



## Difficult Conversations

Welcome! Our 'tool of the month' series has included several models and concepts from IHR's Workforce Development Team. As well as our favourite concepts we include hints and tips that have helped us out in all different work environments. These do not represent a fixed way of doing things, they are not hard and fast rules – if they resonate with you please make use of them – if they do not that's fine too!

This month we are looking at a topic that is necessary but that few of us enjoy. Having difficult conversations can be a constructive activity that builds relationships with colleagues and stakeholders.

This session focusses on difficult conversations of all types. We look at managing people as well as broader techniques we can use in different situations.

*There are four pages in this document.*

### **Difficult conversations with those we manage**

Difficult conversations can be about emotive subjects or around poor behaviour (they may be one and the same).

Before we start to address any issue of concern, first we must acknowledge that managing people is a position of privilege and we need to give the employment relationship the consideration and careful treatment it is due. This means taking time to understand what we bring to the relationship; all of us bring our personal and professional selves to work; both selves can show up in all elements of our roles. Largely we bring positive behaviours from both of ourselves to work; however sometimes we inadvertently bring behaviours that are not suitable for the work environment. As a manager of people, we are responsible for reflecting on and understanding the behaviours of both our colleagues and ourselves. Time and energy spent understanding ourselves in the work environment is an investment that will pay off immediately and in the long term, and will help us to address issues of concern in a tactful way that is suitable for the behaviours/issues that we are trying to tackle.

We can describe appropriate professional behaviour and can probably describe an ideal set of personal behaviours. Everyone is different and sometimes behaviours become unhelpful. As managers we can ask what is driving this? What else is going on? What is going on below the surface?

## Poor behaviours

Schein argues that there is always more going on, and we need to look below the surface<sup>1</sup>. So, when faced with poor behaviours, as leaders we should...

1. Take a moment to understand what else is going on with people and equip ourselves as well as we can.
2. Be clear about the formal process available to us to fall back on, but start out by talking.
3. Address poor behaviours – for the benefit of the team and the individual.

When challenging poor behaviour or actions:

- Be specific about what we observe and the effect it has
- Challenge the unhelpful behaviour, but respect the person
- Be clear about what we expect
- Summarise and document what is agreed so that all parties are clear
- Use Active listening – to help us understand and show that we are listening
- Keep building the relationship – don't bear grudges, treat as normal

As leaders it is worth investing time in people so that issues don't re-appear, and performance improves.

When we tackle particularly emotive subjects, it can be helpful to manage the environment by finding space and time to listen, being empathetic and also being true to our organisation by focusing on what is needed to help the individual be productive. It can be very helpful to keep a degree of distance by listening in an initial session, taking time to reflect and have subsequent sessions to resolve actions. Using other trusted people as a sounding board can help check your perspective.

## Approaching difficult conversations with peers, stakeholders and clients

What kind of challenges do we face?

As well as difficult conversations with those we manage, take a moment to consider the wide range of challenges we can face at work. Typically, we think about:

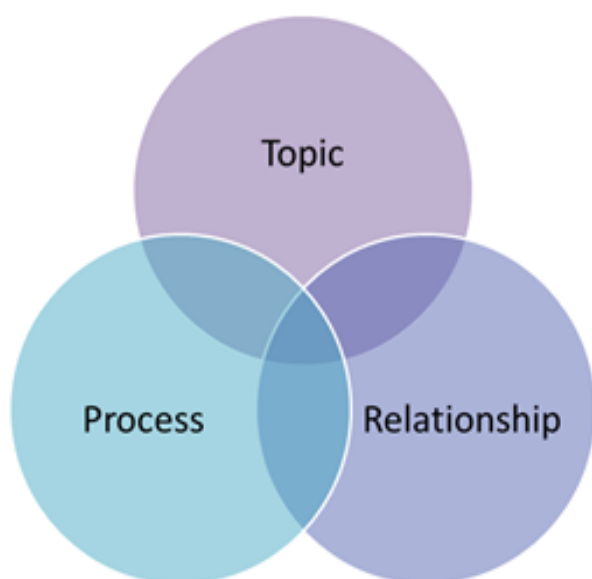
- Managing stakeholders
- Challenge by our peers or colleagues
- Managing upwards
- Dealing with suppliers
- Challenges with customers
- Dealing with unexpected events
- Asking for help- having to admit that we don't have the knowledge to complete a task

Rather than prescribing a solution for each of these, we suggest a process that we can choose to apply. Having an approach that gives us some structure and allows us to address difficulties purposefully towards solutions, can give us a little more confidence when faced with challenges.

Of course, each issue has a context, and we bring our own personality and energies to a situation, so this is one area where each of us is constantly learning and improving our leadership practice.

The recommendation is to:

- **Stop** – be deliberate and conscious in our actions.
- **Consider the situation** - What is being presented? What is the context?
- **Be purposeful** - what do you want to achieve?(for yourself, for the organisation, for others involved)
- It can be helpful to **break the situation** down to three elements.



**Topic**  
Be clear about the purpose of the conversation  
Present your side of the story  
Listen to the other side

**Relationship**  
Protect the relationship. Challenge the behaviours and effect not the person  
Recognise the emotional state of all parties  
Be wary of assumptions and blame

**Process**  
Plan the exchange  
Provide an opportunity for preparation  
Open the conversation  
Look for win-win & an amicable solution

Taking a calm structured approach to the conversation where you take time to prepare, to listen and look for opportunities for resolution can pay dividends. Remember, your objectives are usually to meet the purpose and maintain the relationship. If you can achieve this through a little compromise you have been successful.

A common problem is that views become entrenched and each side focuses on denying the other side, losing sight of what a “good win” can achieve.

## Being realistic

Clearly this approach takes a little more time, planning and energy than quick decisions, giving instructions or even closing down objections to proposals. Therefore, take a moment to assess how important and urgent is the issue? You might choose different strategies including choosing to resolve the issue at a later point, recruiting others to manage the issue or simply to avoid (at that time).

### How can I use this?

- There are many different types of difficult conversation, acknowledge that it is possible to resolve these and maintain or even improve relationships by addressing issues.
- Prepare yourself to challenge poor behaviour that we see in people. Choose the best timing and environment to make this effective.
- Be deliberate. Take a moment to settle yourself before tackling a difficult conversation and clarify your purpose. Most people don't like difficult conversations so calming the situation will help everyone.
- Use other people as a sounding board to help to keep perspective.
- Be ready to adjust. Think about the personalities and energies at play: Yours, other parties. What else is going on under the surface? What approach will achieve what you want?
- We know that there are process and procedures to fall back on, but in most cases aim to preserve the relationship. An agreed solution might serve that better and be productive for you, others and the organisation.

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### Further reading

Handling Difficult Conversations - CMI (managers.org.uk)

Three Proven Techniques for Managing Difficult Conversations - CMI (managers.org.uk)

### Sources:

1. [Edgar Schein on Culture](#) - Leadership & Change Magazine