Handling difficult conversations at work

SURVEY RESULTS AND GUIDE

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Handling difficult conversations: executive summary

Difficult conversations are a fact of life in any workplace, whether they involve a manager delivering difficult feedback, communicating change or discussing behavioural issues, or more everyday problems such as disagreeing with a superior, responding to bad behaviour or dealing with those coming into work late. What’s more, with another recession on the horizon, a business resorting to pushing the ‘redundancy button’ is a constant threat to jobs and cause of pressure on middle managers, unconfident in their own job security whilst often tasked with breaking bad news to others.¹

Yet it is the job of managers to be responsible and accountable to their direct reports and own line managers, regardless of how difficult the conversations; developing managers who are able to tackle these head on is essential if businesses want to maintain employee engagement and productivity in tough times.

Are managers confidently and assertively tackling difficult conversations?

At the beginning of 2012 we surveyed over 100 management and human resources professionals to gain an insight into how difficult conversations are being handled at work. We found that managers rate their confidence dealing with difficult conversations more highly than it is perceived by others, suggesting that in reality conversations can often be put off or mishandled. When asked to rate their own confidence in dealing with difficult conversations with any other individual at work, over two thirds (68%) of managers rated themselves as either extremely or very confident. However, when we put the same question to HR managers, only one in five (21%) felt that managers in their organisation were either extremely confident or very confident to address difficult conversations and almost half (47%) of those surveyed felt that managers were either extremely or very unconfident. Furthermore, half of HR managers felt that difficult conversations are either frequently or often referred to HR when they could be effectively dealt with by the manager. Overall our results suggested that sensitive conversations are often being delayed, risking a detrimental effect on staff morale.

Whilst preparation is key to ensuring a difficult conversation has a clear goal and conflict is well managed, managers intimidated by difficult conversations may spend too long on this. When we asked line managers what their first step was when addressing a difficult conversation, for two thirds (67%) it would be to prepare by clarifying the facts. In addition, when asked who they would approach for advice when dealing with difficult conversations with a boss, direct report or

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peer, just 4% of line managers said that they would go to no one. When we asked HR managers what they would like managers in their organisation to do differently when handling difficult conversations, 42% of answers focused on actually having the difficult conversation, rather than putting it off, whereas only one in five (19%) focused on better preparation.

Preparation is essential - particularly when breaking news that needs to be delivered tactfully and backed up by facts. However, much of the difficulty behind a conversation lies in reacting to the person’s emotional response and dealing with conflict – areas that long-term coaching and working on emotional intelligence can support. The imperative that leadership development focuses on these areas was reinforced when we asked line managers why they put off difficult conversations; preparation was the response of only one in four (25%) and the majority (63%) explained that it was due to apprehension of how the other person would react.

Our survey showed that the importance of handling difficult conversations promptly and effectively is broadly recognised, with all HR managers surveyed saying that their organisation provided some kind of support for handling difficult conversations to at least some of their managers; 84% use coaching, 48% use training, 16% use written manuals and 12% provide support from HR. However, when asked how well HR feel managers are trained in handling difficult conversations the average rating was 3/5 – neither well nor badly; only one in three (32%) HR managers felt that managers were trained either extremely well or very well and one in four (24%) opted for very badly or extremely badly. Furthermore, less than one in ten (7%) of line managers stated that they never put off difficult conversations, with over half (60%) saying that they either often or sometimes put them off.

The importance of handling difficult conversations early

Handling a conversation early can prevent issues reaching more formal stages such as disciplinaries, grievances or employment tribunals, and quash any potential for problems to grow. This negative impact of delaying a difficult conversation and allowing the problem to escalate can include lost business, damage to company reputation, higher staff turnover, missed targets, loss of morale, lower productivity, greater stress and even missed opportunities.

Context is everything: How many difficult conversations are actually the result of something happening that is unexpected? In the workplace, not many.

There is a context to every difficult conversation – be it a performance management meeting, telling a team member they didn’t get a promotion etc – and if you manage that well with clear communication the difficult conversation won’t be so unexpected and hopefully less ‘difficult’.

- Martin Couzins, content, communication and engagement specialist

This guide from Learning Consultancy Partnership is available to be freely distributed and provides some practical starting points for individuals to assess and adapt their approaches to difficult conversations. Our guide focuses mainly on managers, although much of the advice can apply to any situation where difficult conversations arise. Further training workshops or individual coaching sessions may be beneficial e.g. on developing emotional intelligence or how to give and receive feedback, particularly for managers under certain pressures such as the task of communicating redundancies.
Learning how to handle difficult conversations is key to leadership development and coaching work. In our experience it has been a recurring subject brought up by both managers and HR; the following advice represents what we have learnt over the years. We hope that this short guide helps to equip managers with the tools to handle difficult conversations, taking them a step closer to our vision; workplaces that recognise how conflicts and change may be challenges but always represent great opportunities to learn and grow – as individuals and organisations.

