

How to Have A Challenging Conversation



by Nickie Kemp

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Preparation is Key!

Getting comfortable with challenging conversations is critical to your success as a manager. There's also a bonus to developing this skill: It can help you in other areas of your life. Once you learn these tactics, you can apply them in many situations. Follow these prompts to plan and prepare for difficult conversations.



Take a moment to evaluate just how much time and energy you are dedicating to this challenging situation. Reflect on what other productive activities you could engage in with that same time and energy. Instead of ruminating on the issue, addressing it directly can lead to a more positive outcome and free up mental space for other important tasks. Engaging in this proactive approach not only enhances your effectiveness as a manager but also contributes to a healthier work environment where issues are resolved rather than ignored.

Work through your anxiety or fears.

The reason we label certain conversations as “challenging” often stems from the fear or anxiety they provoke. Recognizing that these feelings are common among individuals can significantly alleviate some of the apprehension surrounding the conversation. The following prompts are designed to help you identify and reframe typical fears and worries that may arise in these situations. Understanding the root cause of your anxiety can empower you to face the conversation with greater confidence.

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Understanding when a challenging conversation is necessary is the first step towards effective communication. If you find yourself preoccupied with an issue, repeatedly revisiting it in your mind, this is often a clear indication that a conversation needs to take place. Procrastinating on these discussions can lead to increased stress and unresolved conflicts. Consider whether there is a specific issue you have been avoiding discussing with someone on your team, perhaps due to the perceived difficulty of the conversation. The longer you delay this conversation, the more time and energy you are investing in worry rather than resolution.

Take a moment to consider why this particular conversation triggers anxiety for you. Is it the identity of the person you need to speak with, the anticipated reaction, the subject matter of the discussion, or perhaps something else entirely? Identifying the specific triggers can help you prepare for the conversation more effectively. By addressing these triggers head-on, you can reduce their power over your emotions and approach the conversation with clarity and purpose.

- Challenge your fears by questioning their validity. Ask yourself: Is your anxiety preventing you from having the conversation? Are you envisioning negative outcomes based solely on fear or anxiety, and is that fear aiding your preparation or holding you back? Do you feel uncertain about what you want to articulate? Consider whether your mind races with “what if” scenarios and assess the likelihood of those outcomes actually occurring.
- Are you convincing yourself that you are incapable of handling the conversation? Challenge that belief; is it genuinely true? By confronting these negative thoughts, you can build a stronger foundation for approaching the upcoming discussion with confidence and assertiveness.

Know the person you are talking to

To increase the likelihood that the other person will genuinely hear and understand your message, it is essential to consider their identity and perspective. Rather than solely concentrating on the points you wish to convey, take the time to understand the other person's position, needs, and priorities. This empathy allows you to tailor your message in a way that resonates more deeply with them and fosters a more constructive dialogue. When individuals feel listened to, understood, and respected, they are often more receptive to feedback and discussion.

Who is the person with whom you need to engage in this challenging conversation? Reflect on their specific needs, goals, and potential concerns. By gaining insights into their priorities, you can frame your message in a way that aligns with their interests. For instance, if the individual is focused on career development, consider how your conversation might connect to their professional aspirations, making it more likely they will be open to your input.

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How can you structure your message to maximize its impact on this person? Think about the most effective way to convey your thoughts so that they resonate with the recipient. By personalizing your approach, you enhance the chances of a productive conversation, paving the way for meaningful exchanges and improved relationships.

Practice Assertiveness



Assertiveness is a crucial communication style that can significantly enhance your ability to navigate challenging conversations. This approach strikes a balance between clear expression of your thoughts and a delivery that the other person can genuinely hear and appreciate. It may take time to become comfortable with assertiveness, particularly if your natural communication style leans toward being more passive or aggressive. The following prompts will guide you in honing your assertive communication skills.

