

IN FOCUS: MANAGING PEOPLE

MAKING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS 'DO-ABLE'

Often you realise a difficult conversation could have gone much better – you just do not quite know how. Below, **Jennifer MacKay** explains what you can do in future to make those tricky exchanges more manageable.

We have all had conversations that didn't go as we had hoped – eg having to ask a colleague not to be late again for a client meeting. If, in such circumstances, you have said to yourself 'I wish I had held my ground more', 'I wish I hadn't lost my temper', or something similarly regretful, then read on for constructive advice.

First, though, you need to recognise what does not work. Faced with a

difficult conversation many of us tend to react instinctually with fight or flight. Fighters adopt an 'I'm going to sort this out once and for all' philosophy. Their 'speak first, think later' approach favours a loud voice and big gestures. 'Flighters', on the other hand, hope that if they do nothing the situation will miraculously disappear on its own. Yet neither option encourages dialogue or offers long lasting solutions.

A conversation is an exploration

A conversation is an exploration. It should lead to a greater understanding, but often does not. And when a difficult conversation turns disastrous, the effects can linger.

Far from being just about who is right or wrong, conversations are also about perception, interpretation and values. Is it any wonder we wake up in the night worrying about how to handle the situation?

The good news is that dealing with uncomfortable conversations is a skill you can learn like any other.

The three important steps

A constructive approach towards handling difficult conversations is based on an understanding of the following three steps:

- learning how to deliver your message.
- understanding how certain language will make your audience more receptive to your message.
- knowing how to structure your conversation to present your side.

1. Delivering the message

Mastering eye contact, controlling your voice and managing your body language will project confidence and enhance your message.

Eye contact

If you look away when you are nervous or thinking, you are not alone – it is a hardwired reaction. Unfortunately it does not do us any favours when we want to project

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Box 1 MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

AVOID

You don't know what you are talking about.

But... however

Always, never

Um, err, you know

Why...?

SUBSTITUTE

'You' language can be antagonistic. Take ownership with 'I' language. Saying "I don't agree with that suggestion" is still assertive and makes the discussion about the issue and not the person.

'But' and 'however' link a positive to a reprimand. Replace these words with 'and' or 'going forward'. The sentence, "your report writing style is clear, going forward please include relevant examples" is more likely to inspire change.

Absolutes like these make you look lazy. Be specific and give an example, ie 'on Friday at the client meeting'; 'in your last three reports'; 'at the quarterly reviews'...

Waffle words undermine your conviction: use a pause instead.

The word 'why' can put people on the defensive: try to replace it with a 'what...?' or 'how...?' For example, change 'Why did you do that?' to 'What led you to make that decision?' or 'How did you come to that decision?'

Box 2 DANCE-ING THROUGH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

To make sure you do lead the difficult exchange, rather than follow someone else's lead – or lose the plot entirely – prepare by doing the following 'DANCE' analysis of the underlying issues:

Determine

Ask yourself what the problem is – a sample 'determine'-based statement is 'I have noticed that you have been spending time outside of your lunch hour surfing the internet for personal reasons....'

Acknowledge the impact

Look at how this problem affects you, others, or the organisation. An example of a resultant statement is, 'When you do this, it appears as if you don't have enough work. I am concerned about the effect it has on team motivation.'

Negotiate

Ask yourself:

- What has created this situation?
- What do you want to happen now?

- What are the options?

In the example we are using, the 'negotiate' part of the analysis could give rise to the following – 'Is there a reason that requires you to spend work time on personal issues? People look to you for leadership. I would like you to limit your personal use of the internet to lunch time.'

Commit to change

Decide on what you would like the other party to commit to changing – ie what agreed action is to be taken?

The questions arising from this 'commit to change' element of your analysis could be, 'Is there any reason why this is not possible? Is there anything I can do to help? Are we agreed?'

Evaluate

Consider how you will evaluate the progress of the outcome. This could give rise to a statement such as, 'Let's meet next Friday to see how this is working.'

confidence. You may be clearly outlining expectations, but by looking down, at the ceiling or out of the window you send out the message "don't worry too much about the words, because I'm probably not going to 'see' them through anyway."

Fight the temptation to look away. With practice and determination, you can maintain eye contact even during uncomfortable situations, so:

- make steady eye contact when stating your points – it shows you are serious;
- maintain eye contact when someone speaks – to demonstrate that you want to be fair and listen to their opinion; and
- remember, steady eye contact does not mean you have to stare.

Voice

Under pressure, our voice can abandon us. Our mouth goes dry. We speak really fast to get the words out before we lose our nerve. Then there is the 'forgetting-to-breathe' bit. Instead:

- speak slowly – a measured pace says you are in control. Check that your pace is purposeful and deliberate;
- remember to pause – ask the question and wait for the response. Do not be afraid of silence. Wait it out. Our urge to fill the air space often results in us backing down; and
- monitor your voice volume – tension may arise during a stressful conversation, and raising the volume will automatically raise the temperature. Stay calm and keep the volume down.

Body language

Since fidgeting signals nervousness, you need to control your gestures and focus your attention. So:

- do not be a doodler or toe-tapper; and
- turn off the mobile phone.

2. Minding your language

You really do need to 'mind your language', as some words draw in the listener while others simply alienate. Box 1, on the previous page, is a list of common offenders.

3. Structuring the conversation

Following a structure sets us free to concentrate on the content of the conversation. So imagine your conversation as a dance, in which you need to lead your partner through the steps. (See Box 2, above)

Other tips

In addition to these three main steps further useful tips for handling those difficult conversations are:

- prepare beforehand by making notes;

- think 'outcome', so that you know what result you want;
- remember your relationship with the other party is important; and
- if things get tense, take five minutes out, to cool down.

Conclusion

We cannot escape difficult conversations, but we can get better at handling them. Controlling our physical delivery, selecting our words and 'choreographing' our 'DANCE' can make all the difference. ■



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