

Nobody likes to have difficult conversations. That's why they're called difficult. But whether you're leading a team, overseeing a department, or running a company, there are times when you have to say to yourself, 'This situation isn't getting better on its own.' At that moment it's time to recognise that you've been avoiding the difficult conversation, hoping that whatever was wrong would somehow turn itself around. It hasn't. Now, what do you do?

DIFFICULT

long distance conversations

essential to have, too easy to avoid

If you were faced with this situation ten years ago, you would have scheduled a meeting. Maybe you'd arrange for a neutral location to put both of you at ease. But we're no longer in the nineties. In fact we're only two years away from the second decade of the 21st century. This person is quite probably in a different location from you, possibly in a different time zone. In short, you need to address something that you've been putting off, and you're not going to be able to have a face to face discussion. You're going to have to do it virtually.

For the past three years I've been working with leaders at all levels who are faced with just this situation:

- A finance manager based in The Netherlands with staff who work in Manila
- A programme manager on the US East Coast whose customer is 1000 miles to the south and whose major suppliers are in Asia
- A business unit president whose direct reports are spread across the globe, so that there is never one time when all of them are awake

People such as these share a common challenge: strategic decisions related to cost and customer responsiveness have created a situation where one of the major management tools of the 20th century—the face-to-face meeting—is no longer available.

In my research, I've discovered that there are plenty of ways of overcoming the obstacles thrown up by working in the virtual environment when relationships are going well: conference calls, email, shared drives, and a whole host of collaboration software tools exist

to support productivity in this environment. But when it comes to those difficult conversations, it's not technology that will solve the problem. It's people. To be sure there's a role for technology. High bandwidth technologies like state of the art video conferencing work better than low bandwidth technologies like email for conducting difficult conversations. But ultimately technology won't resolve a difficult issue. The differentiator is the behaviour of the leader.

There are five things that effective leaders do to ensure that difficult conversations will have an impact in the virtual environment.

1. Build Virtual Relationships

Building relationships is the basis for any good conversation. Whether your staff is down the hall or around the world, it is important for them to feel connected to you. To build virtual relationships, one team leader asks all team members to share on-line photos. Another has regular 1:1 phone conversations and staggers the hours of the conversation so that sometimes she's the one on the call in the middle of her night. These attempts to build virtual relationships show an interest in the other person as a person, and pave the way if a difficult conversation is required. One thing is sure: if you go into a virtual difficult conversation without having built a virtual relationship, you're leaving the outcome to chance. Don't wait to build virtual relationships until you need them. It will be too late.

2. Face the issue openly

Picture yourself and one of your staff in a conference room. You've asked for the meeting because you are concerned that the person's

performance seems to be erratic of late. You haven't had much time to prepare because your prior meeting ran late. So you open the discussion by saying "Something's not right." How will this conversation go? Often a conversation that starts like this will go quite well. The other person will squirm. You'll maintain eye contact (maybe squirm a bit yourself on the inside and wish you were better prepared). But somehow you both will blunder your way into a discussion and a resolution. It happens a lot.

Blundering into a difficult conversation in a virtual environment almost never turns out well. Things go quiet. Neither side has any body language cues to go on. The potential for mutual problem solving evaporates. The importance of starting off well is heightened in the virtual environment.

Simple statements that acknowledge that there is an issue that you would like to discuss are usually the best way into the conversation. For example, you can say "I've asked for this discussion because I think you and I may have a difference of opinion about what constitutes success in your position. I want to hear your views and also let you know what I think." Notice with this type of introduction, the speaker is identifying a performance gap as well as setting the tone for a dialogue.

3. Explore the issue together

One of the reasons that difficult conversations are difficult is that both parties often find themselves in a disagreement over the nature of the problem. The manager says the employee's performance is erratic. The employee replies by saying the manager gives conflicting direction. If the manager counters at this point with evidence, be prepared for a battle of wits. Listening is usually a more powerful communication strategy at this stage than telling. In the end you're still the boss. So you've got the power. But in a virtual environment, you don't want to win the argument in the first five minutes and then spend the next two months wondering whether the person got the message. Be sure the other person feels that you're willing to listen.

4. Focus on Results

The reason to have a difficult conversation is to help the other person improve his or her performance. Exploring the issue, no matter how collaboratively is only half the task. The individual needs to come out of the conversation with a clear understanding of what success will look like. Otherwise they will live in fear of the next time they hear from you. An important part of your preparation for a difficult conversation is to be clear what you expect of the other person. Then you can use the exploration phase to decide whether you think your expectations are realistic. Sometimes you'll find that you will need to adjust your expectations so that the employee can be successful. There is also the possibility that you will conclude that this person is not the right person for the job. Regardless of what you conclude, by exploring the issue openly and being clear what is required, you should be in a much better position to have more open discussions with this person.

5. Express confidence

Television programmes like 'The Office' and cartoons like Dilbert convey the impression that most managers are incompetent power mongers. Organisational research, however, paints a different picture. For most employees, their immediate supervisor is the face and voice of the company. What you say has a major impact on how people feel about themselves, their work, and the organisation in general. After you've had a difficult conversation and landed on a course of action, there is one more step that it is important to take. That step is to use your power to help the person believe that what they are about to do is indeed possible and that you have confidence in them. This needs to be authentic. If you don't have confidence, then redefine the success criteria. This final act of expressing confidence will create the tone for all of your follow up meetings.

One final note: Don't celebrate too soon. Confronting a difficult situation is hard work for the manager, and it might be a relief for you to have it behind you. But for the employee the hard work is just beginning. You've asked the employee to change, and they may not have the skill or willingness to see the change through. It is more important in virtual situations to build in follow up than it is in face to face situations. In the virtual environment, you literally can't 'see' how things are going. So the action plan and follow up are much more important, or you might find yourself in a similar situation in a few months time—only now the stakes are higher.



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