

Our guide to

Difficult Conversations



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Sharpstone Skinner

29 Richardson Road,
East Bergholt, Suffolk, CO7 6RR

01206 298 085

info@sharpstoneskinner.co.uk

www.sharpstoneskinner.co.uk

“A lot of problems in the world would disappear if we talk to each other instead of about each other” *Unknown*

Difficult conversations are something few of us look forward to. We might need to clear up a misunderstanding, manage upwards around our workload or deal with a sticky performance problem with one of our team. Get them right and they can take you forward, strengthen relationships and generate higher performance.

This guide will take you through how to get your head in the right place, a preparation framework and point to some of the skills you will need to harness. Who knows, when you get into the swing of them you might even look forward to them because you know they will bring benefits.

Mind-set is everything

Difficult conversations facilitate open, honest and authentic communication about issues, thoughts and feelings that are difficult or challenging to address. They prevent conflict and build collaboration across an organisation. They raise the emotional intelligence of an organisation and strengthen its culture.

That all sounds fab, but at 3am when you are worrying about how you are going to tackle a difficult issue, we need a bit more than a dictionary definition. We don't do anything as human beings unless there is a payoff for us, the person involved and our organisation. So, let's explore some of those payoffs to help you get your head in the right place.

Challenge and Support

High performance is driven by a combination of continuous improvement and support to make it happen. If you support but don't challenge life gets very comfortable but no great strides are taken in levels of output and job satisfaction through personal or professional growth. Challenge without support creates a stressful environment and no challenge or support makes us all apathetic.



When you approach a difficult conversation think about the output – higher performance all round. The conversation will be both challenging and supportive if done right.

Positive regard

This means having respect for the other person you are having the conversation with. You see them as an individual and have a positive belief in them as a person who is able to listen, discuss, understand your point of view and you understand theirs. Above all you direct your thoughts to exploring the situation not judging the person or building up an East Enders story line about why they are doing something and what their motives are. You are also expecting them to reciprocate, then the conversation can be constructive and not full of recriminations.

Genuineness

A difficult conversation is always best when we can express our thoughts or feelings honestly in the spirit of clearing the air and being really clear about your intentions. It means being open, direct and focussed on a mutually beneficial outcome.

Love learning

We learn in many different ways particularly through doing our job. These difficult moments can be some of the most valuable. Perhaps there has been a mistake, a misunderstanding or a factual error. If you don't explore them, they will happen again and undermine performance. Approaching the conversation as a learning opportunity for you and the other party gives it a more dynamic atmosphere rather than a

confrontational one where everyone digs their heels in.

Opportunity knocks

Exploring challenging issues can result in bigger, better ways of doing something. Collaboration often springs from these sorts of conversations as the situation is unpacked instead of used as a way to get one up on someone.

Summary

Have a word with yourself to get yourself in the right frame of mind. The payoffs are:

- Higher performance
- Grown up collaborative relationships
- Improvements in ways of working
- Personal and professional growth
- New opportunities

Let's get ready – a structure around your conversations

The **WELCOME** structure helps us to prepare and conduct the conversation.

What is your aim?

Explicitness

Listen

Confidence

Overcome obstacles

Move forward

Evaluate

What's your aim?

Try and line up why this conversation is important and what you want as a result. Check it is a viable reason not just because you don't like what someone has done but in reality, it doesn't matter in terms of performance. If someone has written a Press Release that is perfectly good for the job but you wouldn't have written it like that, is it really something that you should be spending your time and theirs unpicking?

Your aim helps you with your opening line:

- Can we discuss the way the meeting went as I think there are some issues we need to address before we go any further?
- Thank you for the proposal you have put forward, I have a few areas I would like to explore, can we do that?
- I need to discuss an issue that I think is having an impact on both of us.

Explicitness

Being clear in these conversations is really important, going around the houses hinting that something isn't quite right and you wonder if the other person can guess what it is usually leads to conflict and frustration. This framework might help you get it clear in your head:



Issue One - A member of staff is out of their depth, making mistakes and delivering poor customer service

Present situation, undesirable behaviour, difficulty	Future desirable situation, behaviour, solution
Arrives late for work and is sloppily dressed	Arrives on time every day looking professional
Continually produces work with errors, does not check work	Checks work thoroughly and always accurate

Issue Two - Your manager keeps giving you mixed messages about your priorities, they don't seem to understand the impact it makes on your work load

Present situation, undesirable behaviour, difficulty	Future desirable situation, behaviour, solution
I cannot plan my work because of shifting priorities that don't make sense	Being able to plan my work with certainty and have changes explained clearly
I am becoming overwhelmed with a work load that means I don't get things done on time	Keeping my work load manageable to help me be productive with a sense of achievement

This framework allows you to step back and think about what the real issues are instead of all the hot air we generate about situations that are annoying or distressing us. It also helps you position the conversation.

Issue one

If you haven't prepared it could sound something like:

"I need a word about your punctuality and the mistakes you are making its just not acceptable. Its driving me nuts and means I have to keep correcting your work which I haven't got time for."

