

Awkward conversations, how to have them and why you shouldn't put them off!

We spend a lot more time worrying about how to have an awkward or hard conversation with an employee or team member than we really need to! Sometimes ripping off a band aid is the best solution! Maddyness spoke to Dr Mark Kilgallon about why we feel so difficult having these conversations and the top tips we can employ to help us have them effectively.

As well as top tips on being on the receiving end, because neither party likes to be involved in an awkward conversation! The good news is there are ways to tackle this, especially when coming from an emotionally intelligent leader perspective.

[Maddyness] Why do people put off these conversations? How does this then

affect them psychologically?

[Mark] At one level the answer is quite simple: human beings don't like conflict and take great steps to avoid it at all cost. In my business as a coach I am fully aware that far too many managers fail to address difficult conversations, putting them off for 15 months, rather than having a 15 minute challenging interaction.

In their own minds, and this is where the real problem begins, many managers and leaders, knowing they have a challenging conversation in the future, start to play a continuous disaster movie over and over in their heads. Every possible negative 'what-if' scenario plays out in their *imagination* and consequently they start to feel under threat before any *actual* interaction has even taken place. This imaginary narrative increases the strain on an already difficult situation. If we assume that all parties involved are of a similar mindset, then the potential for failure in this conversation can be high.

It's vital that a leader gets themselves in the right mindset before they begin

This is where an emotionally intelligent attitude aligned to a compassionate based approach is a winning formula. I would suggest there are three helpful positions that can be adopted:

1. Our primary position is to get ourselves right. We each need to develop trusted strategies for creating our own emotional stability (I personally use a lot of deep breathing and mindfulness before such an event). We absolutely need to be *right in ourselves* in order to authentically meet another person.
2. Our secondary position is to have a clear understanding of our success criteria. Our mindset can never be to 'win' the conversation at the expense of another person's viewpoint – that is just destructive thinking. Ultimate success is to find an agreeable solution to a very challenging problem.
3. Our third point is to remind ourselves that in all cases people observe, interpret, understand and then conclude through their own lens. As a manager in these scenarios, my role is to listen, to learn and to comprehend an others' mindset. Too many managers think their job is to transmit in these interactions; have the benevolence to hear what people

have to say. Remember people rarely change without feeling that they have been understood – so listen intensely!

Why are these conversations important to have in the moment and not later?

Let me tell a story to demonstrate this point. One organisation that I worked with would send me their 'problem people' (note their language) and ask me to coach them. Often, I was given a briefing about how challenging this individual was in the workplace. We would therefore have a coaching session where I would genuinely listen to what they had to say.

In nearly every case, it would quickly emerge that these so-called problem people were actually high performers who didn't feel valued, had been allowed to drift, and most importantly, were not listened to or spoken with by their managers. Many told me that they only found out that their boss was unhappy via a third party and sometimes via 'rumour control'.

As leaders it is our ethical duty to connect with people at the earliest opportunity if we are unhappy with their performance. This then gives them the opportunity to improve and grow and in turn fulfils our roles as organisational leaders. Telling me that I did something wrong at my appraisal 11 months after the incident denies me the opportunity to grow. In this fast paced modern world we must proactively lead our people to help them fulfil personal, team and organisational worth.

We bought the ticket of being a leader; we must embrace the responsibilities.

What are your top tips for leaders both approaching and having these conversations?

1. Be self-convinced and develop that positive mindset. Fully acknowledge the impact that these types of scenarios have on you and turn off the disaster movie. Then develop a trusted routine before engaging with

another person – one that is centred on your own wellbeing and emotional stability.

2. Know all the facts that are currently available to you. You need to have absolute grip of the detail in order to facilitate any movement forward. Stick to the known facts and minimise the emotional content. If you are an Emotionally Intelligent leader then the other person will know you are authentic. Use your trustworthiness to its maximum impact by demonstrating both compassion and a determination to settle the event.
3. Prepare, prepare, prepare! You need to have positively and constructively played this out in your head as many times as possible prior to the event. It sounds strange, but make sure you practice in a room by speaking out loud so that you can listen to yourself talking. You do not want to hear yourself say something for the first time during the interaction. As such, take time to speak through your approach. Better still, if you have a trusted colleague who can listen, then use them as a resource.
4. Make sure you have a structured process so that you can keep the event on-track. I would send this to the other person prior to the event. 'No surprises' is a critical success factor.
5. Do not assume anything. There may be a plethora of reasons as to why someone is behaving in the manner that they are doing. Don't worry about accepting or rejecting their story – just work hard at understanding it! Listen to learn and comprehend.
6. Finally, write down your opening comments and bring them in with you. At the start, anxiety is at its maximum, so it's important to begin on the right track. You may also have developed an opening line that remains consistent – it may be something like:

“This conversation is as difficult for me as it is for you, but we need to get this settled today. This is an important issue and it is vital before either of us leaves the room that we understand each other’s viewpoint and we are clear about the actions that we each need to take in order to move forward. We each need to engage with this in a positive manner.”

There is lots of ‘we’ language rather than ‘I’ – and it also demonstrates that we

both have responsibilities in achieving positive outcomes.

7. If this conversation ultimately means that someone may be departing from the company – let them leave with dignity. Be gracious in handling this particularly.

What tips would you give to people having these conversations with their boss? How can they also put their perspective across in a polite and positive way?

If the ultimate aim of a difficult conversation is to hear, listen and learn – then not much should change when dealing with your boss. The biggest mistake is going into their office and trying to demonstrate how ‘right’ you are – and ultimately how wrong they are! One thing I would definitely advise is – knowing your bosses *preference type*. This is something that is very useful in any challenging conversation (and equally relates to all that we have discussed so far) particularly when there is a power dynamic at play. If the boss is an authentic leader then the conversation should be adult-to-adult. Sometimes for whatever reason that equality may not exist, that is when I would be armed with some preferential knowledge. If they like detail – give them the facts of your position; if they are impatient – be brief, land your point and be gone; if they are people focused – wax lyrical on the values and worth of your idea; if they are big picture focused then concentrate on the strategic value to the organisation.

Too many people concentrate solely on their own message, without taking the time to translate it through the lens of their boss. They need to be able to listen and hear your message – so transform it into a language they understand.

Any final points on how we should follow up after these conversations?

Having had the difficult conversation, the hardest part is over! Now make sure that you follow up on all the agreements that were made in the meeting. These should have been set with timescales and they should be agreed. Each person should be clear about their responsibilities.

If the individual starts to improve – please praise them for their efforts. They

have gone through a vulnerable experience, so let's make sure we reward performance improvement. Equally, if they are not stepping up to the requirement, they also need to know.

Demonstrate compassion and purpose at all times.

Make sure their development plan is fully supported. Invest in a coach and mentor.

Remember email is the most impersonal method of communication, one that too many people rely upon. Leadership is a person to person event, so try and speak with the individual as regularly as possible.

Take care of the self! A leader who operates at the highest echelons of performance needs to keep cognitively bright, emotionally connected, and demonstrate behaviours that connect with their values. You can't do that if you are running on empty. It's vital for all concerned that leaders are at their peak.

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