Difficult conversations are one of the biggest challenges we face in our lives. Because all the action is focused on this one, pivotal activity, our perspective becomes shifted. All the anger, frustration, fear, excitement is distilled down to those few moments where we have to bite that bullet and create what we perceive will be momentous stress.

What we lose sight of in the run up, is the value this interaction will create. So often, it’s too easy to let it go because we fear what will happen in that short burst of what is often confrontation, and carry on. The issue at hand drifts away from us and becomes an acceptance we live with.

This ongoing burden is light, relative to the difficult conversation we avoided. Or so we think. No-one can easily evaluate the perhaps life-time impact of the drip feed of irritation we accepted. No-one can appreciate the balance between a difficult conversation stress level and that miniscule annoyance we let pass.

Yet we know that by avoiding, we let ourselves down, perhaps once more even, continuing with a pattern we know so well. We did not take the steps we might have taken and we failed again. To carry that with us is as significant as it gets.

- Martin Haworth, management coach and trainer

Actually, to be honest, I don’t find any conversations to be difficult anymore. At one time I did. I found it very difficult to terminate someone, it would take me days with a lot of help and coaching to do that. But if you are secure in what you have to say, that it is the truth, and you are only trying to help someone, bring something to their attention that they may not be aware of, then you have every right as a manager or a boss to sit them down, and say, “You may not like what I am about to say to you, but trust me, if I didn’t care about you, I wouldn’t be saying this.” Something to that effect. It’s all in the delivery, and if it is said with care and kindness, honestly, in order to help the other person become aware of something they might not be aware of, to give them the opportunity to correct or better themselves, why not? I don’t see any problems with talking about anything if handled well.

- Cheryl Roshak, transition and career coach
Who are Learning Consultancy Partnership?

Learning Consultancy Partnership are an East Sussex based firm providing leadership training, executive coaching and learning and development consultancy. Additional specialist services are language and communications training, train the trainer, 360° feedback and psychometric testing - including conflict resolution tool Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) and personality assessment Myers Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®). To find other research papers and articles please visit our website lcp.org.uk or call us on 01273 590232.

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- Martin Couzins, content, communication and engagement specialist and owner of itsdevelopmental Ltd. http://itsdevelopmental.com
- Martin Haworth, management coach and trainer, as well as a popular business writer. He works one-to-one with individuals, in a variety of management roles as well as teams, in the UK, worldwide and virtually. http://coachtrainlearn.com
- Ann Lewis, leadership coach and director of Your Great Workplace, offering leadership coaching and organisational development. She is also author of Recover Your Balance – how to bounce back from bad times at work. http://yourgreatworkplace.com
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- Katherine Connolly, managing director of Keeping HR Simple, an independent HR consultancy specialising in working with small businesses. http://www.keepinghrsimple.co.uk
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- David Winter, acting head of C2 Careers & Professional Development Consultancy, who help organisations to develop engaged and effective employees by transforming attitudes and actions. http://www.c2careers.com/
1. What is a difficult conversation?

A difficult conversation is a situation in which at least two parties are engaged where (a) there are differing opinions, perceptions, and needs/wants, (b) feelings and emotions run strong, and (c) the consequences or stakes for us are significant. – J. Russell (2009)

This short guide deals with difficult conversations primarily in a work context, such as dealing with disagreements with colleagues, breaking bad news to a direct report, or broaching a certain subject with a manager. What actually makes such conversations difficult will often depend less on the actual topic and more on an individual’s relationships and personal value system.

Based on emotion

Difficult conversations are based on emotion; they are difficult because we and/or others have strong feelings about them. Fear of how the conversation will be handled and what the consequences will be can lead to us putting it off.

Based on relationships

A conversation and our perception of it will differ a lot according to the relationships involved, such as two colleagues, a line manager and direct report, or a line manager and his own manager. Further dimensions can be added by those who are influencing the conversation without participating, such as a spouse who insists the employee must ask their manager for a payrise, or a line manager ‘caught in the middle’ having to justify her manager’s decisions to her team.

Three kinds of difficult conversation

For Douglas Stone et al (1999), there are three key different types of conversation, some or all of which lie beneath the surface. Recognising the presence of these deeper conversations is to recognise why the conversation is difficult; this is key to avoiding conflict and having productive conversations:

1. The “What happened?” conversation, which usually involves disagreement over what happened, what should happen and who is at fault. It can involve each side feeling they are in the ‘right’, passing blame and misinterpreting the intentions behind a fault.
2. The feelings conversation, which concerns each party’s emotions and their validity. It is difficult because individuals must find away to understand and communicate their feelings.
3. The identity conversation, which is an internal conversation over what the situation tells each party about who she is. It is difficult because it can affect confidence and seem a threat to one’s identity.

