

Handling difficult conversations at work



E2

Purpose

When we are at work we are often involved in conversations that are difficult to handle. The purpose of this paper is to suggest ways in which we can handle such conversations so that it benefits the participants and the organisations for which they work.

Difficult conversations and their consequences

A difficult conversation is one that, for a variety of reasons, we find hard to handle. It is characterised by negative feelings such as anxiety, anger, guilt or resentment. Such negative feelings can be very stressful for those involved. Cumulatively, they can also create a work culture of mistrust, blame and resentment which limits organisational effectiveness.

Closed and open-to-learning approaches to difficult conversations

There are two starkly contrasting ways of handling difficult conversations. We call them the 'closed-to-learning' approach and the 'open-to-learning' approach. Our own work has shown that only an open-to-learning approach enables us to deal with difficult conversations in a way that has beneficial outcomes, maintains good working relationships and, in the process, enhances learning (Clark and Myers, 2007). The problem is that in response to the negative feelings aroused by difficult conversations, we typically adopt strategies that protect our own view of the world and keep us closed-to-learning.

If we are to handle difficult conversations effectively, therefore, we must become aware of what distinguishes a closed-to-learning approach from an open-to learning approach. The contrasting features of these two approaches to handling difficult conversations can be summarised as follows:

1. The way we deal with our assumptions

CLOSED In closed-to-learning mode, we do not question our assumptions. These unquestioned assumptions then restrict the way we handle the conversation. In particular they prevent us taking on board anything that differs from our way of seeing things [*She disagrees ... but she doesn't know what she's talking about.*].

OPEN In open-to-learning mode we regard our own assumptions as provisional. This prevents us from being restricted by our own point of view and helps us to be open-to-learning as the conversation progresses [*She may be inexperienced but I need to consider what she is saying on its merits.*].

2. The extent to which we make the conversation a partnership

CLOSED We do not give others the opportunity to influence us. For example:

- We manage the conversation unilaterally in order to achieve our own agenda [*I need to steer the conversation towards getting her agreement.*].
- We avoid finding out what the other person really thinks or wants [*I won't ask her opinion in case she disagrees with me.*].
- We adopt strategic tactics to get our own way [*If I get her to admit that she is now free on Wednesday she will find it difficult to refuse my request.*].

OPEN We think of the conversation as both of 'us' exploring the situation and the issues together. For example:

- We try to involve the other person in deciding how the conversation might be conducted [*I'll see if she has any ideas about how we might tackle this disagreement.*].
- We inquire into the other person's views and reactions to what we say [*I'll ask her whether or not she agrees with me.*].

- We offer others an informed choice. [*I'll explain what I would like him to do on Wednesday and then ask him if he is in a position to help.*].

3. The way we handle the exchange of information

CLOSED We only promote the exchange of information that suits our own purposes. For example:

- We see no need to expose the thinking behind our views [*I'm the decision maker ... he must just accept what I say.*].
- We avoid exploring the thinking behind the other person's views [*What a silly suggestion!*].
- We disclose information on the basis of expediency [*Better not tell him that ... it might undermine my position.*].

OPEN We aim to share all the information that is relevant to the difficulty. This will include:

- information that we may be reluctant to disclose [*I need to come clean about my position.*];
- information that explains the thinking behind our views [*I should explain why I think Mrs. X is unreliable so that he can make his own mind up.*];
- information that explains why we are asking a question [*I'll let her know why I need to know her availability.*].

The open-to-learning approach in practice

Adopting an open-to-learning approach to handling difficult conversations at work may sound simple. The problem is, however, that the closed-to-learning approach we adopt when under pressure is unconscious. We are, therefore, unable to change this approach, even if we recognise its inadequacy. In practice, acquiring the skills to be open-to-learning takes considerable time and effort. However, the following exercises might be of help.

- Next time you become worried about a forthcoming conversation write down any assumptions you are making that, unless questioned, will restrict your approach to it. Try to put these assumptions on one side so that you can be free to handle the conversation in an open way.
- Notice when you make decisions that affect another person without consulting them. Try involving them in decision-making.
- Notice when you are tempted to withhold information that you know is relevant to the conversation. Try putting it 'on the table' in the context of a shared discussion.

A Christian perspective

Adopting an open-to-learning approach to handling difficult conversations at work is not just 'another managerial technique'. It is of the essence in helping to build what elsewhere has been described as 'the kingdom community' in the workplace [worksheet E1]. It is also an approach that lies at the heart of mission as dialogue.

Resources

Clark, Sue and Myers, Mel, *Managing Difficult Conversations at Work*, Cirencester; Management Books 2000 Ltd, 2000 (This is the key book relating to this worksheet.)

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