

TOP TIPS FOR NAVIGATING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

FROM AN EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL COACH

Clients often approach us during their coaching sessions for support in having a challenging conversation. This could be a line report with whom they need to have a performance discussion, a peer they want to give some confronting feedback to, or a superior to challenge their decision.

Being prepared

In nearly all cases, the idea of 'being prepared rather than having prepared' is helpful. Simply lining up all the reasons why your perspective is right is unlikely to prove influential or get you the outcome you want from the conversation. It is much more likely to lead to resistance, conflict and entrenched positions, whether these are spoken or unspoken.



'Being prepared' consists of going into the conversation with the right mindset or stance. The Human Systems Dynamics Institute¹ has some useful thoughts on this:

- **Shift from Judgement to Curiosity:** try to adopt a curious mindset when approaching difficult conversations. Explore the other party's perspective with genuine interest and empathy. Hold off judging them for their sins or what you might believe to be their wilful ignorance of the facts.
- **Turn assumptions into questions:** instead of making assumptions about where the other person is coming from or what they want or believe, engage in genuine enquiry as to their wishes and motivations. It's difficult to argue with a question!
- **Turn defensiveness into self-reflection:** catching yourself being triggered or caught on the back foot, and being curious inwardly as to why that might be, is a great way to get a handle on your emotions and therefore manage them appropriately rather than letting them take over.
- **Move from conflict into shared enquiry:** try to imagine coming alongside the other party and enquiring together about the issue at hand, rather than facing off with them, toe-to-toe over the issue between you.

¹ <https://www.hsdinstitute.org/index.html>



In addition, you can learn some simple somatic techniques for centring and grounding yourself if you feel yourself being knocked off-balance in a challenging conversation. For example, SOS stands for Self, Other, and Situation. It also stands for:

- Sense the earth beneath your feet.
- Observe their eyes.
- Slowly breathe out.

By doing this, you actively pay attention to the situation (noticing your feet on the ground), the other (by looking at the other party's eyes), and to self (by becoming aware of your breathing). This can be done unobtrusively, in the moment, and serves to restore a certain equanimity².

Acknowledge Emotions

As coaches, we create a supportive environment where clients feel comfortable expressing their feelings without fear of judgement and to honestly connect with how they feel about the conversation to come. All challenging conversations are fundamentally about feelings, but we like to pretend that we are somehow 'above all that'. If we don't acknowledge what's going on for us emotionally, at least to ourselves, it's highly likely to leak out in how we show up in the conversation. As Carl Jung put it, "until you make your unconscious conscious, it will direct you, and you will call it fate".

It's also important to realise that we are not our feelings and to create a little distance between who we are and what we're feeling. So, for example, to explore the difference between 'I am angry' and 'I am feeling angry'.

Finally, it can be helpful to understand that, whilst thoughts and feelings come and go like the weather, our values are the bedrock from which we can choose to act. By exploring the values at stake in a conversation, we, as coaches, support our clients to connect to the 'why' of the conversation and what it seeks to achieve. You are more likely to find common ground with the other person by speaking to a higher purpose than by wrangling over the petty details of who did what.



² Adapted from Field-relational coaching for Gestalt beginners: the PAIR model.
Sally Denham-Vaughan and Mark Gawlinski - British Gestalt Journal 2012, Vol. 21, No. 1, 11-21

Focus on Interests, Not Positions

It's sometimes said that all conflict is the encounter of unmet needs. Consider reframing the upcoming challenging conversation as an exploration of underlying interests and needs, fostering empathy and collaboration around how they can be met. Seeking to defend your position may be understandable in the heat of the moment, but if winning means the other person losing, or vice versa, there will be very little room for compromise.

Disentangle Intentions and Impact³

One of the common causes of misunderstanding, confusion, and conflict in challenging conversations arises from the assumption that we know the other person's intentions. We attribute their intentions based on their impact on us. So, if you feel hurt by what someone has said or done, you might assume that the person intended to hurt you. As coaches we work with our clients to instead:

- Focus on actions – what did the other party actually say or do?
- Be clear on the impact of this on you.
- Reflect on the impact and the assumptions you're making about the other person's intention.
- Hold these assumptions lightly as a hypothesis and no more.
- Enquire about the other person's intentions.
- Share the impact you're experiencing and what you want instead.



Consider how valuable coaching skills can be for successful conversations:

As you will have probably guessed by now, the core skills of coaching - active listening, asking effective questions and providing feedback or reflecting back what you have heard, are all valuable skills in effectively navigating challenging conversations. Learn the art of active listening to understand emotions, intentions, and underlying messages rather than listening to formulate the next statement of your position.

As noted above, using genuine curiosity to shape questions that will reveal the other person's unmet needs can lay the foundation for agreement. Provide feedback on the impact of the other's behaviour in a respectful and non-confrontational way. The Centre for Non-Violent Communication's⁴ framing of this can be helpful:

- Observation: a description of "what's actually happening" as reported by our senses. The behaviour we are challenging.
- Feeling: physical sensations and emotions. The impact of the behaviour on us.
- Need: the alternative impact we are seeking.
- Request: what we want the other person to do or change.

³This is only one of many excellent insights into the topic to be found in *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Bruce Patton, Douglas Stone, Sheila Heen, 2011

⁴Nonviolent Communication - A Language of Life. Marshall B. Rosenberg, 2015

Work on assertive communication⁵

Clarity about impact, intentions and needs requires clear, concise and assertive communication. We can work on:

- Minimising to establishing importance: not downplaying what is important to you and why.
- Taking ownership: using a strong personal "I" rather than a vague "we" or "you".
- Making explicit requests.
- Clearly framing intention from the outset: not beating about the bush concerning the purpose of the conversation.



Finally, you can work with a coach or colleague to practice technique and tone and to get a feel for what having a challenging conversation actually feels like. This can help you prepare for the conversation to come and perhaps dispel the fear that the relationship with the other person will be irreparably damaged by it.

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If you're interested in finding out more about improving your coaching-style conversation skills or the benefits of executive coaching, please contact us: enquiry@theocm.co.uk

⁵ I am indebted to Peter Young's article on difficult conversations for the OCM for these insights.

<https://www.theocm.co.uk/ocm-enable/insights/helping-managers-and-leaders-prepare-difficult-conversations>