

How can HR navigate difficult conversations?

'Keep in mind you only have the power to control what you bring to the conversation'



BY [John Hilton](#) / 01 Jul 2020 / Share



Many HR professionals struggle just as much as anyone else to manage the stress and anxiety they feel when faced with the tough conversations that inevitably arise, according to Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo.

Typically, at the heart of the issue is a very human desire to avoid situations that make ourselves, or other people feel emotionally uncomfortable, added Gately.

“Optimising your impact in an HR or a leadership role takes engaging in the types of honest conversations that enable people to understand, accept and take ownership for shifting their reality,” said Gately.

“Often for example, its necessary to guide people to not only build greater self awareness, but also develop the character traits and master the behaviours needed to allow them to be a more successful member of the team.

“Avoiding or ‘tip toing’ around the issue, or expressing frustration and being aggressive don’t help.”

Gately added that honest and at times tough conversations are necessary if we’re serious about getting the best from people at work.

“Contemplate for a moment how often you have seen issues go unresolved or worsen because the leaders involved simply didn’t want to have a necessary chat,” said Gately.

“Have you or other HR people you know lived to regret your decision to let things slide so a difficult conversation could be avoided?”

Successfully navigating difficult conversations starts with understanding more about yourself. Identify what types of conversations you typically find difficult and why.

Common examples include conversations with people who hold strongly opposing views, or those that are likely to be emotionally charged or lead to conflict.

When the stakes are high most people struggle to keep their emotions entirely in check. Gately offers the following advice:

Reframe the conversation

If you decide the conversation is a difficult one – it will be. It really is that simple. Reframing the conversation is a powerful way of shifting your mindset to one that is more optimistic and helpful. Focus on the value of the conversation and ultimately how it will help to create desirable outcomes.

For example, rather than thinking you are punishing someone for how they have behaved, choose to see it as working to save them from themselves.

In other words, having a tough but respectful conversation with this person, is a part of your efforts to support them to shift their approach before an avoidable decision to terminate their employment is reached.

Be prepared

When preparing for the conversation, ask yourself “how can I be entirely honest while at the same time being respectful”.

Spend some time reflecting on the nature of the other person and how their character or circumstances may influence their approach to the conversation. Be prepared to tailor your own style to optimise the likelihood of the other person being receptive to healthy dialogue.

Manage you in the moment

Among the most powerful choices you can make is to be comfortable with discomfort. Often emotionally charged responses reflect our unconscious desire to flee from or fight our way out of uncomfortable situations. Observe the influence adrenaline is having on your mind and body and accept it as natural.

Breath. It's common for people to hold their breath when in stressful situations which undermines our capacity to think and respond effectively.

The box breathing technique is just one of the many recommended ways of focusing on your breath and regaining a sense of emotional control. Breathe in to a count of four, hold for four, exhale for four and hold again for another count of four.

Slow down and take the time that is needed to work through the issues. Keep the conversation on track but also avoid the all too common mistake of rushing through so everyone can escape the discomfort they feel.

Engage well

Healthy dialogue is more likely to be maintained when both parties choose to listen to understand.

As author Stephen Covey famously said, "most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply". Stay in the conversation with an open mind, courage and vulnerability.

When opinions clash and emotions run high don't look for ways to win, punish or keep the peace.

At the end of the day keep in mind you only have the power to control what you bring to the conversation.

Other people will respond in ways that reflect their own perceptions of reality and emotions associated with that. The best you can do is adopt an approach that is both honest and respectful.