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Embracing diversity whilst working together

In *The Magic of Conflict* (1988) Thomas Crum describes how visions behind a conflict may be surprisingly compatible; Crum takes the example of an employee lounge, which the employees feel they need, contrary to the employer: beyond the immediate conflict, considering interests, beliefs and feelings reveals shared visions, for example the employer wants to run their company economically and is concerned of the lounge’s expense whereas the employees know they will work better when they feel supported and be more productive if they have a comfortable place to relax – in this case there is a shared vision of a productive working environment with employees enabled to perform to their best. ¹

Today’s businesses and customers are diverse and interpretation of a single situation will depend on our own unique frame of reference e.g. our upbringing, values, knowledge, culture and experiences. Therefore an open mind and willingness to think again are essential. However, focusing on these differences risks making presumptions and failing to find potential agreement; finding places of similarity, is the first step to finding an effective compromise.

For me when considering what makes a difficult or challenging conversation it is important to ask where the difficulty lies? Is it difficult because of our own preconceptions, discomfort and perceived expectations, or is it difficult because of how the other person sees the situation or perhaps a mix of both?

There are many variables which affect how we find some things difficult to talk about and not others. For example, if you’ve been brought up with an ‘unwritten rule’ in your family that you don’t complain and make a scene but ‘put up with things as they are’, then it could be incredibly stressful to complain about the quality of a meal in a restaurant. On the other hand you may have a family value that says ‘don’t bottle things up it’s far healthier to get them out in the open’ in which case you may find that complaining is not a problem for you.

Becoming more self-aware by understanding your own personal values, experiences and motivations I believe can greatly improve the quality of all conversations whether they are seen as difficult or not. This awareness I think can help people to have more honest and authentic conversations because they recognise and acknowledge the level of discomfort they feel about a particular person or topic. - Claire Walsh, managing partner, Learning Consultancy Partnership

When staff are in conflict: Some years ago, I moved to a new employer. Once there, I discovered that two of my team, who sat within a couple of metres of each other, had not spoken for several years and communicated only by email. The original disagreement had been over a relatively trivial issue that had offended the older of the two. My predecessor told me that she had deliberately not encouraged them to make up because ‘if they’re not talking, they’re not gossiping’.

I believe that collaboration, particularly within small teams like mine, produces better outcomes than conflict, and I was not prepared to let the situation continue. Each was good at their job, and together they could be so much more. What to do?

I spoke with each of them individually, then together, making it clear that I needed them to work together, and that I would support them to build bridges. Both were reluctant at first, but agreed to try. Weeks of strained conversation ensued, and I knew that more would be needed in order to break down the wall they had built.

Eventually I engaged a team coach to facilitate an overnight awayday for the team. During the time we spent together, he created dialogues between pairs of people, during which they were asked to tell each other what they appreciated about them. That finally broke the ice, and by the time I left a few years later, the two worked really effectively together genuinely respected and liked each other. - Ann Lewis, leadership coach

2. How we respond to and approach difficult conversations

*Flexibility allows us to stretch rather than shrink in life.*
– Crum (1988)

### Look to yourself first

All of us may find ourselves on either side of a difficult conversation; if delivering the message we must be confident to tell the truth, and if receiving the message we must be able to handle the truth. Whichever position we’re in, an awareness of how we handle ourselves is essential to achieving positive conversations: for Stone et al (1999) “the more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation, and the higher the chances it will go well”.

### How do you emotionally respond to conflict?

The precursor to effective conflict management is an emotionally intelligent manager who is aware of their stress level, emotions and non-verbal communications.

Perhaps you are usually able to control your emotions and they have never affected you at work. However, failing to be honest to yourself about your feelings and holding them back can weaken your ability to concentrate upon and listen to the other person, increasing the risk of conflict. Furthermore, our emotions may reveal themselves in ways other than words, affecting our communication e.g. body language or tone of voice.

In order to better manage difficult conversations at work you should ask yourself: how does your body react to conflict e.g. emotion, anger, impatience? What are the warning signs? A useful analogy is to think about things that hook you into negative emotions, which will be as unique as you are. For example, some people like things explained in a lot of detail whereas others may only want the high level overview. In this instance a boss who likes high level may find themselves becoming increasingly irritated with a direct report who always feeds back in minute detail.

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5 Crum. P171
6 Stone et al. P.119
Which role do you adopt?

Have you ever cringed upon noticing yourself repeat a phrase your parents used to say? Or found yourself spontaneously acting like a child? Transactional analysis theory explains that we all have three potential states when we communicate: the childlike state which can be spontaneous or rebellious; the parent state which can be critical and judgemental or caring and nurturing, and the adult state which is logical and reasoned. All of us can use any of these states, consciously or unconsciously, according to who we are communicating with; being able to consciously choose our communication style will determine the type of response we invite.

Which mode do you find yourself using? If you want an adult response, it’s important that you’re not inadvertently encouraging otherwise; remember that using a parent mode e.g. “you aren’t allowed to do that”, will potentially invite an unhelpful childlike response, such as “that’s not fair, you’re being unreasonable”.

