

Holding Difficult Conversations in the Workplace *by William Peterson*

After having written 'New Beginnings'; 'I see you' – creating a vision, and now 'Holding Difficult conversations', it feels like a dramatic fall from altitude through the white fluffy clouds onto planet earth where the proverbial rubber hits the road. Life's many daily interactions not only tests our resolve, it also calls us to live real and practical lives still led by that glint of vision in our eyes. There is no such thing as an ordinary life, only an ordinary response to our extraordinary giftedness to make a difference wherever we find ourselves.

Holding difficult conversations will test whether you live in a place of fear and revenge versus a place of love and abundance. When you hold difficult conversations you summon the forces of good to triumph over the forces of destructiveness, smallness, tyranny, prejudice and suffering at many levels in the world. You become a change agent, a love warrior and a peace merchant. Only good and success will follow you wherever you live, play or work.

In this article, I present to you a set of 'success principles' to apply as you wind your way through the phases of 'holding difficult conversations'. While each of these steps' starts with an opening "liner" you can make up your own. These steps are not absolute; rather see them as guidelines and make the adjustments as your wisdom instructs.

Success Principles

#1. Keep an Open Mind.

You must be prepared to see multiple perspectives, yours and the other persons'. You need to recognise that there might be an angle you are not seeing, an important insight you're not getting. The other person might have had a particular experience causing

them to be fearful or resentful etc. This may result in them holding back hence making it difficult for both of you to engage openly, assertively and even honestly. Try not to invest too heavily in assumptions until you have sufficient background information. Also, if you adopt a mono-perspective attitude i.e. 'my view only', likened to an "Either-Or" approach, the conversation will not be productive.

#2. Try not to be right at all costs.

If you want to be right at all costs then you won't hear them and they won't hear you. Try to do more than listening, really seek to understand. This is really hard when you yourself are hurting or frustrated, but it's often the best way. When you are in this mode of listening, you tend to ask more questions, clarify more frequently, probe for more information, and you express empathy. You give the other person the message that you deeply care and value their humanity despite the circumstance or issues at hand. In turn they feel safer and are more prepared to genuinely engage with you.

#3. Be solution-oriented.

Where possible, "Win-Win" solutions should be your ultimate objective, a solution containing a healthy integration of both your ideas. This will increase buy-in and commitment. Here the solution contains "Both-And" thinking. The orientation is to increase inclusively and decrease exclusivity.

#4. Be hopeful and realistic about the future.

Just because you successfully managed a difficult discussion and found mutually acceptable solutions does not mean that there will be no "hiccups" in the future. If you do not put your agreed action/s into practice by:

- being prepared to be transformed by what you agreed,

- being committed to ongoing development,
 - being okay with open sharing and authentic engagement,
- the problem will reappear.

Key STEPS to guide the Discussion:

STEP 1: “What would you like us to discuss first...what is really key for you?”

When it is clear that there are issues which needs addressing and resolving, you can begin to apply the 1st principle. With a sincere disposition you can start the conversation with an open question, “let us talk about what is really key for you”, or “please put on the table all of your burning issues”. It is very important to reflect back to the other person in your own words (sincerely) your understanding of what they have just shared about what is concerning them. “So let me check if I heard you correctly...you said that your burning issues are...Is that accurate?”

BE IMPECCABLE WITH YOUR WORD

Speak with integrity. Say only what you mean. Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or gossip about others. Use the power of your word in the direction of truth and love. **DM Ruiz**

STEP 2: “Thanks for this, what else might there be which still needs mentioning? Is there anything else still outstanding for you?”

You are operating with principle #2 in mind.

The reason you ask this question is to get to the bottom of the issue. When the situation is emotionally charged the mind tends to muddle. People are a lot more articulate when they are relaxed. So restating, “Is there

anything else?” allows them to think about and state what might be bothering them at the deepest level. At this point you need to listen very carefully and be aware of body language and tone of voice. You will be surprised by what you can pick-up. ***Listen to what is important for them. Also, listen to what is not being said.***

Since a number of issues may be generated, you will do well to prioritise. You can say “If we could deal with the two most important issues to get to the root cause which ones would you choose?” Make notes to keep track of the issues raised, this might not be everybody’s style because it may be perceived as not paying attention to the speaker. So ask for permission and state why keeping track (taking notes) could benefit the discussion.

DON'T TAKE ANYTHING PERSONALLY.

Nothing others do is because of you. What others say and do is a projection of their own reality, their own dream. When you are immune to the opinions and actions of others, you won't be the victim of needless suffering. **DM Ruiz**

STEP 3: “Please share with me how you are being impacted by these issue/s or situation.”

This step calls for the application of principles' # 1& 2.

There's a Native American saying about the way to truly understand someone else's perspective, where they say you must walk in someone else's moccasins first before you can know what it is like to be them.

"Do not judge your neighbour until you walk two moons in his moccasins."

Cheyenne

When you pose this question, listen deeply and try and put yourself in their experience or situation. You may have to deal with sharp criticism levelled at yourself, team organisation, “the system” etc. Some of the feedback may be unfiltered and therefore could sting. Try your best not to go into a defensive mode or on the offensive to protect. Rather try and hold them in their anger and hurt. Acknowledge that you appreciate the impact this issue may have had on them. Showing sincere empathy in this instance can be most effective. Even if you have to paraphrase what they said, it will be helpful.