Start by distilling your message down to its essence. What is the main point you want to convey, stated in clear and concise terms? Focusing on the core of your message makes it easier for the other person to grasp your intent and facilitates a more straightforward dialogue. Clear communication prevents misunderstandings and encourages a productive exchange.

Being assertive also means grounding your message in facts and evidence. What examples or data can you provide to support your points? Having concrete evidence bolsters your argument and demonstrates your preparedness, which can enhance your credibility during the conversation. When you present your case with clarity and backing, you are more likely to foster a responsible and open discussion.

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Deliver the message effectively

When the time comes to have the conversation, it is essential to recognise that effective communication goes beyond just the words you choose. Your body language, tone of voice, and overall demeanor play a critical role in how your message is received. By focusing on all these elements, you significantly increase your chances of delivering your message successfully and fostering a constructive dialogue.



Before the conversation, consider writing out what you wish to say, including your main message and any evidence or examples you intend to reference. This preparation ensures that you remain focused and clear during the discussion. A written outline can serve as a useful guide to keep the conversation on track and prevent you from losing sight of your objectives.

Practice speaking your message aloud until you feel comfortable and confident. Pay attention to your body language and tone of voice to ensure they convey clarity and firmness. Practicing in front of a mirror or with a trusted colleague can provide valuable feedback and help you fine-tune your delivery to ensure your message is received as intended.

Before the meeting, check your emotional state... remember to keep calm, make sure you are not rushing off to another meeting straight afterwards.... allow for the time to have the conversation.

Visualizing various outcomes and preparing for different responses can be incredibly beneficial. For example, if a team member remains silent during the conversation, consider giving them time to process before checking if they understood your message. Alternatively, if someone becomes upset, recognize that this may be an indication to pause and revisit the conversation at a later time.

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Use the SBI model to structure the conversation.

If the conversation relates to underperformance or poor behaviour, use the SBI model. SBI stands for Standard, Behaviour, Impact, and it was developed by the Leadership Academy as a simple tool to assist in structuring challenging conversations.

In your workplace, there are expectations or a standard of performance or behaviour that your employee is expected to meet. These may be outlined in KPI's, job descriptions, policies, or procedures. However, if someone in your team is not meeting these expectations, you need to take action to have the challenging conversation.

Start the conversation by reiterating the **standard** or expectation e.g. staff must ensure the store is ready for opening at 8.00am and check that they are aware of this expectation.

Next, explain the **behaviour or performance** you have witnessed, e.g., the store is not ready for opening at 8.30 am...boxes remain in the aisles and cleaning materials are also left lying around, and when specifically you have observed this.

Then explain the **impact** of the failure to meet expected standards, e.g., items in the store aisles and lying around on the floor create a trip hazard for employees and for customers. It also does not look professional.

Crucially at this point...don't walk away with a remark such as "make sure it does not happen again"... rather follow it up with an offer to provide support e.g. "this has happened several times when its you are on opening shift, how can I help you to make sure that you are ready to open the store at 8.30am?"

This turns a challenging conversation into a coaching conversation with opportunities for the employee to consider how to do things differently and, if necessary, you can offer advice and support.

You might want to set the "expectation" that you will always endeavour to provide feedback in the moment or as soon as possible, and encourage your team to adopt the SBI method when they want to provide you or others with feedback. Feedback becomes the norm and slowly loses the fear factor... and perhaps becomes less challenging!

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.... And finally....



Gaining comfort with the skills outlined in this guide requires practice and dedication, but the rewards are well worth the effort. Engaging in difficult conversations not only enhances your professional relationships but also contributes to personal growth and development.

Remember, most high performers would not have attained their success without having received and acted upon challenging feedback. Your role as a leader is to nurture performance, providing others opportunities to improve.

Engaging with other managers and learning how they handle challenging conversations can provide fresh perspectives and strategies. Sharing experiences can foster a sense of community and support within your organisation.

For further insights or assistance with Leadership Coaching or training, please contact Nickie Kemp at nickie@thechangecanopy.com.au