

TAKING THE FEAR AWAY FROM DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



FACTSHEET

Exploring how to have difficult conversations in a positive way



In the fear-free organization leaders understand that scared people spend a lot more time plotting their survival than working productively. In the fear-free organization people work on inspiration. They are encouraged to take risks, to think out of the box, to challenge the status quo, to explore new frontiers, to stand up and be counted.



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Every leader has to have difficult conversations from time to time, whether it's about managing poor performance or explaining a restructure to the team. The thought of upsetting people or having to 'tell them off' can, quite understandably, lead to a fear of having these conversations and reluctance to do so.

But these conversations don't have to, and shouldn't, be scary at all. In the right circumstances and with the right skills, a difficult conversation can be an entirely positive experience.

How should you approach a difficult conversation?

Giving feedback back should never be about telling people off. It is about nurturing, managing relationships, and crucially, inspiring so that leaders can get the most out of their people.

The key to doing this is curiosity. It's about finding what is important to the individual, what is driving their behaviour and using that as the starting point for building an effective working relationship.

Taking this approach means that difficult conversations move from being a case 'I need to tell you how to improve' and more towards 'how can we work together to make sure we both get what we need?'

It become collaborative, less about 'telling', and opportunity for development and therefore far less intimidating.

What are the benefits of this approach?

- Negative behaviours dealt with sooner. Without the fear, leaders are far less likely to put off the conversation until it becomes critical. More difficult conversations begin to happen, until eventually becoming a day-to-day activity. This means negative and disruptive behaviours are dealt with before they impact too greatly.
- More productive conversations. When a leader doesn't want to have a difficult conversation, but does it anyway, the outcome is unlikely to benefit either party. The conversation will be rushed, potentially one-sided, and therefore a mutually beneficial solution is unlikely. When approached with positivity and curiosity it is much more likely that both parties will be at ease, conversation will flow, and it will take as long it needs to take in order to reach a solution that both people are happy with.
- Better working relationships. By approaching difficult conversations with curiosity leaders will get to know and understand their people more. This understanding will lead to better, more effective working relationships.
- More engaged, innovate teams. If a leader fears giving negative feedback they will avoid doing it at all costs. This often means ruling with an iron fist – putting in lots of rules and regulations. Research shows that this kind of fear-led organisation makes for unengaged, unproductive teams as people spend more time plotting their survival than working towards the organisation's objectives. If people trust that they can make mistakes and not be disciplined they will be far more engaged, productive and innovative.



- A more supportive, positive organisational culture. Leading without fear will lead to an organisation-wide culture of trust and support. If the leaders of the organisation set the example, this trusting, supportive attitude will filter through the whole of the business.

How do you take the fear away?

If you are commissioning or delivering training to improve leaders' confidence in having difficult conversations, the development programme will need to enable significant behavioural change. Here are some tips on how to achieve this:

- **Understand why.** The first step in leaders taking the fear away from having difficult conversations is for them to understand why they fear it. This involves exploring their own personality, values and drivers as well the neuroscience behind fear. Understanding why an emotion is occurring often helps people to control how they let that emotion affect them.
- **Improve self-awareness.** In order for leaders to feel comfortable to have difficult conversations, it's important that they understand and recognise the impact that they have on others. Understanding this will enable them to make choices about their impact, and therefore feel more in control of the situation and confident about having difficult conversations.
- **Explore rapport.** Exploring how to build rapport, through methods and theories such as coaching techniques, Transactional Analysis and Neuro Linguistic Programming, leaders will feel confident they are equipped with the knowledge and tools that they need to have productive conversations.
- **Practice and reflect.** Equipping leaders with the right tools does not necessarily mean that they will feel confident to use them. Leaders must have time to practice and reflect on their learning. A programme with the right development framework will balance different learning styles and blend experiential learning and reflective practice in order to catalyse learning and behavioural change.
- **Practice in the right environment.** To ensure that the learning is effective, it is vital that leaders learn in an environment (both psychological and physical) that supports development, rather than hampers it. Exploring one's own personality and behaviours can be challenging for leaders. Creating a 'safe' psychological space helps to ensure that leaders are willing to be open, curious and vulnerable. Finding environments that are inspirational allows people to temporarily disconnect from distraction and be fully immersed in the developmental experience. The suspension of action that comes from being away from the office and in an inspiring environment, creates an opportunity to reflect and inquire more deeply.