

# WORKING ON DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS.



We all have times in our lives when we need to have a difficult conversation, maybe with a work colleague, friend or family member.

As a leader it is part of your role to be able to hold such conversations when appropriate and not shy away from them. Often difficult conversations are around emotional or difficult

performance and conduct issues, so getting them right is extremely important. Get it wrong and the outcomes could be employee absence, less efficient and effective work or even worse, a grievance. Get it right and you can improve levels of performance, employee engagement and attendance.

Handling the difficult conversation requires skill and empathy, but ultimately, it requires the courage to go ahead and do it. The more you get into the habit of facing these issues squarely, the more adept you will become at it.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE CONVERSATION

Before going into the conversation, ask yourself some questions:

### 1. What is your purpose for having the conversation?

**What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome?**

Watch for hidden purposes. You may think you have honourable goals, like giving information or helping them understand, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.

### 2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions?

You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalised, but be cautious about assuming that this was the speaker's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.

### 3. What buttons of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants?

Take a look at personal history and what might be being triggered. You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotions has to do with you, not them.

### 4. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it?

If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.

### 5. Who is the person? What might they be thinking about the situation? Are they aware of the problem?

If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are his/her needs and fears? What solution would they suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as a partner.

### 6. What are your needs and fears?

Are there any concerns? Could there be?

### 7. How have you contributed to the problem?

How has the other person?

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## FOUR STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME

Follow this four step model to achieve a successful outcome:

### STEP ONE: INQUIRY

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity

### STEP TWO: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgement means showing that you've heard and understood

### STEP THREE: ADVOCACY

Express your views and represent your interests

### STEP FOUR: PROBLEM-SOLVING

Now start building solutions

#### STEP ONE: INQUIRY

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don't know anything (you really don't), and try to learn as much as possible about the person you are going to talk to and their point of view.

Pretend you're entertaining a visitor from another planet, and find out how things look on that planet, how certain events affect the other person, and what the values and priorities are. If the person really was from another planet, you'd be watching their body language and listening for unspoken energy as well. Do that here. What do they really want? What are they not saying? Let the other person talk until they have finished.

Don't interrupt except to acknowledge. Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you. Try to learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush things.

#### STEP THREE: ADVOCACY

When you sense that the person you are talking to has expressed all of their energy on the topic, it's your turn.

What can you see from your perspective that they have missed? Help clarify your position without minimising theirs.

For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. And I think I am. When I introduce problems with a project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. I don't mean to be a critic, though perhaps I sound like one.

Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."

#### STEP TWO: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Acknowledgement means showing that you've heard and understood. Try to understand the other person so well you can make 'their' argument for them. Then do it. Explain back to them what you think they are really going for.

They will not change unless they see that you understand their point of view. Then they might, although there are no guarantees. Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up.

Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement, but you can keep them separate. If you say, "this sounds really important to you", it doesn't mean you're going to go along with their decision.

#### STEP FOUR: PROBLEM-SOLVING

Now you're ready to begin building solutions.

Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here. Ask the person you are talking to what they think might work. Whatever they say, find something you like and build on it.

If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage. If you've been successful in centering, adjusting your attitude, and engaging with inquiry and useful purpose, building sustainable solutions will be easy.

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## Hints & Tips

- i** Keep your goals realistic – you can't ever eliminate the stress you'll feel around telling your supplier you're cutting back, but you can reduce it. Spend your energy on preparation – focus on developing a plan or script
- i** Give bad news upfront – tough messages should be simply and clearly stated in the first sentence
- i** Adopt the "and" stance – take control of the situation by pre-empting distractions, objections and blame by using "and". For instance, "I know you worked all night and I know you want to do well" or "I know the graphics team get things wrong sometimes and I could have been clearer in my direction to you"
- i** Get out of the 'blame frame' – each person involved in the situation has a different objective story about what happened. Your goal is not to judge who is right and wrong, rather to manage him/her to achieve better outcomes in the future
- i** Paraphrase – to create clarity and to let people know you are genuinely listening, summarise what they are telling you and ask them to do the same
- i** Be prepared for bad reactions – finger-pointing, denial, arguments and tears are all possible outcomes of tough conversations. You cannot control the other person's reactions, but you can anticipate them and be emotionally ready
- i** Pretend it is 3 months or 10 years from now – put the difficult conversation in perspective by thinking about the future. The conversations that are hardest right now will seem less daunting.

## Links & References

1. <http://www.JudyRinger.com>
2. Carmichael, S. (2010) *Difficult Conversations: 9 Common Mistakes*. Harvard Business Review (available online: <https://hbr.org/2010/10/difficult-conversations-9-common-mistakes>).