

## Article Series for Managers and Supervisors

### How to Have the Difficult Conversations You Don't Want to Have By Julia Menard of Menard Coaching & Training

Even the best managers have trouble initiating difficult conversations with employees. I am often surprised at the number of highly-rated managers who, when asked if they were having the hard conversations they know they should, aren't. Even though they know they should be talking about serious issues with some employees, they avoid doing it anyway.

Does that sound familiar to you? Do you see yourself as someone who has sound communication skills yet still find you put off those difficult conversations?

Here are my top three tips to have successful tough conversations.

#### **Tip 1: Speak in Specific, Objective, Behavioural Language**

What are the specific behaviours and incidents that have prompted the need for a conversation? I often get responses like this one:

*"He (or she) is... a bully...  
unprofessional... controlling...  
manipulative..."*

These are not behaviours. They are interpretations of them. These labels are usually our assumptions about what we believe the other person's negative intentions are.

Nothing gets people's hackles up quicker than using a negative label to characterize behaviour. So, instead of having a rational conversation, our employee reacts defensively, we chalk up their reaction as unreasonableness and the conversation disintegrates without resolution. We get stuck.

How do we break out of the cycle?

It begins by training ourselves to see "what is" from a more objective place. We all come with our biases, prejudices and perspectives; that will never change. We are born story-makers and we need our experiences to help us make sense of the world and look for patterns on which to make our decisions.

The challenge is to come from a more detached and objective place when looking at conflict. Take notice of the incidents and behaviours that contribute to the need to have the difficult conversation. Work back to the employee's original behaviours or actions. Those behaviours and actions are what you want to discuss with the employee.

This takes practice, which brings me to my second tip.

## Tip 2: Take the Time to Practice

Just like you would for speeches, sports or dance performances, it's important to practice having a difficult conversation.

I've witnessed this principle in action time and again in my capacity as a conflict/negotiation coach. Once people take the time to identify some specific behaviours and incidents and practice how to speak those observations, the conversations always go better than anticipated.

The most effective practice I have seen is role-playing. I recommend it to my clients and

encourage them to role-play with someone before going into the real thing. We all remember and learn better when we can act out what we learn. It's not enough to get this stuff in theory; we need support in practicing it in an ongoing way as we apply it to the realities of our everyday challenges. I've worked with so many people who already get the concepts, yet when we role-played, they learned even more. Suddenly, they discovered their difficult spots and the tough conversation came to life. People always walk away with some gem that helps them in the actual conversation later.

## Tip 3: Get to the Heart of the Matter

Research has shown that we transmit how a whole conversation is going to go in our first three minutes.

If that is the case, it makes sense to put most of our emphasis on how we start those difficult discussions.

The most effective way I've seen people open collaborative conversations is to affirm the value of the person, their relationships or their work. Something that acknowledges the person in some way. It usually takes practice (see Tip 2) to identify what you can truly and genuinely appreciate about the other person.

It also helps to frame the problem within that first three minutes (or close to it). That also takes practice. Most people's first attempts sound like an attack. Remember, the problem is the behaviour, the situation, the observation (see Tip 1) but not the person. Unfortunately, we often go about problem-solving by making

the person the problem.

Get around this by clarifying at the beginning that the conversation isn't about them, but is about their behaviour. We all have ample experience with that methodology, probably from our earliest memories. No wonder we are all on the defensive the minute it starts to feel like the conversation might go in that direction. If, within the first three minutes, your employee thinks the conversation will be personal, they'll close the conversation before it even gets going.

That's just the nature of conflict. Our own distortions feed our anger. We need to give ourselves some space (through practice) to review where we stand and how we can frame what we need to talk about in a way that encourages the other person to engage in the conversation.

That is the heart of the matter.

*Julia Menard specializes in helping middle-level managers and executives navigate difficult conversations and debrief from 360s. She also publishes a regular monthly ezine and can be reached through her Web site at [www.makeandbelieve.com](http://www.makeandbelieve.com).*