

Managing difficult issues: **How to have a 'Courageous Conversation' (CC)**

Let's face it, few people like or embrace conflict situations. Given the choice, most people avoid facing up to conflict, whether that's in the workplace, in our personal lives or when somebody has jumped the queue in the supermarket. It takes courage (and skill) to get the issue out into the open and move it to a positive resolution.

One of the main things that I find business leaders struggle with is managing the performance of their staff, especially when performance problems start to occur. When things get sticky in the workplace one of three things occur;

a) early intervention in the problem to stop it becoming bigger

b) avoid the issue & hope it will go away....

and, when it doesn't

c) exit the person out, either out of the company, or ... move them to another team where .. it becomes somebody else's problem

Cost to the business

The costs to the business of options b) & c) are huge and often not recognised; loss of a person who you might have been able to turn around, a personal grievance for a questionable exit, fractured teams, good staff leaving, higher absence, productivity dip and impact on your business and employer brand (reputation).

How do you know when you need a CC?

If the problem is at the front of your mind & won't go away, if it's keeping you awake at night, if you have other staff & work colleagues raising the issue, if your customers are starting to complain... then you need to have a Courageous Conversation.

What's holding you back?

When you don't want to have the conversation you need to ask yourself why. Is it because?

- You've never had to do this before, it's a skills issue – get help
- You've done it before and it wasn't a good experience – again get help
- You're worried, even scared, of their reaction
- You're worried about the consequences of the conversation
- When you imagine the conversation, you feel uncomfortable

In a nutshell you probably haven't had the conversation because you're afraid of the outcome. We all do that. So here's some tips to get you started.

Get in early before the problem gets too big and more difficult to manage

Be clear about what the issue is, how it is causing problems and for whom

Gather more information, such behavioural examples from a range of trusted sources. Be confident the issue isn't more about personal agendas or a personality conflict; i.e. two people who just don't get on (I have a code I work to "you don't have to like who you work with, but you do have to work with them. Bottom line. ")

Think about the person and how they are likely to react, what language do they respond positively and negatively to?

If you're anxious about the conversation, **get some coaching** either from a trusted, confidential, internal person who's skilled at this stuff, or from an external coach.

Role play it a couple of times; this will help to uncover objections or reactions you might encounter and be more prepared.

Think about the key skills needed: active listening; open and non-confrontational questioning; positive body language; language, words and timing set the tone and can cause unnecessary conflict before you've even got started.

It's important to re-affirm organisational expectations and standards about "what good looks like". However this may need to take a back seat if the root of the problems are personal issues that need a different approach and compassionate level of support.

Susan and Peter Glaser in their book 'Be Quiet Be Heard' suggest two simple models for having your CC:

Raising Delicate Issues

- Step 1** **Opener** – Psychological agreement to have the conversation
 I-Feeling language – when people feel pushed, it creates a counter resistance
 Edit accusative language – avoid loaded language and red flag terms
- Step 2** **Pinpoint details** – Tell the person exactly what they said, when they said it or exactly what they did and when they did it
- Step 3** **Acknowledge Your Part** – Search for and communicate how you've contributed to the problem
- Step 4** **Agree on a solution** – Develop a solution that you both create and both implement

What if the concerns are directed at you?

Responding to criticism

- Step 1** **Active Listening** – Nonverbal attention and paraphrasing
 Nonverbal Attention – A posture of curiosity
 Paraphrasing – Listening to the message, reflecting it back, discovering speaker's intent
- Step 2** **Ask for Details** – Requesting clarifying information
- Step 3** **Guess** – When a speaker can't think of a specific, you come up with one
- Step 4** **Agree with Facts** – Be explicit in your agreement
- Step 5** **Agree with Critic's Perception** – Acknowledge the critic's perception is reasonable

What if the courageous conversation doesn't work?

If the informal route doesn't work, you may have to consider taking a more formal route. In this case I'd recommend you consult with your HR Advisor, or other professional to ensure you follow a fair and reasonable process and are aware of the potential consequences.

So don't put it off, take a breath, make a plan and address the problem.

Source: Denise Hartley-Wilkins, 2010 Shine People Consulting Ltd.