



Difficult Conversations – Get over your gremlins!

In my coaching work with leaders and teams one of the things I'm frequently asked to help them with is the 'important' conversation.

I've written quite considerably on this topic before but this is a new article that contains everything you need to do in one place!

Most commonly this is a conversation about performance (or lack of!), conflict with a colleague (spoken or unspoken) or a request to a boss, colleague or team member that you think might be refused.

Why do we find these conversations so difficult?

In my experience there are three main reasons:

1. You don't know where to begin or you struggle to find the right words to use;
2. You worry about the potentially strong emotions that the conversation may evoke;
3. You dread conflict and/or you have a strong need to be liked.

We can ALL get better at these conversations if we do four things:

- 1) Understand our own beliefs and know that we can change them if we choose to;
- 2) See the world from the other person's shoes (empathy);
- 3) Prepare;
- 4) Practise.

Understand Our Beliefs

What are the beliefs you hold that mean you avoid difficult conversations? These are some of the most common:

- 'I must be nice';
- 'I don't do confrontation';
- 'I'm useless at this' (fear of failure which will lead to humiliation, rejection and worse).

All of these beliefs can be changed.

But how?

'That's just how I am' is a lame excuse. It's how you **CHOOSE** to be.

What would a better belief be in this situation?

Rather than 'I must be nice' how about 'I must do the right thing for myself, the other person, my team and the organisation', or rather than 'I don't do confrontation' how about 'It is my job to give honest and clear feedback.'

Empathise

This person is a human being too with hopes, fears, their own beliefs and view of the situation. What is important to them? What do they fear? In many of my leadership training programmes I ask delegates to, metaphorically, 'stand in the shoes' of the 'difficult' person. This brings huge new insights, ideas and understanding about how the world might look from another perspective and how, therefore, to start the conversation in a way that is likely to be heard (and therefore less likely to result in defensiveness, denial or accusation!

Preparation

You need to be absolutely clear on:

- The purpose of the conversation;
- The outcome you want as a result of the conversation (important: think 'win- win' and 'shaping the future' rather than going back over old ground).

Preparation is the key to making a good start. Now, I'm not saying you should prepare a script (not a good idea!) but writing things down gives you clarity and can take some of the emotional fear away.

Practise

Once you've done your preparation, one of the best things to do is to practise saying out loud the things you have written down. You can do that with a friend, a colleague or your coach or mentor. Or record it on your phone. There's something about becoming familiar with the words (and feelings that go with the words) in advance that will help you to be succinct when you are in the room with the other person.

Speak slowly, clearly, and succinctly. Avoid all those extraneous words that don't add anything to your message. (AKA waffle).

The Conversation

Start by:

- Outlining your reasons for having the conversation (purpose);
- Explaining what is at stake;
- Sharing your thoughts and feelings on the issue;
- Explaining that you are looking for a solution and mutual understanding.

Then:

- Ask for a response from the other person;
- Listen to their response. And allow some silence for reflection;

- Explore options to move forward;
- Agree specific actions.

If this sounds too difficult... think about things you have mastered in life that felt difficult at first and are now second nature. Driving a car? Playing a sport? Doing a presentation?

Practice does really making things easier.

And if you carry on avoiding the conversation – what will the consequences be?

Got any specific 'important conversations' you'd like my help with? Get in touch via pat@lynnscottcoaching.co.uk