How to avoid parenting mode

Whilst agreement on the bare facts may be found, there may actually be disagreement over what these facts mean or what is important. Being flexible about what is “right” is a way to encourage a productive adult conversation. Stone et al (1999) recommend the “And Stance” which acknowledges your views and the others’ differing ones. This is also a way to manage conversations that involve complex emotions; these emotions can be acknowledged as important whilst not the one and only truth.

Shifting the emphasis from criticising the other to explaining how you feel can also change you from parent to adult, for example “you’re failing to meet targets” is far less productive that “I would really like to see results coming closer to the targets”. The first example seems to blame the individual, whereas the second explains clearly what you want and invites the other to helpfully suggest how this can be achieved.

Tackling a conversation from a proactive adult perspective, as opposed to a reactive child or parent one, will make you better prepared for the other’s response and more able to turn the conversations into a positive experience.

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7 See Stone et al.
3. Preparing for difficult conversations

*Think first to understand, then to be understood*

– Stephen R Covey (2004)⁶

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**Whose job is it?**
- It will usually be the manager’s role and rarely that of HR, unless it is more formal such as grievance or disciplinary and organisational procedures need to be followed.
- For a subject such as a payrise, then the initiative may need to be the employee’s; when thinking of broaching a difficult subject, think - is this important to me? Will it be addressed if I don’t bring it up? For other subjects - e.g. interpersonal issues - ask yourself whether the manager’s involvement is really a necessary step to resolving the issue.

**Do you need advice?**
- Whilst conversations can be the manager’s responsibility, sometimes support may be needed; seeking advice from appropriate colleagues such as a mentor can be helpful. However, it is critical that confidentiality is kept in mind at all times.
- If the conversation is part of a formal procedure such as a grievance or disciplinary then HR will advise on which organisational procedures to follow.

**Gather the information**
- Take time to gather facts and evidence - don’t rely on hearsay, check out the facts.
- Try to get a balanced view of the situation so you are not biased by one person’s account.

**Clarify the message**
- Clarify what you want to achieve by the end of the conversation and how this may work with their own goals, what do you want them to start doing, stop doing and change?
- Prepare potential solutions that could be discussed and determine how much you are willing to compromise.

**Prepare for the response**
- Consider the various points of view, including facts and feelings: How may they see it? What barriers and resistance are you likely to encounter?
- Consider how your own body reacts to conflict - what are the warning signs, what is likely to 'hook' you into an unproductive response? What can you watch out for in others?

**When and where?**
- Consider where to have the conversation to ensure privacy and find time that is suitable for both parties - towards the end of that day is probably not a good idea.

**Bite the bullet!**
- This is not a performance - once the information is gathered, the message clarified, responses prepared for and the time is planned, the matter should be addressed as soon as possible.

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It can be very challenging to counsel individuals regarding performance deficiencies due to the number of facets related to the process itself. Most managers are not HR Generalists and therefore should seek advice from their internal department regarding legal ramifications, process guidelines, verbal and written communications & performance plan development. I have found that larger companies have very clear steps that must be followed and smaller organizations may have less structure. Careful planning is key when it comes to setting expectations early and often and keeping lines of communication open.

I find that if managers have the right tools in their toolbox and utilize them effectively, conversations on performance become less daunting and more productive for both the employee and manager. Many jobs can be saved through effective management, communication & strategic planning.

- Evelyn Eury, management consulting professional

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An effective opening

Ensure you begin with a productive opening that introduces the subject clearly and concisely without beating around the bush - this part of the conversation can be practiced if you are nervous. Emphasise I rather than you to avoid encouraging a defensive response e.g. “I would really like to hear your point of view on this” or “I would really appreciate your help with figuring this out”. If the subject may be embarrassing or upsetting and is likely to be unexpected by the individual, use a soft entry and tell them the conversation may be difficult.

Starting a difficult conversation, having to face up to a difficult situation is usually something most people would like to avoid. But as we know, sometimes too well, letting issues continue and be ignored instead of confronting them can often make the situation worse. Situations that are ignored will escalate and they will likely impact more negatively on an individual’s motivation, productivity or performance.

Developing our skills to be better at having difficult conversations isn’t necessarily about acquiring new ones but rather adapting ones we have already. I would suggest one of the key ways we can managing our difficult conversations more effectively is by ensuring we prepare. In doing this we can feel more in control of them. Here are some good questions to ask yourself as part of your preparation for that difficult conversation.

- What’s the objective of the message I need to give?
- How will I ensure my message is understood?
- How will I broach the subject?
- What might the other person feel when they hear what I have to say?
- What might the other person respond back with?
- How will I conclude the discussion?
- How will I suggest what I want to happen next?

-Fiona McBride MSc, learning & development professional

It is difficult to tell employees that they are not meeting requirements on a project. Often times, employees try very hard, but simply don’t reach the goals set for them to complete the project on time. When this issue arises, it’s best to have evidence to turn to, so that it doesn’t seem like a personal attack. Keeping a responsibility assignment chart for each employee (with timeline milestones linked to live data) helps. This way, you can revert back to your notes and show them examples of where they didn’t meet expectations.

