

## **How to Have Tough Conversations – for Leaders (Webinar)**

You Will Learn 7 Easy Steps to Apply to Any Tough Conversation:

### **STEP 1: Assess whether you should start a conversation**

Too many of us think about a tough conversation and quickly decide it's just not worth the effort. We may think: "I've tried before and nothing has worked." Or: "He (she) is unreasonable." Or: "It's not worth the risk."

What years of coaching, training and mediating in the area of conflict has taught me, however, is most times that risk/benefit assessment is only one sided. We usually only think about what the risks are, not the benefits.

Consequently, we start to go "below the line" in our thinking. It's easy to tip the scale into feeling anxious or angry about the situation and what follows from that emotional state is a diminishment of our resourced, more balanced, thinking. When we are upset, we are not using our "above the line" brain. We start to get into "bottom-up" processing – that is: thinking only of the risks makes us use more of our mammalian and reptilian brain. We're not thinking using our pre-frontal cortex.

A way to solve this problem is to put deliberate focus and attention on to the other side of the equation. Think not only about how your attempts have failed and will fail, but why is it worth bringing up in the first place. The Benefits/Risk Tool forces you to look at both sides of the equation before arriving at your conclusion.

### **STEP 2: Plan to stay cool in the face of hot emotions**

The reason tough conversations are tough is because the stakes are high, the differences are large and the emotions are intense. This type of conversation is not your garden-variety kind. It needs you, as much as possible, to have a plan for how you will keep your cool when the talk gets hot!

So what does help you stay cool?

As Daniel Goleman says, there is "zero correlation between IQ and emotional intelligence." So, you can't think your way to emotional calm. Your ability to stay cool and hold onto yourself starts much earlier than the tough conversation itself.

Holding onto yourself starts with a practice you do regularly. Like any athlete about to run a race, practice is required. To have effective tough conversations in your role as a leader, you need a practice that strengthens your own capacity to regulate yourself and to recover from the dysregulation of others around you.

As a leader, you will have more than your fair share of people coming to you, and at you, expecting you to solve their problems and make their anxiety go away. It would be easy to take on their monkeys every time. They want you to make their problems go away. It would also be easy to ignore their problems or just say “Deal with it yourself.” This is also not helpful, as you leave your people without the support and coaching they need to take the next step.

So increasing your own capacity to access your emotions and bodily sensations is key. If you don’t know how your body feels, you can’t feel your feelings.

If you can’t feel your feelings, you certainly can’t regulate them.

One simple tool to start to strengthen your own capacity to stay cool in the face of tough conversations is to use a “Check in” tool several times a day. This tool allows you, in a few short seconds throughout your day, to do a temperature check about your own emotions.

This starts you on the road to self-regulation.

### **STEP 3: Open the conversation as you want it to end**

Because so many of us are conflict-averse, we tend to ruminate over our tough conversation and then, when we see an “opportunity” – we jump right in. We don’t necessarily think about whether that particular setting is a “safe” one.

How the conversation starts is vitally important. In fact, research has now shown that it is possible to know the outcome of a conflicted conversation within the first three minutes. This research comes from John Gottman, from the Gottman Institute, out of Seattle. He’s been in the marital therapy field for almost 40 years, and is best known for being able to predict, with over 90 percent accuracy, whether a couple will divorce or not – and within the first 3 minutes of the conflict discussion!

His research has also shown that how a conversation opens, is how it ends. His ability to predict the ending of one conversation is also based on his observations of thousands of couples in conflict.

So, what we say in our first few minutes sets the tone for the rest of the conversation.

One approach that works is starting with your best intention, or a mutual purpose. Instead of opening the conversation with what is not working and wrong with the situation (or worse yet – the person) – set the context for what you are wanting to have the conversation for in the first place. What is your best intention? What might be theirs? What could you both be aiming for as a mutual purpose?

#### **Step 4: Separate fact from fiction**

Planning what happens after the opening is also important. We tend to go into conversations before either party really understands what the concrete topic or situation is that is up for discussion. Or, if we do try to explain what we are here to talk about, we go into it with such force and blame, that the other person quickly become defensive.

We then are surprised by the other's reaction, don't see that we contributed and then tell ourselves we shouldn't have brought it up in the first place.

A vicious cycle.