Or maybe:

"Er, um, this is a bit awkward, I think you've been a bit late this week and you sometimes don't look very professional, I mean, well, I don't want to get personal and we all have our own style but maybe you might want to wear an ironed shirt, but then maybe the crinkled t-shirt look is self-expression so um did you have a nice weekend?"

Prepare calmly for it and it could sound like this:

"Can we have a chat about punctuality and accuracy? I'm concerned that your standards have fallen recently and I want to make sure that it doesn't continue because it will have an impact on both of us."

Issue two

Could sound like this:

"I am totally overloaded and I don't think you realise that when you change my priorities it throws all my plans and I'm not producing good work and that's your fault."

Or maybe:

"Gosh I'm really busy at the moment, but another task on top of the ten I have already is just fine, I'm sure I will cope, no problem"
(exit grumbling under your breath)

With a bit of calm preparation:

"Can we have a review of my work load? I understand that priorities change from time to time but I would find it really useful if you could explain why they have changed then I can plan my work better. Also, I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed by the volume of work so could you give me some guidance around what my priorities need to be at the moment then I can sort myself out better and feel productive."



Listen

Engage all your lovely active listening skills in these situations so that you can really understand the other person's points of view and in return ask them to listen to yours.

Why don't we listen?

- We are waiting to say what we want to say
- We don't value the other person's views
- We are checking our assumptions and only listening for that evidence
- We have decided what the intentions of the person are and don't want to be proved wrong.

We show we are listening by all the stuff we know and love – rephrasing, summarising, building on what the other person has said, asking follow up questions and giving all the non-verbal clues (and putting our phones away!)

Confidence

Have the confidence that the situation can be resolved, the behaviour can be changed the mistake can be rectified. It is important to be upbeat in these conversations, usually it ends up not being as catastrophic as first thought and the way forward becomes clear. It is reassuring to the other party to hear "look, we are where we are, I'm sure we can fix this and build on our experience"



Overcoming obstacles

Your assertive skills can help you here.

Remember assertiveness is about acknowledging the other person's needs and wants and putting yours on the table to have that sentiment reciprocated. The assertive framework helps us with this:

1. I understand your needs and thoughts on this
2. My needs and thoughts are
3. So, shall we see if we can reach a compromise that benefits everyone?

Move forward

Try not to dwell or roll around in the mud of despair or recriminations. Just move on, make the plan, record it, commit to what you have agreed and do your bit to make it work.

Evaluate

Always the Bridesmaid never the Bride! We all forget to review how its gone but doing so will strengthen those relationships and prevent further difficulties so its worth doing. Agree to meet in a week and see how things are going or drop an email to confirm things have been done. Keep the momentum up and you won't need another difficult conversation because the relationship has become more trusting as a result of the conversation you had.

Summary

- Preparation is 80% of making these conversations effective
- Being explicit really helps you focus and the other person understand what the meeting is about
- Engage your listening skills
- Always move forwards
- Check what has been agreed has happened and do what you promised.

What if the other person doesn't play the game?

Ah there's the rub. You've got yourself all prepared, polished up your listening skills, practiced your assertive techniques in the mirror but the other party has other ideas. They may be obstructive, emotional, confrontational, defensive...the list goes on and on.

The very simple answer to this is to remain assertive and stick to the reason for the meeting not be dragged off into issues that are not relevant by someone who wants to deflect you.

Oh, that sounds so easy!

Ok, so, what does it sound like in practice?

Some classic behaviours and their assertive responses:

Bursting into tears – this is a normal emotional reaction to hearing something you don't want to hear or exploring a topic that is really difficult for you. We must be humane in these situations we have no idea what is behind the tears. Whatever you do don't give them a hug, it may make you feel better but the other person might be horrified by it. Let them gather themselves, take a breath, show them you know this is difficult and carry on so they can work it through with you and feel listened to and find a solution. Try not to panic and stop the meeting, it can break the atmosphere and will make you feel like you have been manipulated and the other person will be embarrassed. Hold the space and work it through – "I know this is difficult for you, however, I really need to get to the bottom of this for your sake and mine"

It's you not me – we get defensive if we feel under attack so we come out shooting, blaming others for our difficulties. This is usually an instinctive response so often just waiting for someone to finish can be helpful before you calmly turn the conversation back to the reason for meeting – "I am sure there are external factors that have impacted your ability to hit your deadlines, however, I think it would be more useful to fully explore what led up to this situation and why you missed the deadline. So, can you take me through what happened this week and what caused the delay?"

That's not fair, everyone moans at meetings

– again a defensive move and one designed to make you worry about everyone else to take the heat off them. Totally normal response when faced with evidence of behaviour unbecoming. Speaking on behalf of others is a way of building up a virtual supportive group but it is rarely the case that 'everyone' behaves like them. Again, stick to the aim of the meeting and assertively bring the person back to the point – "I would like to discuss the effect of your negativity at the meetings not other people's behaviour, so can I bring you back to what happened this Monday and we can go from there?"

Summary

- Being clear about your aim keeps you on track
- Stay calm and assertive to influence the other person to do the same then you can solve the issue better
- Don't judge the reactions of others, they are usually totally normal just don't let them derail the conversation.