Want to talk through a challenging conversation or role play how you might lower defenses? Or maybe you want support leading your team through this exercise. Connect with us [here](#) to chat.

Other Resources You Might Find Helpful

- [Relationship Spirals Tool](#)
- [How to Start the Conversation Right Tool](#)
- [Working Styles Tool](#)

About this Resource:

Thank you to Crucial Learning for your rich thinking on how to start challenging conversations. Learn more about Crucial Learning at <https://cruciallearning.com>.

The book links above support [Marcus Books](#), the nation's oldest Black-owned independent bookstore located in Oakland, California.

[To Get Your Own Editable Copy of this Template, Click Here**.](#)