

WHITEPAPER

Coaching for challenging conversations.

BY SANDRA STARK



If you are like most managers, one of the things you most dislike doing is having a challenging conversation with someone—especially if they are a hard worker, generally competent, but just falling down in a few places. Many managers avoid or soft-pedal the issue, only to watch that person deal with a more serious issue later, such as loss of promotion, less opportunity, smaller bonus, or lack of respect.

There are three types of challenging conversations in the work environment:

- **PERFORMANCE-RELATED** - You need someone to change how they are performing a certain task, such as the way they speak to the team or their attitude toward support staff.
- **A DIFFICULT PERSONALITY OR TRAIT** - That is undermining relationships, office morale, team development and/or productivity. This difficult personality may be constant, or just emerge under certain circumstances, but it needs to be addressed.
- **HARD TRUTHS** - A pattern of events that points to something needing to change. For example, your marketing plans aren't working, you're missing too many deadlines, we argue about everything related to this topic. Whatever the issue is, it's a hard truth that has to be addressed.

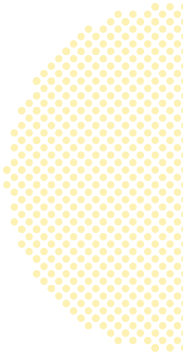
The underlying premise in each of these is that things aren't working as they are and something is going to have to change. The other person may not be aware this needs to change, they may not believe it needs to change, they may not want to make the change, but in your opinion it has to change.

WHY IS THIS SO TOUGH?

What makes these conversations so difficult before we even start them? What is it we are afraid of? What causes the increased pressure and scares us about this conversation?

Here are some of our worst fears around these challenging conversations.

- I might make it worse and escalate the problem.
- Any conversation around this topic may result in negative consequences to me. I could be rejected, lose the relationship, there could be retaliation, I may force an outcome I'm not prepared for (e.g., they quit).



- This could violate unspoken agreements. There may be an unspoken agreement or norm that certain topics don't get raised in this organization, family or relationship.
- I may meet with irrationality or emotional outbursts.
- I may exhibit irrationality or emotional outbursts myself.
- I could end up looking like the bad guy.
- There could be hurt feelings—theirs or mine.
- I might discover I am part of the problem and I might have to change too.
- It takes up too much time.
- I may have to engage at a deeper level with this person. I may hear, or have to share, information that makes me uncomfortable.

Let's take a couple of these fears and explore a little further to see what is so scary. What we discover is that somehow it all really comes down to 'me'—that I might get hurt, be hurtful, look bad, feel incompetent. For each of us the real challenge is how to reconcile being honest and direct with doing no harm to ourselves or to the other person.

CAN'T I JUST IGNORE IT AND HOPE IT GOES AWAY?

Given how much trouble this is, why bother? What if we just don't confront? What are the results of not confronting? What if we just let it go and do nothing? Here are a few possibilities.

- The problem escalates rather than resolves.
- I get an outcome I don't want at a time when I least need it.
- Emotions build until someone blows up.
- I lose the relationship as my anger and disrespect grow.
- I lose my credibility with other staff because I don't deal with it.
- I could lose other staff.
- I undermine myself and my health.
- I lose my job.



Looking at the two lists it would seem that whether we confront or we don't, the outcome is not good. They look pretty similar. Both indicate we will get an outcome we don't want. But which of these lists actually represents the truth? The answer: the 'don't confront' list. By not confronting you will be guaranteed an outcome you don't want.

If you don't confront when it's needed you will continue to get behaviour you don't want, and your relationship will be harmed. Your communications will become contaminated by negative thoughts, feelings and actions, such as sarcasm, cynicism, ridicule and talking behind backs. Eventually this will lead to a damaged relationship, reduced commitment in the other person and longterm decline.

The first list, the 'what will happen if we confront' list, is a list of our fears about what could happen. It is not the truth. Yet some of us, in spite of all logic to the contrary, act as if this list is the truth, as if it is better not to confront.

What keeps that belief alive? During the anticipation phase, we often think of this conversation as a threat, and if you're like most people you will delay having to deal with something you feel is a threat. This is normal, as these are just survival instincts. To overcome them, we need to pay attention to how we are naming/thinking about this conversation.

If I believe it is a threat and ... I therefore prepare for it as if it is a threat ...
What internal state am I creating? Fear and anger.

If we confront from a place of fear or anger, which is a place of reactivity, defensiveness and irrationality, we increase the probability of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The behaviours that come out of this negative internal state—to blame, punish, intimidate, embarrass, etc.—undermine our skills and reduce our choices for how to be.

CONFRONTING EFFECTIVELY = OPPORTUNITY

Right up front we need to have tremendous clarity about a few things if we want to confront in an effective way—that is from a place of higher purpose and with a coaching approach. We need to think and talk about the opportunities in having the conversation.

There are many opportunities in learning to confront—for starters, increased trust.



We want the people we coach to trust us. We often think they will trust us if we are nice to them; we equate trust with lack of discord. But we couldn't be more wrong. How you and your employees deal with discord is one of the biggest determinants of how much trust and respect you will have in one another. If you can treat everyone with respect and compassion when you are frustrated, angry and scared, then they can trust you. Discord, difficult topics and disagreement are absolutely unavoidable in authentic relationships, and dealing with them always presents an opportunity to increase respect and deepen the trust. However, if it is done poorly, it will undoubtedly weaken respect and trust.

This is especially true with someone who is charged with the responsibility of coaching another: the manager. If I am the coachee and you are my manager, my trust in you is built on the knowledge that you will act responsibly and fairly to help me improve—especially when something is wrong. I need to trust that you will not chicken out and leave me hanging out there doing it wrong or making a bad impression and messing up without telling me.

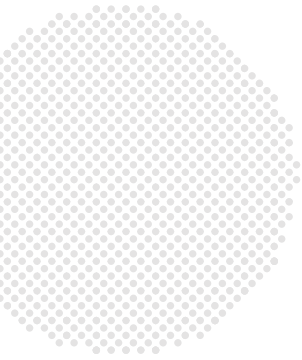
BEING 'BIG' ENOUGH

To successfully engage in this process you have to be big. When you're angry, frustrated, rushed, embarrassed, you're neck is on the line, you know you're right and someone is resisting, it's hard to be big—really hard.

I think intuitively we all know this and at some level we fear we just can't be that big or we think we shouldn't have to be, (he shouldn't have put me in that position), or we don't want to be. I hear phrases such as: "I'll just make matters worse." "It won't make any difference." "It won't be a positive experience in the end." "People may get hurt, angry, behave badly, relations will suffer."

We rarely say: "I'm just not a big enough person to pull this off." Well, to quote some very wise people: "Who are you not to be big?"

The map and the skills we teach in our Tackling Challenging Conversations course are really the most wonderful mini lesson and methodology for how to be big in a confrontational setting. From our point of view the question is not really whether to confront or not; it is how to confront in a way that communicates your best intentions and meets your highest purpose. To do that you need awareness, self-management skills, and a clear map of how to proceed.





There is an excellent section on this in Peter's new book, *Igniting The Third Factor*, and Susan Scott has written one of the best books ever on communicating, called *Fierce Conversations*, but I believe these skills are best learned in a workshop setting where you get to see the 'all' of it and practice in an environment where you can be coached.

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