Alicia Clarke, outreach team member

What makes a conversation “difficult”? Sometimes it’s to do with sensitive subject matter. Sometimes it’s the person with whom we need to have the conversation that’s hard to deal with. Often, it’s our perception of how the conversation will go that makes it “difficult” before it’s even taken place. We tell ourselves that it’s going to be really tough and we worry ourselves sick about it. We even try to get someone else to have the conversation for us so we don’t have to!

Handling a difficult conversation is made much more bearable when you’re properly prepared. Preparing for the conversation means taking time to think about the best way to put your comments, thinking of ways the other person may react and planning your responses. Feeling well-prepared and able to deal with any scenario is key. The subject matter won’t be any less sensitive and the person you’re speaking to won’t be any less prickly, but the conversation itself will not be as difficult as you’d first feared.

-Katherine Connolly, HR consultant
4. Process for handling difficult reactions

Difficult reactions can happen at any stage of a conversation. Many of the reactions are difficult because the other person is feeling emotional about the feedback or topic e.g. angry, upset etc. It is important to acknowledge and deal with the emotion before moving on with the conversation; a way to do this is to use the following process:

- **Acknowledge & invite**: As the difficult reaction is expressed the level of emotion will rise and it is important to acknowledge and invite the other person to express their point of view, including how they feel about the situation. Acknowledging their feelings before moving onto the facts will reduce a defensive response.

- **Explore the issues**: The next phase is to ask relevant questions to fully understand their issues and concerns. Remember the quality of the questions you ask and the level of empathy you show determines the quality of the conversation. Communicate your views and feeling too using 'I' statements. Clarify feelings and facts from both parties.

- **Look for agreement**: Summarise the points you agree on, to encourage greater collaboration.

- **Evaluate potential solutions**: Discuss options of how the situation can be resolved satisfactorily from both points of view.

- **Agree on the way forward**: Agree how you will move forward and who will do what. Should another review be planned for the future?

How to actively listen

Active listening is essential to handling an emotive conversation; for Stone et al (1999) “the single most important rule about managing the interaction is this: you can’t move the conversation in a more positive direction until the other person feels heard and understood”.

What can you watch out for in others? Consider the non-verbal signs such as facial expressions, eye contact, body movements and personal space (e.g. leaning in).

Whilst you can prepare for an emotional response, it can be difficult to predict what this will be e.g. anger, fear, anxiety, shock, isolation or jealousy. Even when emotions are apparent, it can be dangerous to assume what these are and questions should be used to identify them, such as “how do you feel about that?” or “you don’t feel happy about what I’ve just said – why is that?”. It’s important to clarify how the other person is feeling so that you can respond accordingly.

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9 Stone et al. P.206.
Showing some empathy need not be seen as watering down the message, for example “I know what you mean” is less effective than “It seems like you are concerned about the impact of this change on your financial situation” in both showing them support and clarifying their feelings.

**Clarifying fact and feeling**

Whilst feelings come before fact, for highly emotive conversations they need to be effectively managed throughout and cannot be simply dealt with at the beginning of a conversation. Recognising where someone is on a facts/feeling scale can help you to empathise and acknowledge their emotions – before moving back onto the facts of the matter.

**An example:** Are you OK? (Feelings) > Listen & probe how they are e.g. so how do you feel about that? (Feelings) > So what actually happened? (Lead into facts) > How did that affect you? (Feelings) > So what can you do about it? (Lead into facts)

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**Difficult Conversations: What Not To Say**

No one likes having those difficult conversations. You know the ones? Conversations where you have to discuss sensitive or difficult subjects in the workplace. Those awful times when you have to break bad news to a direct report, to tell your Manager you feel you’re being bullied or to tell someone their personal hygiene isn’t all it might be! It can be tricky to manoeuvre your way through these situations without putting your foot in it or making the situation worse.

So here’s a brief guide to **What NOT to say when you’re having difficult conversations**...

- “I know how you feel…”
  (No you don’t you’re not them!)
- “This is difficult for me too”
  (They may not care and you might inflame the situation)
- “Your attitude is all wrong”
  (What does that mean? Be specific)
- “If I was you I’d...”
  (You’re still not them!)
- “Here’s what you should do…”
  (Sometimes it’s better to help people find solutions which work for them instead of telling them what to do)
- “First let me tell you what I think…”
  (It’s often best to let them tell you their side first so you can understand their position before you leap in)
- “I don’t really know much about this but...”
  (Well you should! Do the research. Get your facts straight before you start)
- “You smell...”
  (Just No!)

-Julie McDonald, chartered psychologist

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Most people avoid difficult conversations because they fear having an uncomfortable moment. I think a bad few minutes is better than an uncomfortable work-life. Going into the discussion with an optimistic heart and mind will make working it out much easier. Trust that you can convey the sensitive issue or problem, and potential solutions, in a caring way that will help put the other person at ease.