One powerful antidote is simple but not easy: separate behaviours from our interpretations and judgments about those behaviours.

The ability to separate facts from interpretation is a critical skill for any leader. Too often people confuse the facts such that what actually happened is not clear to anyone.

Those times have been dubbed "interpersonal mush" by Gervase Bushe, the author of *Clear Leadership* and an Executive Coach and Professor from Simon Fraser University. Interpersonal mush is what happens when we don't speak clearly – being mindful to separate the facts from the stories we make up about those facts.

Facts are the behaviours a camera might record – behaviours only. Facts are what you based your interpretation of those facts on.

Getting this concept is a bit tougher than it sounds. It also requires practice and mindful attention. The rewards are worth it as interpersonal mush is replaced by more clarity and mutual understanding.

#### **Step 5: Separate feelings from fiction**

Most people mix up feelings and thoughts. And we don't even know we are doing this. We are unconsciously incompetent.

Here is how we tend to express our feelings - does this sound familiar:

"I feel that YOU..." ... then a thought is expressed (often judgments) about the other person or the situation. "I feel that you didn't get back to me in time."  
"I feel that you must have known what to do." Or "You made me feel like an idiot when you said that."

It's important to separate feelings from any thoughts we have about those feelings. Otherwise, we can get stuck very quickly in a conflict loop.

A conflict loop is a series of steps in our thinking which end up producing the same results – over and over again! We can get stuck there and not realize we are stuck or how to get out.

The anatomy of a conflict loop goes like this:

- 1) We select a piece of data to focus on.
- 2) Once a small piece of data is noticed, we instantly make up a story about this limited amount of data observation – that is, our thoughts kick in.
- 3) We have physical reactions to our negative thoughts (our feelings).
- 4) We express our thoughts and the negative emotions associated with our thoughts as if they are facts about the other person. The other person doesn't want to be seen negatively (none of us do) and so reacts defensively.
- 5) Once we see defensive behaviours arising from the other person, we become confirmed in our thinking that this other person is way too defensive and would never have a reasonable discussion with us anyway. So we drop it or go on the offensive.

And voila we are stuck in a conflict loop.

The way out is to make it a practice uncoupling feelings from fiction.

### **Step 6: Link feelings to needs**

Once we can notice feelings, really notice their existence in ourselves and others, we can then drill down deeper into the underlying motivations for the feelings.

Marshall Rosenberg, who wrote Non-Violent Communication, used to have the following maxim about feelings and needs.

There are only two kinds of feelings:

- bad feelings – which mean your needs are NOT getting met; or
- good feelings – which mean your needs ARE getting met.

People's feelings, whether your own or another's, can be thought of as a pointer to needs. That's why it's important to get curious about feelings and needs. David Rock, in his book *Your Brain at Work*, has researched into what the common drivers of needs are across various neuroscience literature. He

organized his findings into 5 universal needs: Security, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

It is very useful to get very familiar with each of those needs. When you start to look at people, situations and conflicts through the lens of these 5 needs, what to do in a tough conversation to problem-solve becomes much easier.

### **Step 7: Avoid solutions until the end**

My experience is that most tough conversations take time and patience.

Unfortunately, especially in the workplace, we are rewarded for coming up with quick solutions and results. Yet, most of us have had the experience of thinking something was solved only to see that it really wasn't!

It's like going to see a doctor and the doctor prescribes you something without even understanding what is going on. When we treat symptoms, and not root causes, new symptoms and problems come up. When a solution doesn't work, new resentments and mistrust can intensify. Or the solution actually doesn't make sense so it's ignored and the other person labels this resistance or "passive-aggressive" behaviour.

Waiting until near the end of the conversation to look at solutions is also at the heart of an "interest-based" method of negotiating. Popularized by the authors and international negotiators Fisher and Ury in the 1980s, the idea of interest-based negotiation is to clarify what each party's needs are first – before going to solutions.

If we thoroughly understand needs before moving to proposed solutions, we also increase the likelihood that both parties will stay with the agreement.

How do we know we're ready to go to solutions?

There is one clear way to know you are ready to start talking about solutions – when both parties in the tough conversation say they are understood. As the leadership author Stephen Covey once said: Seek first to understand, then be understood.

Once mutual understanding is reached, you are ready to come up with your solutions - and not before.