



## Managing the difficult conversation: Middle - Senior Leaders

Like many of you, I have worked with communication experts, read the literature, completed role training and coaching training and have had my fair share of hard conversations. But even still, I can find it hard to have difficult conversations. A number of years ago, I was told by a mentor that 'left unchallenged, unresolved conflicts in the workplace will slowly erode your culture and will eventually cause problems... and you will still need to have the conversation.

So do it now.' How true!



Often, the reason for a difficult conversation is clearly defined by a particular action. Though sometimes it isn't. It is often these trickier, harder to point to actions, that cumulate and are not dealt with. We leave them aside, and they continue on unchallenged.

In my thinking, I consider two aspects of professional competence here as 'conduct' and 'performance'. It is often the 'conduct' concerns that are easier to raise, as they directly impact on the team or on students. Whereas it is the 'performance' conversations that are left to one side. These can range from something small, like having people answer emails during meetings (a pet peeve of mine), through to someone not contributing to developing curriculum or failing to deliver on teaching standards.

So whilst this is not an exhaustive list, here are three keys to managing difficult conversations in your teams.

### 1. Proactively create a team based on positive leadership and trust

Recently, I had a conversation with a faculty about changes to subject offerings. Quite reasonably, the faculty were concerned: would there be any impact to overall loads, why was the school doing this, and did it reflect negatively on them as a team?

*In approaching this difficult conversation, I knew that I had formed good relationships with many people on the team. So whilst I felt the relationship was good and they would feel ok, I also felt confident to talk through the challenges in looking at the changes and explaining the why. Trust is imperative, and goes two ways.*

In his book on proactive positive leadership, Professor Kim Cameron (2013) describes how even when you work through difficult conversations, ultimately they can form stronger relationships within a team. This occurs through productive dialogue based on shared values.

Having trust as the underpinning value of a successful culture is well-known: trust makes it safe for us to make errors, and it becomes the foundation of taking a strength-based approach to managing our teams. Seminal work from Bryk and Schneider (Trust in Schools, 2002) has shown the importance of the connections between trust, social relationships and schools. They argue that high trust is a characteristic of schools that are prepared to change and improve.

According to Dr Jim Knight, we know that trust is formed by 5 interrelating factors

- Character (honesty, transparency and fairness);
- Reliability (doing what we say we will do);
- Competence;
- Warmth (affirmation, connectedness); and
- Stewardship (an attitude of benevolence to a person).

So, what does this look like in management? I think it starts with how we set out our teams. What are the agreed standards (behavioural and competency) that we will strive toward? How do we hold each other to account? How will we reward and recognise behaviour when it is working? And importantly, how do we 'measure and monitor' the effectiveness of how we create a positive environment?

## 2. Plan your conversation and then rehearse if before it occurs

There are many brilliant frameworks for managing difficult conversations. Several of these feature the following principles:

- *Preparation for the conversation (using a framework or script to explain the costs of the behaviour and the outline for the meeting);*
- *Separate the person from the behaviour (protecting the person's integrity, focusing on the behaviour which is changeable); and*
- *Agree to next steps (reaching clarity and consequences).*

For the first part of my career, amongst the things that I feel I could have done better in the difficult conversations space, one was to ensure that the staff member had more of the information earlier.

An example that springs to mind is in dealing with a performance issue. The staff member in question looked at me and said – "how come this is the first I have heard of this? Why am I meeting with you now – couldn't my manager have had this conversation with me first?" It was true, the longer the manager had not dealt with the issue meant that the evidence had built up, but the staff member was not aware. Perhaps had there been more trust in the team, this could have been raised earlier.

In her brilliant book, *Fierce Conversations* (2004), Susan Scott argues that 'we live our life one conversation at a time'. Conversations (difficult or otherwise) are an invitation for us to improve how we communicate and what we need. Scott offers some excellent frameworks for managing conversations and also invites us, as managers, to be 'present.' Being present means to be focused and emotionally available.

When we think about difficult conversations, it is actually really normal to be stressed and this is why it is great to have some notes or a structure for questions prepared. You can even say that at the beginning of the meeting:

'Thanks for joining me today to talk about this. I know this conversation may be hard for you, so I don't want to rush anything. I've also written down a few things to cover so will refer to this as we go through our chat today. I want you to know that if you feel uncomfortable or unable to respond – that's ok. We can pause, take a time out, or arrange to meet again. But this meeting is about hearing from you. I have a couple of concerns that have been raised, but there are always different perspective and today I am here to hear yours.'



I don't think I've ever met someone who enjoys role-play, but it is a powerful way of preparing for difficult conversations. Considering how you will hold your notes, how you will take minutes, what your opening and closing remarks might be, who is playing what role, managing your own nerves as well as considering different contingencies are all worth testing before the meeting.

## 3. Agree to next steps

One of the best things about coaching culture, that is now infusing into many professional work environments, is that it has two main drivers: 'seeking clarity' and 'taking action'. Sometimes it can seem like you need to get to a final conclusion very quickly. But the key is actually to invite a response, enable the staff member to consider the feedback, and to develop a clearer picture of what is going on. Only then should you take actions, however small.

A key point here is to, where one can, maintain and protect your colleague's autonomy. In his book *Never Split the Difference* (2016), former FBI negotiator Chris Vos explains how it is really important in a difficult conversation to listen to enable autonomous choice moments to occur. This can be done by using a technique like 'summary and confirmation.' Simply replaying back a summary of the actions or clarity can be a powerful way of inviting the person you are working with to consider the feedback whilst summarising and enabling action.



An example here is:

So in our conversation today, what has become clearer to you?

What are the steps you might need to take?

Or

*Let's take a moment to summarise. In our conversation, I raised some performance concerns, and if they continued what the impact on the team and the students could be. You then provided some more context around it. It seems like there is still a bit of a gap between the feedback and your sense of what was happening. Is that a fair summary? What might be the next step from here do you think?*

*Finally, as hard as these conversations can be, they are opportunities for mutual growth. The longer we leave them, the longer we push the opportunity to grow away.*

## References

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- Scott, S. (2004). Fierce conversations : achieving success at work & in life, one conversation at a time. Berkley Books.
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## THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

1. Are there any conversations you probably should have, but don't want to?
2. How much time, in your teams, do you put into proactively preparing your team culture?

## USE IT NOW

- Plan a difficult conversation before it takes place
- Roleplay the conversation by yourself or with another colleague (confidence is a must of course so this maybe a peer or superior)
- Ensure the conversation focuses on the behaviour not the person

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