

HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

There are many issues that make business owners wake after midnight in a cold sweat. One of the most common is when you know you have to have a difficult conversation with staff or customers

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OFTEN IN EXECUTIVE coaching, clients ask for assistance with having tricky conversations because they are dreading an upcoming interview. I see difficult conversations as a cause for celebration, *especially* if the conversation is initiated by the other party.

Often we lose staff and customers and have no idea why they left; what caused them to become so disenchanted with us, our product or service that they just walked away without caring enough to let us know? Staying engaged with someone who still cares about us or what we do is the best opportunity to build a long-term business relationship. By beginning a difficult conversation, you have made the choice to resolve the situation as opposed to allowing it to escalate.

There are times when we inadvertently cause a difficult situation; a throwaway comment, less than rigorous approach to a shipment, an unthinking outburst of frustration, or an unreturned phonecall. These can be easily misinterpreted as signs of us not caring enough to keep the relationship alive. When the opportunity arises to have a difficult conversation it is useful to review recent events, and non-events, to see if we have inadvertently caused an upset. What has really happened (cold facts)? What is the other person's perspective of the facts? If you put yourself in their shoes, can you relate to their issue?

Once we have thought about this, it's time to plan. The issue might not be clear; it's useful to gather any information which provides clarity before the conversation takes place. It's vital to know what we want as an outcome. This way, we set up a blueprint for the result and become architect of the solution.

If it is a staff member, do we want to keep them, build their confidence, have them change their behaviours/attitudes, or really do we want to let the relationship end? With a customer, do we want to be adding more products/services, creating a deeper relationship, or have them adjust their behaviours to our staff?

Do we really want to keep them? What impression do we want them to have of us and our business after the conversation is over? What do we want them saying about us in the market?

To have more control over our outcomes, it is useful to set our intention in advance. This is especially so when planning a difficult conversation. Once we know what we want to achieve and have organised to conduct the conversation without interruptions, if possible, face to face in an appropriately respectful environment, then we can plan the process using these steps for handling tough situations:

“STAYING ENGAGED WITH SOMEONE WHO STILL CARES ABOUT US OR WHAT WE DO IS THE BEST OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP”

Identify the situation: First, observe what is *actually* happening. The trick is to articulate this observation without any judgment or personal evaluation; simply state what is going on that is causing the situation. If you find yourself making a judgement, pause. Make another attempt at seeing the situation without judgement. Judgement stops the conversation in its tracks.

Open meaningful discussion: Deal with the subject objectively, openly and honestly. If you have difficulty with this, bring in an uninvolved mediator. Begin by making a short, clear statement of facts not opinions, stating what you want to discuss. This sets the scene for the other party and frames your discussion.

Acknowledge the other person: Thank them for making time to have a conversation with you.

Tell them your desired outcomes: If you want to get a resolution, *tell them*. They may be relieved to hear you say it.

State your case: Using neutral, unemotional and objective language, explain the real effects this conflict is having on you. Be assertive (not aggressive), accurate and mean what you say. First empathise with their situation, then state honestly how you feel.

Gather information: Now it's their turn to talk. This is not a time for action, just *listen* with real empathy and without interruptions or becoming defensive. Then use open and unemotional language to ask clarifying questions. You are trying to see the world from their perspective. The useful attitude here is one of curiosity as to how the other person perceives the situation and your behaviours. At this time you're trying to *understand* the other person's point of view. *You do not have to agree with it.*

What are the needs? State clearly your need for the situation to be resolved and ask about their needs.

Problem solve: Only when the parties have clearly explained their thinking and perceptions, is it time to problem solve.

Agree on what the actual problem is. This may lead to a resolution straight away! Where do each of you stand on the issue? State this clearly, reframing your words. Define the problem in terms of conflicting needs, not conflicting solutions. Clearly state the intention of agreeing to a mutually satisfactory solution.

Search for as many mutually acceptable solutions as possible. Be creative with generating solutions, because this expands the chance of a good outcome for both parties. *Your priority is to help the other party achieve their desired solution, on your terms.*

Evaluate the solutions carefully: are there hidden downsides, or unintended consequences? Check if each solution is fair. Is there a win-win situation?

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEM SITUATIONS

- When you are working with a customer or employee to come up with a solution, be creative! The more potential solutions there are, the easier it will be to solve the problem so that both parties are satisfied.
- Create a climate of new possibilities with new ideas, new people, new attitudes, new situations and new conversations.
- Brainstorm as many ideas as you can.
- Generate a creative climate by asking the question “What if?”
- Expand your possibilities by identifying additional sources of resources. These might include money, people and time.
- Look for values which bring your interests together on a higher level.

Decide together on the solution. Choose the one most acceptable to both parties to get shared commitment to the result. If the solution is forced on the employee or customer it may be sabotaged, or not carried out at all.

Plan together how to implement the solution. Write it down. Everyone involved gets a copy.

Monitor success: After an agreed time, evaluate implementation and results. If all this sounds onerous, compare it to the devastating impact on your business to lose employees and customers because they found it too hard to talk with you.

When you master the skill of having difficult conversations you find the steps blur and the conversations flow.

Many people start a business because they have a great idea or are good at delivering a product. Only later in the game do they gain the much-needed people skills to run the business successfully, and the ability to master difficult conversations is near the top of the list of these people skills. **DB**

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