Always have difficult conversations in private to avoid any embarrassment, and to avoid spreading negativity in the office. Remember that you can be heard behind closed doors, so keep the volume low and the vibe as calm as possible. In addition to the words you speak, which surprisingly convey as little as seven percent of communication, be aware of your nonverbal messages. Leaning forward and facing someone unconsciously communicates receptiveness and interest. For the business relationship to work and grow, through the difficulty and after it has been resolved, you both have to feel like you have each other’s support.

-Barton Goldsmith Ph.D., author, keynote speaker and psychotherapist.
Giving challenging feedback - get better bread for your sandwich

After all these years, the traditional feedback ‘sandwich’ (positive-growth area-positive) is looking somewhat stale and curled up at the edges. This is especially true when the ‘growth area’ filling is particularly challenging or sensitive. The standard advice about making your feedback concrete, specific, descriptive and immediate still stands but it’s a good idea to work on some artisan bread for that sandwich.

First though, ask yourself a question and answer honestly: Why do I want to give this feedback? Do I want the person to improve or do I want to punish them and make myself feel better? If it’s the latter. Stop right there. Things will go wrong.

Even if you genuinely want to help the person to improve, things can still go wrong. Any challenge can be perceived as a threat by the person receiving the feedback, thus making them unreceptive. The more challenging the feedback, the more likely it is that a perceived threat will be escalated. A challenge to one’s behaviour (‘There’s something wrong with your actions’) can escalate into a challenge to one’s motivations (‘There’s something wrong with your intentions’). Even worse a challenge to one’s intentions can be interpreted as a challenge to one’s identity (‘There’s something wrong with you’). If handled badly, negative feedback can lead to defensive behaviour designed to preserve one’s sense of identity. To reduce the risk of this, it is important first — genuinely — to affirm and validate an individual’s sense of identity and their intentions before challenging their behaviours. This helps both you and them to have a positive contextual relationship for the feedback.

Just making someone aware of their unwanted behaviours will not guarantee that they adopt more appropriate ones, so the other end of your sandwich has to focus on helping them to develop alternative options for future behaviours. Identify potential triggers for undesired behaviours and make them aware of the range of behaviour choices they have in such situations. Help them to link positive behaviours to desired outcomes. Check very carefully that they are confident about how to implement the new behaviours.

- David Winter, careers consultant

Difficult Conversations: Acting as a go-between

Setting the scene:
Alpha had been in his job for just over a year and, despite a lot of support from his line manager, his workplace performance had remained consistently poor. Alpha’s line manager Beta, was asked by her boss Gamma (who had appointed Alpha in the first instance), to compile a detailed report of Alpha’s poor performance over the course of the year. Following this, Alpha and Beta were asked to attend a meeting with Gamma ...

What happened next:
Gamma asked Alpha to explain why his performance was so poor. Taken aback, Alpha tried to justify what had happened but all that came out was a defensive and stuttered response. After five minutes of listening to this, in a fit of frustration and anger Gamma totally lost his temper – he yelled at Alpha and thumped the table so hard that the coffee cups leapt out of their saucers! Alpha looked extremely scared and shocked and was completely unable to speak.

Beta took this moment to intervene and in a very calm, gentle and quiet voice explained that, whilst Alpha had done his utmost to improve his performance, there were so many aspects of his job that he just couldn’t get to grips with. To make matters worse, the more he tried the more panicky and stressed-out he had become.

Beta then in the same quiet, gentle and calm voice, asked Alpha how he really felt about his job and whether there was anything more that she could do to help him. Alpha slowly started to speak about how he felt, how stressed-out he was, and how inadequate he felt. He couldn’t sleep, was having marital problems as a result of all the stress, and was so very, very unhappy. When Beta asked him what he would like to do next, Alpha replied “to look for another job, please.”

-Judith Christian-Carter, instructional design & e-learning specialist
Survey methodology & results

This ‘Handling difficult conversations at work’ report on has been put together based upon LCP’s own learning and development experiences with our clients, discussions in our research team, and prior literature on this topic. Fourteen learning and development professionals have also contributed short pieces of advice based on their practical experiences, which have helped shape the report’s focus and structure. In addition, we prepared a short online survey (see appendix one) on Constant Contact and advertised it on our website, through our mailing list and on social media, as well as asking our existing client base to take part if applicable. The survey ran for four weeks, from the 11th of January until the 8th of February, and in total over 100 people contributed their responses.

The main survey had two parts with a section of questions answered only by HR managers and a section answered only by line managers. There were 57 responses, 40 of which were fully completed. Of these respondents, 36 were HR managers and 21 were line managers. In addition question 6 and question 12 were asked again to managers or those with management experience on LinkedIn and Twitter. 59 additional people answered question 6, and 4 additional people answered question 12; these responses have been included in the survey results. Respondents are marked on each graph by N=#.

