

Difficult Conversations

Preparation

- What is happening? What are the facts?

- What are my reasons for having this conversation?

- What have we both contributed to the situation?

- What do I hope this conversation will achieve ?

- What assumptions am I making about the other person's intentions?

- What might the other person be thinking about the situation?

- What are my concerns about having this conversation?

Moving from Blame to Contribution

Sarah manages a small administrative team and she is concerned that a member of her staff spends too much time texting his friends and family during working hours. Before addressing the issue with him she decides to consider what they have both contributed to the situation reaching this point

Sarah's notes:

What have I contributed:

- I have not provided any guidance to staff about what is acceptable in the office with regard to using their mobile phones.
- I have not mentioned the issue before even though I know it has been going on for quite a long time.
- I do not know whether other people spend as much time texting.

What has he contributed:

- He has spent a lot of time texting.
- He has missed a few deadlines recently and has not been able to explain why.

Mark has just come out of a team meeting that was scheduled to run from 9.00 – 11.00 and there was a written agenda. Two people arrived late and the chair waited for them to arrive before starting so the meeting did not begin until 9.15am. The first item took much longer than expected because several people spent a lot of time discussing details that were not really relevant to most people there – the chair looked uncomfortable but did not stop the discussion. As a result the rest of the agenda was really rushed and something that Mark felt needed some serious consideration was waived through on a show of hands. After the meeting he tried to identify what had contributed to the situation.

Mark's notes:

What have I contributed:

- I do not always arrive on time for the meeting.
- I did not try to stop the early discussion or say that I was unhappy about the later item being rushed through.
- I have felt for a while that the meeting does not have a clear purpose but I have not raised or discussed that with anyone.

What has the chair contributed:

- He did not start the meeting on time
- The items on the agenda were not prioritised and managed appropriately.

Managing Emotions

To have productive conversations we need to be able to separate the emotion we are feeling from what we want to say. This is important because if we do not acknowledge and manage the emotion it can hijack us during the conversation.

The following ideas can help you to manage your emotional state.

1. Recognise and acknowledge the emotion – name it.

Bothered	Unhappy	Happy	Worried	Disappointed
Furious	Tearful	Joyful	Concerned	Embarrassed
Annoyed	Miserable	Merry	Distressed	Uncomfortable
Irritated	Distraught	Hopeful	Scared	Abashed
Ticked off	Melancholic	Optimistic	Nervous	Apologetic
Livid	Down	Elated	Queasy	Confused
Displeased	Upset	Cheerful	Troubled	Crestfallen
Ruffled	Blue	Afraid	Excited	Amazed
Fed up	Crestfallen	Thrilled	Apprehensive	Guilty
Disgusted	Crushed	Pleased	Careful	Hesitant
Appalled	Dejected	Satisfied	Disturbed	Humbled
Irate	Depressed	Lively	Expectant	Humiliated
Incensed	Desolated	Passionate	In suspense	Mortified
Fuming	Dismal	Glad	Confused	Prudish
Explosive	Downcast	Jubilant	Empowered	Red faced
Angry	Gloomy	Contented	Overwrought	Remorseful
Irked	Joyless	Jolly	Tense	Self conscious
Frustrated	Sombre	Watchful	Shamefaced	Ecstatic

2. **Take a step back and gain perspective** – ideally take some time out before responding however if that is not possible practise counting to 10
3. **Learn to breathe well** - this can help you to calm yourself before starting a conversation that you are anxious about. Try the following exercise and see if you notice the difference:
Sit in an upright and comfortable position.

Close your eyes or lower them to the ground if you are somewhere too public

Breathe through your nose for a count of four.

Hold the breath for a count of seven.

Then exhale through your mouth for a count of eight – concentrate on pushing all the air out with your tummy muscles.

Repeat this five times

Practise this regularly and you will find that it becomes more automatic and will help to calm you and ensure that your voice remains even and measured.

4. Use positive visualisation

A Framework for Difficult Conversations

1. The 30 second introduction

- Open the conversation
- Describe what is happening – provide specific examples of the behaviour or the facts about the situation that you want to discuss, ensure that you are not using evaluative or judgemental statements.
- Describe the effect that is having - describe clearly the effect this is having without assigning blame.
- Identify what has contributed to the problem.

2. Invite discussion

Try to learn as much as you can about the other person's point of view – ask questions and listen.

- Can you say a little more about how you see things?
- How is that affecting you?
- What are you thinking?
- What do you want to happen?
- Tell me how you see the situation.
- What is your perspective on this?
- How do you feel about what I have just said?
- How can we prevent this from happening again?
- What are the barriers to us achieving this?
- How do you feel we can move forward from here?
- What options do you think are open to us in this situation?

3. Discuss alternatives

4. Agree a way forward

5. Close

- It is important to do this clearly otherwise you may begin to cloud the issue with other things
- 'Thank you for coming in – do come back if you need to discuss anything further.'
- 'Thanks for listening – I am going to get a coffee – would you like one?'

The 30 Second Opening

The conversation needs to be started in a clear and assertive way – it should take no longer than 30 seconds and needs to include the following:

An opening statement

'I would like to talk to you about.....'

'I would like to see if we can reach a better understanding about how we are going to manage the monthly returns.'

