

leadership instalments

Difficult Conversations

By Dan Gaynor

“The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing in the right place but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.” Dorothy Nevill. English Writer (1826-1913)

THE BEST LEADERS SURFACE AND RESOLVE THE

most important questions about people and their work: questions surrounding someone’s willingness to change a problematic behavior or those that arise when the time to move on has arrived. Difficult conversations can also turn around faltering performance and restore success. They are vital to the health of the team and the individual. Every successful leader’s career is filled with opportunities for them. When you get right down to it, great teams are built one conversation at a time. The best leaders step forward into these conversations confidently and skillfully, less effective leaders avoid them.

The art of conversation is among every leader’s most valuable assets. Accepting the reality that this takes time to develop, here are five principles to help you along the way:

Don’t avoid

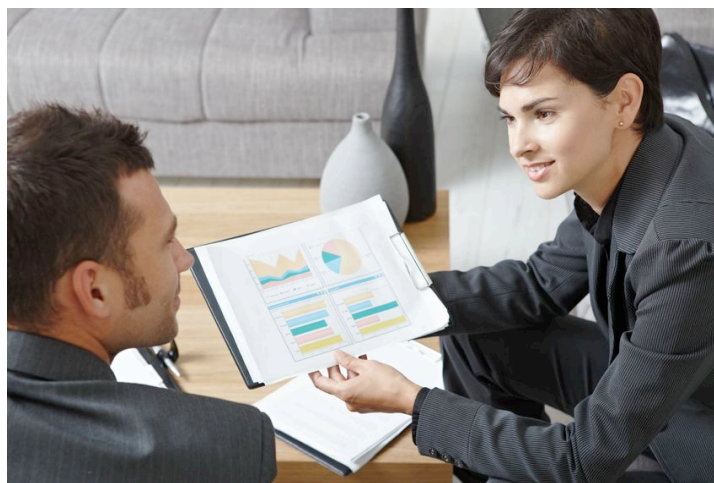
Like any other skill, this one only comes with practice. Avoiding a difficult conversation is not doing or saying the right thing so decide to engage. Good leadership is filled with them.

Stay constructive

Dorothy Nevill’s opening quote directs us to the next principle - stay constructive. These are often the most emotionally charged conversations, so determine to say only that which will improve the situation for everyone involved - once again, don’t avoid what should be said, say it constructively. Resist the temptation to say the wrong thing when you are provoked, these moments will arise. You are in the power position and this brings with it the responsibility for self-control.

Prepare well

Because these conversations are often so emotional, they can get off track if you are not well organized. The pressure you feel makes it more difficult so stay on course, particularly when you are new to these encounters, so prepare in advance by making notes. If you’re nervous take the notes with you. Tell the individual that it is an important conversation and so you are going to work from notes.



Be respectful

The moment someone feels you are being disrespectful the focus of the conversation changes: the disrespect becomes the issue. When someone gets defensive, stop the conversation and deal with this. I will often say something like, “I want you to know we’re having this conversation because I want to help you, so I want you to accept it in spirit in which it’s being offered.” If this doesn’t succeed, I’ll discuss the reality that it’s my job to provide corrective feedback when its warranted and that I need employees who can accept it - people who demonstrate they can be coached. When the right tone has been re-established move back to the topic.

Be encouraging

All good leaders are natural encouragers. When someone is discouraged, and this can happen at any point in these conversations, good leaders encourage. Ending on a note of encouragement with a statement like, “I know this was tough to hear, but I also know you can change it if you want to” provided this is truthful, can make all the difference and motivate someone to really work at the feedback you’ve provided. No matter the topic, there is always a way to encourage.

These conversation are essential, the ability to hold them with skill and grace is the mark of great leaders. Make it a priority to polish this art until it shines.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is there a difficult conversation that you have been avoiding?
2. Can you recall being on the receiving end of a difficult but important conversation, was it held skillfully?
3. Which of the five principles will help you improve the most?

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