1) Line managers - Please rate your confidence when addressing difficult issues with the following people: your direct reports, your peers and your boss

Whilst we have displayed results as pie charts, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to five, one meaning extremely unconfident and five meaning extremely confident: for direct reports the average confidence level was 4.0; for peers it was 3.6; and for addressing difficult issues with a boss it was 3.4. The average confidence level for these three questions is 3.7, and 68% of managers rate themselves as either extremely or very confident to deal with difficult conversations with any other individual at work. See question seven to compare results with HR managers’ perceptions.
2) Line managers - What is your first step if you need to address a difficult issue with a member of your team?

Ten of the fifteen responses (67%) for this question were very similar, summarised as ‘preparing the information and clarifying the message’. Four responses (27%) suggested that their first step would be to approach the individual and discuss the matter privately. One response (7%) stated they would find out about the individual’s stress level.

- Prepare
- Preparation
- Preparation (facts, information details)
- Get the facts, then work out a plan of what to say
- Get facts clear and do not do it if they aren’t
- Clarify the exact issue and get supporting data
- Realising that there is a specific issue
- Information - outline the talk first beforehand
- Define the issue in SMART terms
- Reflect on the message that needs to be conveyed
- Find an appropriate time and place
- Invite them for interview and outline the problem
- Pull them aside to discuss it privately
- Speaking to them on a one to one basis
- Find out about her/his current stress level

3) Line managers - Who do you go to for advice if you need to have a difficult conversation with the following people: a direct report, a colleague and a boss?

When needing to have a difficult conversation with a direct report, 20% would go to their line manager for advice, 20% to HR, 20% to a coach or mentor, 27% to a colleague, and 13% to ‘other’ – 50% of whom would go to no one. When needing to have a difficult conversation with a colleague, 20% would go to their line manager, 13% to HR, 40% to a coach or mentor, 7% to another colleague, and 20% to ‘other’ – 33% of whom would go to no one and 33% to their spouse. When needing to have a difficult conversation with a boss, 27% would go to HR, 40% to a coach or mentor, 20% to a colleague, and 13% to ‘other’ – 50% of whom would go to their spouse.
4) Line managers - How often do you put off having difficult conversations?

Whilst no one indicated that they always put off conversations, the majority (60%) occasionally put off difficult conversations, with 7% often and 53% sometimes. A third rarely put off difficult conversations and just 7% never put off difficult conversations.

5) Line managers - Why do you put off having difficult conversations?

This question was asked only to those nine respondents who chose ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Often’ for the previous questions (and also ‘Always’, but no respondents chose that option), eight of whom responded. Five of the eight responses were focused on apprehension of how the other person would react. Two of the eight respondents put off difficult conversations in order to plan or find the right timing. One respondent referred to the off-putting organisational culture.

- Worried about how the person will react
- Worried re negative consequences if badly done
- Fear of offending someone, fear of consequences
- They’re uncomfortable & how will they take it?
- Unintended consequences of mishandling
- To plan what I am going to say, where and how
- Try to find the best timing first
- The organisational culture fosters negativism
6) Managers - When dealing with a difficult conversation as a manager, what subject matter is most daunting for you?

There were three clearly defined most difficult conversation topics: behavioural issues (23%), followed shortly by poor performance, and personal hygiene (each 20%). For 11% firing or redundancy was the most difficult conversation subject matter, for 6% it was absence and lateness, for 5% communicating change, and 3% an individual with personal difficulties.

Whilst 32 respondents specified ‘other’ (43%), fifteen and eight of these could be categorised as ‘personal hygiene’ and ‘firing or redundancy’ respectively, so these have been given their own categories in our results.

7) HR managers - Overall how confident do you think managers are in your organisation addressing difficult conversations?

47% of HR managers felt that managers in their organisation were either extremely unconfident or very unconfident addressing difficult conversations. 21% felt that managers were either extremely confident or very confident. Comparing results to question one reveals how managers rate their confidence much more highly than it is perceived by HR.
8) HR managers - What would you like managers to do differently?

Eleven of the twenty six responses (42%) for this question were very similar, summarised as ‘having the difficult conversation rather than putting it off’. Five responses (19%) were broadly focused on better preparation. Four responses (15%) referred to improved sensitivity or empathy. The remaining six responses focused on separate areas, including: knowing what is serious; speaking directly to the individual, not others; thinking about the person and their values; having regular staff reviews, and thinking about whether the issue is personal or business related. There were a total of 26 responses.

- Not avoid difficult conversations
- Have the conversations, instead of asking HR to!
- Deal with issues as they arise and listening skills
- Discuss the issue before it gets out of control
- Feel the fear and do it anyway
- Deal promptly instead of putting off the inevitable
- Address issues when they arise rather delay
- Actually ’have’ the difficult conversation!
- Tackle a situation directly instead of skirting
- Be proactive in tackling issue
- Adopt managerial courage
- Be better prepared
- Check facts and be honest
- Prepare and deliver feedback effectively
- Come to HR for coaching rather than ‘winging it’
- Have a more standard and structured process
- Be much more ’open' about 'any' sensitive issue
- Empathise, listen and articulate positions clearly
- Emphasise but org need must take priority
- Be more sympathetic
- Know what is serious and what is not
- Speak directly to the person, not others
- Think about what they know of the person and values
- Have regular monthly/quarterly reviews with staff
- To think about the why. Is it personal or business?
- Yes, I do it according the need of the hour

9) HR managers - How often do managers refer difficult conversations to HR that they could have dealt with themselves?

