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How to Navigate Difficult Conversations

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Research consistently paints a bleak picture when it comes to the willingness and ability of people to engage in difficult conversations in the workplace. One study found 66 per cent of people feel stressed when they know a difficult conversation is coming. Another report suggests 70 per cent of us avoid conversations we perceive to be difficult.

Many of the HR professionals I work with struggle just as much as anyone else in managing the stress and anxiety they feel when faced with tough conversations that inevitably arise. Typically, at the heart of the issue is a very human desire to avoid situations that make ourselves, or other people feel emotionally uncomfortable.

Optimising your impact in an HR or leadership role requires you to engage in honest and courageous conversations that enable people to understand, accept and take ownership for shifting their reality.

Often, for example, it's 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-toeing' around the issue, or expressing frustration and being aggressive don't help.



Honest and tough conversations are necessary if we're serious about getting the best from people at work. Contemplate for a moment how often do you see issues go unresolved or worsen because the leaders involved simply didn't have the courage to have that necessary chat and then live to regret that decision to let things slide so a difficult conversation could be avoided?

Successfully navigating difficult conversations starts with understanding more about yourself. Identify the 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.

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 how it will ultimately help create desirable outcomes.

For example, rather than thinking that 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 part of your effort 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 and respectful at the same time?" 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 the uncomfortable. Often emotionally charged responses reflect our unconscious desire to flee from or fight our way out of uncomfortable situations. Observe how the adrenaline effect is affecting your mind and body and accept it as natural.

Breathe. 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 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

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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 that 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.