

Thriving Through Difficult Conversations

A lot of my work involves dealing with issues that could have been avoided and should have been addressed days if not decades ago. That's because many people managers don't know how to deal with difficult conversations. Deferring them means molehills grow into unnecessary mountains. These problems are often in what I call the 'bad breath' areas. They involve performance or behaviour patterns that are difficult to discuss because they involve judgement of another's choices or personal standards.

Care for farm accommodation (especially inside), interference by spouses or family members in working relationships or problems with drugs or alcohol overflowing to the workplace are typical examples.

On my recent speaking tours I've been challenging audiences to give me an example of a topic they find too difficult to raise with another. As yet I have not been able to find one that can't be solved. It's simply a matter of developing tactics that use sensitivity to create an environment where issues can be dealt with firmly and fairly. These rely more on questions rather than statements, getting shared agreement on standards, embracing negative emotions and dealing with things in context. Here's what works for me.

Questions Not Statements

The most powerful tool for this type of communication is the ability to ask the right questions. No one ever started conflict by asking questions but many have ignited major upsets by making statements – especially straight out judgements that humiliate the other. Just as for sales or negotiation, questioning is vital for approaching difficult conversations.

Open-ended questions help introduce the topic. "*How well are we meeting our standards for house care?*" is a good starting point for a discussion on house cleanliness. Contrast this with a statement like "*I think your house is looking very untidy.*" which immediately raises confrontation and demands self-justification of the other. A blunt approach always generates defensiveness and soon has the other party wanting to withdraw

Invite the other to be judged

Step two is to ask opinions about the matter being raised. You might ask, "*if you were running this business, what would you regard as the minimum standards for tidiness? Tell me about the policies and standards in other jobs you've had.*"

These questions invite the other to 'walk a mile in your shoes' - to think from your perspective. It's a chance for a meeting of minds so that rather than imposing standards, you ask people to join you in setting them. As importantly, it will tell you just how far apart your views are.

Naturally you need to be prepared to disagree with those who don't share your vision. But this process is all about closing the gap. It's positive and empowering as it promotes understanding and gets people to understand what's at stake for you and them.

Take on the Negative Emotion

The third step is to acknowledge the negative emotions around the topic. You could introduce a discussion on family interfering in the workplace by indicating you have a topic you want to raise in an area where you "*don't know what's fair*". You could add: "*I'm feeling nervous about bringing this up with you because I know it's a sensitive area. I'm not sure what the right way is to approach this but I also know its affecting the team and I know it must be impacting on your enjoyment of the job. I also know I'm not doing my job properly if I allow this to drift!*"

There is no need to communicate that inside you may be feeling frustrated or determined to bring change. For the moment the priority should be to allow people to come on board and help find a solution.

Never Concentrate on Negatives Alone

Finally, deal with difficulties in context. Talk about what's going well before you embark on bringing change. Do this to build rapport by acknowledging what's going well before raising areas for improvement. This keeps things balanced and in perspective. Don't confuse this process with 'pussy footing' or avoiding the issue - there will always be situations where you'll need to take decisive immediate action. What I'm talking about here is how to deal with a difficult area in an otherwise positive relationship.

Get Close to the Problems

Too many people walk away from relationship difficulties hoping they will manage themselves. Experience has shown me things will only get worse without a proactive approach. I've never yet found a situation where only one party knew there was a problem so these areas need action.

Maybe you want to join my challenge to suggest a topic that's too difficult to deal with. As June's guest expert on the ***Rural News*** website I'm available to answer your questions and would relish the opportunity.

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