

ASK THE EXPERT

Our approach to difficult conversations

Over the years RoleplayUK has helped to deliver and facilitate innumerable roleplays and training events aimed at helping people to handle difficult conversations at work. What this has shown us is that, even across a vast range of business sectors, no matter what the environment or issue, it's the same 'human' elements which create obstacles every time.

The first problem is the multitude of reasons we can all come up with for avoiding these conversations: Fear of an emotional reaction (on both sides), fear of making the problem worse, fear of consequences for the team and/or yourself. But then there are the consequences of avoidance as well: misunderstandings, resentment from others affected and, ultimately, escalation of the issue. Finally, there is the 'confrontation' itself, which may well fulfil our worst fears due to delay, nerves and the anticipation of a poor outcome.

In other words, it can turn out to be the ultimate 'self-fulfilling prophecy'!

So how do we turn that around and start approaching challenging conversations with positivity and confidence?

First of all we start with the thinking behind it. Because whether we intend it or not, a negative attitude to the conversation will disclose itself in our body language, tone and choice of words. In other words, *our behaviours demonstrate our thinking*. That's why signals can often be picked up and defensiveness provoked before anything has even been addressed.

In order to give off positive signals we need to have prepared (and, ideally, practiced) a conversation which can motivate the other person to *want* to make changes in their behaviour. Part of this is about considering our own motives; Do we intend to tell-off or support - to warn or to encourage? Choosing to view this as a development opportunity can make a world of difference to our mental approach and the subsequent behaviours we display.

Next it's time to consider the structure of the conversation (we present a useful business model for this in our training modules). Think about which points need to be covered and how to convey those with confidence. This may include thinking about emotional management for yourself - anticipating what makes you flustered/angry etc.- and also anticipating the emotional response of the other person - being on the look out for *their* body language/tone and having some phrases prepared to address those signals.

Our experience has shown us that it's essential to state the purpose of the conversation as clearly as possible at the start. Then check the other person's understanding - make sure they're in no doubt about what you're there to discuss. It's also useful to surface any feelings of discomfort you both may have in tackling a delicate subject. This demonstrates empathy and can help to diffuse high emotion.

Responsibility needs to be established (yours and theirs) along with agreement of the issue in hand. Without genuine agreement you'll find it difficult to move forwards.

You're likely to have some ideas already about what's causing the problem, but asking open questions and giving the other person plenty of airtime may well give you information you never knew and some legitimate elements to be considered.

Once you've established all the facts you can begin exploring solutions. Together. Again, you'll probably have your own ideas already but asking open or guided questions will allow the other person to come up with their own solutions. And if it's their idea they're much more likely to feel a sense of ownership and commitment to change.

Last, but not least, agree some clear, specific actions. List them. Repeat them if necessary. Check the other person's understanding again. This is a contract of sorts so notate what you've agreed and make sure the other person has a copy too. Remember, this will be one of the documents you can refer back to when checking progress!

We've seen evidence time and again that it really *is* possible for a challenging conversation to end with the other person leaving feeling valued, nurtured and encouraged. They may even go away with an increased understanding of your organisation's vision and values...because they've just seen them in action!