'I would like to talk to you about the way the meeting went this morning. I really want to hear your thoughts about it and share my perspective as well'

'I think we might have different perceptions about what reasonable use of the internet means and I would like to discuss it with you'

Try to avoid indirect openers such as 'I was wondering how you felt the meeting went today' or 'Is everything OK'

A description of what is happening

Provide specific examples of the behaviour or the situation that you want to discuss, ensure that you are not using evaluative or judgemental statements

A description of the effect of that behaviour

Clearly describe the effect or the impact of the above.

A clarification of what is at stake

'I am concerned about this as I think it is affecting our working relationship and so would like to find a resolution'

'It is important that we have some consistency across the department'

'I appreciate this may have come as a bit of a shock.'

'It is part of your role to conduct these audits so we need to find a way to resolve this.'

An acknowledgement of your contribution to the problem (if appropriate)

'I recognise that we should probably have had this conversation a while ago'

'I appreciate that we are short staffed and you have probably not had the support that you needed'

'I know I am not always easy to get hold of.'

Asking a question to invite them to join the conversation

At the end of your 30 second introduction you need to decide which question you are going to use to get the conversation going. Wording this correctly is important as it focuses the other person on the particular issue you want to discuss.

Assertiveness Techniques

Time Out

If you are not sure how to respond to a request find a way to take some time out to think about it.

'I will check my diary for next week and see if that is possible – I will ring you back in 5 minutes'
'That's not a possibility I had considered – I will give it some thought and get back to you tomorrow'
'I think this is something that deserves more attention – can we arrange a convenient time to talk about it?'

It is important that you always specify the time and that you stick to it.

Broken Record

This technique means repeating your message until it is no longer ignored or dismissed. When using this approach it is important that you do not introduce a note of anger or sarcasm or raise your voice.

e.g. *'We won't be able to complete this by the 31st. I appreciate that this will cause you problems however it doesn't alter the fact that it will not be possible to complete all the work in less than 5 days. We can promise to finish the key areas if you tell us what your priorities are and we will reschedule the rest of the work – what we can't do is complete everything by the 31st.*

Fogging

This technique enables aggression to be side-stepped without any abandonment of your position. It involves responding to criticism by saying, *'Yes, I recognise that.....'*. This is an unexpected response. An angry person normally expects to be met by returned aggression or defensiveness.

Once things have calmed down you can progress the exchange using other assertive behaviour.

Saying No

There are several different ways to say no:

- the direct no
 - *'No, that is not possible.'*
- the reflecting no
 - *'I appreciate that you have a deadline to meet however it is not possible to process this in a day.'*
- the reasoned no
 - *'I can't do that now because the photocopier is broken.'*
- the 'flipping' no
 - *'I can show you first thing tomorrow but I cannot do it now.'*

Handling Aggressive Situations

The Control Trilogy

There are three key stages involved in defusing aggressive situations – they involve calming the person then reaching them and finally moving forward. Situations are often unintentionally escalated because people do not realise the importance of following this sequence. There is no point in trying to move someone forward if they have not been calmed down. It is important that these are not seen as being completely discrete – each stage is dependent on the others and the chances of successfully resolving an aggressive encounter come from flexibility in returning to a previous stage of the trilogy if progress is hindered.

Stage 1 - Calming (showing understanding)

Display calmness

However difficult it may be *never* lose your own temper – you will only add fuel to the fire. Show the other person that you are calm and self controlled. It is much harder for him or her to continue to be angry if you are obviously not responding.

Encourage the other person to talk

An angry person will run out of steam very quickly if nothing is done to aggravate the situation. Use open questions and non-verbal prompts to encourage him or her to talk. Listen carefully and gather as much information as you can – resist the urge to counter arguments or disagree until they have calmed down.

Listen with empathy

Put yourself in the other person's place. They may have a legitimate grievance so make sure you get all the facts.

Avoid an audience

Don't allow the other person the 'play to the gallery'. The audience may be drawn to take sides or increase the likelihood of loss of face. If the encounter takes place in a reception area take the person to a quiet area where you can talk freely without being overheard. Often the act of walking to another room can begin to calm someone down.

Take your time

You must create the space to deal with the situation. If the other person senses that you are impatient to finish the encounter they will become increasingly agitated.

Stage 2 – Reaching (developing empathy)

Show understanding

Let someone know that you understand how he or she feels: 'I can see why you are annoyed' - make sure that your tone of voice, expression and body language support what you are saying.

Ask Questions

Clarify your understanding by asking questions and checking details.

Summarise

Demonstrate that you have understood the key points the person is making by summarising what they have told you about the issue

Stage 3 - Moving Forward

Tackle issues one by one

Often an angry person will let all their grievances pour out. Listen carefully and try to identify each issue and respond to them individually. If appropriate ask how the person would like to see the situations resolved.

How would you like to see this progress from here?

What are you hoping I will be able to do?

Tell me what success would look like in this situation?

The decision has been made so how do you feel we can move forward from here?

Avoid loss of face and structure expectations

Even if you know that you are unlikely to be able to meet the person's demands make sure that you can offer an alternative which will save face on both sides. Once the initial anger has passed people often need to be given a 'way out'. Sometimes this can be achieved by suggesting they talk to a colleague or your manager.