Taking this approach allows you to firstly appreciate their pain and difficulty. It also allows you to see the impact this situation has had on them. For the person it allows them to vent, release their anger or past hurts. It also gives them the message that they are really being heard and their feelings are recognised. This helps to disarm, make space for cooler heads and creates a willingness to find solutions.

STEP 4: *“What are the consequences if the situation remains unchanged?”*

Apply a combination of principles #1 – 3, with a strong emphasis on principle #3 – be however cautious not to go for premature closure. Keep listening deeply.

With this input you come to appreciate what is at stake should nothing change. All protagonists must recognise the consequences if nothing changes. It needs to be clearly understood what everybody stands to lose if the situation remains unattended. This could provide a sobering reality check and spur everybody into action. I know that I have mentioned several times before the need to paraphrase. When the person tells you what they believe is at stake make sure that you have heard them by paraphrasing. Warning! If you do the paraphrasing please use your own words.

Sounding like a parrot can be most frustrating. You can start your paraphrase like this, “Joe let me see if I heard you correctly. If things don’t change then..., is that right?”

STEP 5: *“How do you think I have contributed to this issue or situation?”*

You will definitely apply principle #3 with principles #1 and 2 hovering around to do duty when needed.

Asking this question indicates that you are willing to resolve the situation. You are also saying that you recognise that you may have been complicit in contributing towards this situation. This takes a huge amount of courage and humility. Our natural reaction is to explain, justify, hold judgement, and seek revenge. If you succumb to this most human of temptations, you will spiral the conversation down a very slippery slope and it will be difficult to make a comeback. You will have lost the credibility you built earlier on.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS.

Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness, and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

DM Ruiz

STEP 6: *“Is there anything you have contributed to the issue or situation?”*

Principles #3 and 4 are essentially at play here.

This question lets the other person know that they are also a player in the situation and that they ought to allow themselves to be challenged and examine the extent to which they have also contributed to the situation.

They may not be expecting this request and may initially struggle with the idea of them possibly having played a part in creating the issue or situation. Your emphasis should be on getting them to co-operate and share responsibility for the situation. Avoid playing the “Knight in shining armour” ready to rescue (it just perpetuates the situation). The other person must not be made to feel like the poor, helpless wounded prey. They will need to realise that they too can make a meaningful contribution toward finding a sustainable solution. If they don’t acknowledge this then the conversation has a long way still to go.

STEP 7: *“What different or new reality/situation do we both want to create?”*

Principles #3 and 4 are essentially at play here.

This is an opportunity to restore the situation, friendship, relationship etc either to what it was or to raise it to a whole new level of understanding, relating or engaging. The energy should now be aimed at co-creating solutions that will work. The activity here involves sharing ideas, building and extending on each other’s ideas and coming to agreement. “Two willing heads are better than one headstrong head at finding creative solutions”. This can be a very positive part of the conversation. So be sure to support the enthusiasm and temper it with pragmatism.

STEP 8: *“What is the one important thing we can ask of each other which will ensure this situation or issue does not happen again?”*

Principles #3 and 4 are essentially at play here.

This one thing could be in the area of an attitude adjustment, new behaviour, different approach, practice or procedures which is

required. Unless you are prepared to be held accountable around this one important thing don’t agree to it. It will set the situation back even further if you agree to it but it’s discovered later on that you were never really committed to it. It is fraudulent and your credibility will be severely eroded. This ‘**one thing**’ once uttered and agreed to must be applied with consistency and any breach must be dealt with immediately. The best way to describe this phase of the discussion is to call it, “establishing our rules of engagement”. It will help you to navigate a very challenging new reality.

ALWAYS DO YOUR BEST.

Your best is going to change from moment to moment; it will be difficult when you are healthy as opposed to sick. Under any circumstance, simply do your best and you will avoid self-judgement, self-abuse and regret.

DM Ruiz

STEP 9: *“What practical steps or action must we take to make this happen?”*

Definitely principle #4 here.

You must have heard the wise saying “it’s not how you start but how you finish”. This saying has value. Mentioned earlier the actions you agree upon must be tempered with a good dose of pragmatism. Record these actions and make it known to each other and all other relevant stakeholders. Don’t set yourselves up for failure by agreeing to actions where the means for its implementation does not exist. Remember, “God lives in the grand scheme of things but the devil lives in the detail”. Be sure to check that the actions are doable. If not, work at finding another solution.

Follow these rules when agreeing to your actions.

Rules for good actioning planning:

1. Five Whiskies and One Hotel

- **Who** does
- **What**
- **When**
- **Where**
- **Why** and
- **How?**

2. SMART

- **SPECIFIC:** with respect to what is to be accomplished.
- **MEASURABLE:** with respect to what progress has been made toward meeting the objective or outcome.
- **ASSIGNABLE:** with respect to which individual or group of individuals is responsible for performing the task.
- **REALISTIC:** with respect to the available resources.
- **TIME-RELATED:** with respect to when results are expected.

Till our next article, journey well...