Almost half (48%) of HR managers felt that managers frequently or often refer difficult conversations to HR, instead of dealing with them themselves. 60% said that this sometimes or occasionally happened, and only 12% said that this rarely happened.
10) HR managers - What support are managers in your organisation given for handling difficult conversations?

For this question HR managers were asked to tick all options that apply: 48% of organisations use training to support managers in handling difficult conversations, 84% use coaching, and 16% use written manuals. Whilst 28% of organisations use ‘other’ types of support, three of these could be categorised as ‘HR support’, so this has been given its own column on the bar chart below (12%).

All ‘other’ responses: advice and support from HR, HR support in meetings, a specific HR consultant for their area, ACAS information and contact, team development days, support from MD, web resources.

11) HR managers - How well do you feel managers in your organisation are trained in handling difficult situations?

Whilst we have displayed results as a pie chart, respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to five, one meaning extremely well and five meaning extremely badly; the average was 3.0 – neither well nor badly.
12) Managers and HR managers - When dealing with a difficult conversation with your own manager, what subject matter is most daunting for you?

The most difficult conversation for both managers and HR managers when dealing with their own manager, was requesting a payrise (32%). One in four respondents (25%) said that it was asking for feedback, 13% agreeing targets, and 13% challenging their manager. A manager’s behaviour (5%) and poor management (5%) were together the most difficult subjects for one in ten, with a further 5% choosing other and 2% seeking promotion.

Whilst eleven (28%) respondents initially opted for ‘other’, five (13%) could be grouped into the area of ‘challenging manager’, two to ‘poor management’ (5%) and two to ‘manager’s behaviour’ (5%) – these have been indicated in the pie chart below, reducing ‘other’ to 5%. Four respondents specified ‘n/a’ as they did not report to a manager – those results have been omitted from the totals here. ‘Organising leave’ and ‘requesting training / time off for training’ were also survey options, omitted here as chosen by zero respondents.

[Diagram showing difficult conversation subject matters]

Chart 13

N= 40

All ‘other’ responses: addressing things he has not done, challenging leadership decisions, telling my manager he is wrong, when they want you to say what they want to hear, when they want you to say what they want to hear, lack of management and direction on her part, poor performance of a manager!, manager’s personal behaviour, bad behaviour of managers, getting a direct answer to a question, probation.
References


Appendix one: survey questions

Questions for HR Managers

1. Please rate your confidence when addressing difficult issues with the following people:

   1 = Extremely unconfident, 5 = Extremely confident

   a) Your direct reports 1 2 3 4 5
   b) Your peers 1 2 3 4 5
   c) Your boss 1 2 3 4 5

2. What is your first step if you need to address a difficult issue with a member of your team?

   .............................................................................................................................

3. Who do you go to for advice if you need to have a difficult conversation with...

   a) A direct report? Line manager HR Coach / mentor Colleague Other
   b) A colleague? Line manager HR Coach / mentor Another colleague Other
   c) A boss? HR Coach / mentor Colleague Other

4. How often do you put off having difficult conversations? (If rarely or never skip question 5)

   Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

5. Why do you put off difficult questions?

   .............................................................................................................................

6. When dealing with a difficult conversation as a manager, what subject matter is most daunting for you?

   Poor performance An individual with personal difficulties Absence and lateness Behavioural issues
   Communicating change Other

Questions for Line Managers

7. Overall how confident do you think managers are in your organisation addressing difficult conversations?

   1 = Extremely unconfident, 5 = Extremely confident

   1 2 3 4 5

8. What would you like them to do differently?

   .............................................................................................................................
9. How often do they refer difficult conversations to HR rather than dealing with them themselves?

Frequently (over 80% of the conversations could have been dealt with without HR intervention)
Often (60% - 79% of the conversations could have been dealt with without HR intervention)
Sometimes (40% - 59% of the conversations could have been dealt with without HR intervention)
Occasionally (20% - 39% of the conversations could have been dealt with without HR intervention)
Rarely (Under 20% of the conversations could have been dealt with without HR intervention)
Never

10. What support are managers in your organisation given for handling difficult conversations? (Select all that apply)

Training          Coaching          Written manuals          Other

11. How well do you feel managers in your organisation are trained in handling difficult conversations?

1= Extremely well, 5 = Extremely badly

1  2  3  4  5

Question for both line managers and HR managers

12. When dealing with a difficult conversation with your own manager, which subject matter is most daunting for you?

Requesting a payrise   Organising leave   Seeking promotion   Agreeing targets   Asking for feedback
Requesting training / time off for training   Other