

Having Those Difficult Conversations with Ease

As managers and supervisors, having an uncomfortable conversation is something that is inevitable. This may be as a result of poor performance, an investigation into unwelcomed behaviour, or a poor attitude with offensive or unprofessional conduct occurring in the workplace regularly. When you had that conversation was it easy, probably not. What is the risk of not having those difficult conversations? You may get more of the same behaviour or they may get angry with you. However, if the behaviour needs to change, who are you defending by not saying anything to that person? Ask yourself: how will they improve if they do not know there is anything wrong?

It is always easy to praise employees. The conversation becomes tough when employees feel the stakes are high, when perception varies regarding the circumstances of the events and when emotions are strong. Regrettably, these are generally the type of performance-based conversations we encounter. Learning to address difficult issues in a timely manner, use clear communication and create a well-developed plan for improvement is crucial for good performance management.

Before you have those difficult conversations I would like to share with you some guiding principles which may assist.

First remember you are completely responsible for your communication. How you respond and react to an individual is completely in your control. If you respond in anger to an angry person you will escalate the conversation to a negative outcome. So remain calm, in control and not defensive. You need to learn to respect each person's model of the world, not necessarily accepted but to understand their perception. Provide feedback rather than criticize. Finally remember to set your expectations high in order to receive better results. When we aim low we get disappointing results.

The work environment is not always rosy and bright. You may have experienced or seen others go through difficult conversations with a peer, a boss, a subordinate or a client. Good conversations are always pleasant and fruitful, leaving you with a feeling of accomplishment. However, this doesn't happen all the time. At work, business conversations can always end on a positive note if everyone involved has good communication skills.

Unfortunately, not all conversations can be that way. Often when you are faced with a difficult employee it may seem like you are talking to a stonewall.

I would like share a few tips in having those conversations with you:

- Keep the conversation private. Select a place where you can talk to the person privately, so you prevent involving other people or increasing the size of the problem.
- Be in control of the conversation. State the purpose of the conversation and what you hope to accomplish in the end.
- Listen and paraphrase. Hear out the other person, listen attentively and rephrase what they said. Clarify the points they made. Never interrupt unless the person is taking too much time or going into a different direction.
- Use the words "I" and instead of "you" and the word "and" should replace "but": The word "you" can make someone feel you are criticizing or accusing them. While the word "but" can be deemed argumentative and defensive. It also negates the value of whatever was said prior to it.
- Be direct and never judgmental. If you have something to say, whether it is good news or bad news, say it in a clear, simple, direct and tactful manner.
- Be prepared for negative reactions: Be prepared to diffuse the situation by taking a breath and bringing the conversation back to the facts.
- Involve the person in the solution. Involving the person in problem solving will make them feel valued.
- Say thank you. Thanking the person at the end of the conversation shows respect for them.

I have found the following six (6) step process to having difficult conversation with ease helpful.

Step 1: Gain clarity. The chance of clear communication increases when the sender thinks carefully beforehand about what to say. Check for agreement. Step back. Calm your mind. Put things in perspective. Sleep on it if you must.

Ask yourself:

- What is the most important thing we should be talking about today?
- What is the core, underlying issue?
- What current results is this creating?
- If nothing changes, what's likely to happen?
- What is the ideal outcome you want?
- What is the next vital step you need to take?

Step 2: Overrule avoidance. Make the conversation real. Avoidance is all about fear. Although you don't want to hurt their feelings, you need to maintain a healthy selfishness.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Will this help them?
- Are my feelings about what might happen making me avoid this?
- Is delivering this message consistent with my desired reputation?

If you answered yes then move to the next phases.

Step 3: Be present and execute the message, in two parts; one on one and with soft eyes and ears.

Step 4: Tackle the toughest challenge first...as Brian Tracy says: “eat that frog for breakfast” before it gets bigger throughout the day. Don’t make small talk. Get straight to the point. Think “I” not “YOU”. Start with an opening statement where you name the issue by providing a specific example that illustrates the behaviour or situation you want to change and the negative results it is currently creating in the workplace. Describe your emotions about the issue and clarify what is at stake if nothing changes. Identify your contribution to this problem and indicate your wish to resolve the issue then invite a response. Seek resolution as your expected outcome.

Step 5: Listen to your instincts; is this the right time to deliver this message? Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, besides, who am I to tell them? Listen to your internal voice. Test your perception.

Step 6: Take responsibility for your emotions. Know when to be silent. The rule is you have two ears and one mouth. The saying goes: “So many words; so little substance”. Remember to slow down and put space between your thoughts. Practice having the conversation and expect success.

So, next time you are faced with a difficult conversation, don't fret. Remember, difficult conversations are opportunities for you to turn something negative into something positive. It's a challenge you should be willing to face in the work place. After all, a life without challenges is uninspiring.