

## Seven steps help tough conversations run smoothly

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The key to ensuring a tough conversation or feedback session goes smoothly is preparing before the event, according to a communication expert.

**Georgia Murch**, author of the book [Fixing Feedback](#), says taking time to prepare for such conversations "makes all the difference in preserving, and even improving, your relationships and getting the best outcomes for your team and the business".

She says leaders must learn to confront issues as soon as they see them.

"How many conversations with people – friends, colleagues and family – become more serious than they need to be because you don't 'nip them in the bud' in the early days?"

Murch says the thinking that causes managers to avoid having feedback conversations includes:

- **It's easier to do the task myself** – But, "when we do things ourselves we miss opportunities to teach and reset expectations";
- **It might ruin the relationship** – "The last thing we want to do is damage the relationship. The fact is, we damage it with inaction anyway";
- **It's not my job/not my team member** – "The new school of leadership dictates that if you see an issue then you need to have the conversation," Murch says; and
- **I don't have time** – "Just wait until the spot fire has become a bushfire and you'll realise how much more time and resources it will take to fix then."

HR professionals, managers and other leaders should follow seven steps to prepare for their tough conversations or feedback sessions, and they will "watch the conversation and relationship flow", Murch says.

### 1. State the issue

Employers should no longer be practising the 'sandwich' technique that has been taught in the past: "that we need to deliver something nice, then the tough news and then wrap it again at the end with a positive bow", Murch says.

"When this is done people either don't hear the bit in the middle, which is what you're trying to relay; or they don't respect the fact that you don't tell it straight," she says.

Instead, "get straight to the point" and state the purpose of the discussion immediately. "When the issue is unambiguous it can be an anchor to come back to when the conversation goes off the track. You need to be clear on the issue in order to drive great outcomes."

Murch warns those having difficult conversations to first ensure the issue isn't just based on an opinion or feeling, because "then you are walking into gunfire".

## 2. Provide examples

It is vital for HR professionals and leaders to provide facts; "not opinions, but tangible, proven information that helps the other person understand why the feedback or conversation is taking place".

"If they are facts, the other person cannot deny them... When you are presenting information this way it will be easier to lead conversations," Murch says, adding that leaders *shouldn't* have conversations unless they have examples of the issues that need to be addressed.

They should also keep examples very short, "but have the details behind them in case you need to recall them later in the conversation".

## 3. Share opinions and/or feelings

Opinions are important, but shouldn't lead a tough conversation, Murch says, warning leaders not to let their judgements be clouded by "cognitive distortions (the way we see information and data and then recalibrate it based on our own beliefs and values)".

Sharing opinions and feelings is "about letting the other person know how you view the impact of what has or has not happened or been said", she says.

## 4. Clarify what is at stake

"What is the impact of the action or inaction of the person you are having a conversation with? What are the repercussions? What are the stakes in not improving or handling the issue better? What is at stake for the person if they do not act on the information you are giving them?" Murch asks.

Being clear about what the consequences are allows someone to understand the full effect of their actions, she says.

Some examples of clarifying the stakes include:

- "If you don't improve then we will have to go down a formal performance management process and your first warning will be issued"; and
- "If we don't improve our working relationship it sets a poor example for the rest of the team and we are unlikely to do our best work."

## 5. Identify contributions

Leaders often have conversations or feedback sessions hoping the other person will be open to what is being discussed; they want the employee to "understand, own their stuff and apologise if necessary", Murch says.

"So we need to show them that we are prepared to do the same thing.

"The more we own and show our own flaws, the more likely others are to do the same."

But leaders shouldn't take responsibility for issues they don't need to – "in some cases there may not be anything you need to take responsibility for. And in other cases you may take too much responsibility".

## 6. Indicate an intent to resolve (but don't problem-solve)

It's important that employees know their managers "sincerely want to find a resolution; otherwise they will tend to feel threatened and unsafe", Murch says.

"Your intent might be authentic, but people can't see your intent so they need to hear it. This is where you might let people know that you're keen to reach an outcome or better understand the situation," she says.

This part of a conversation, however, isn't about coming up with solutions, "because without the other person's facts and explanations, how can you make the best recommendation?"

Murch says there is "no collaboration in presenting a solution without understanding the other person's perspective".

## 7. Ask for their perspective

The best way to end any tough conversation is to show genuine interest in understanding the other party's perspective, Murch says.

"Finishing the conversation with something along the lines of: 'What are your thoughts?' or 'What's your perspective?' or 'How does this sit with you?' is a simple way to complete the process.

"And then be prepared to listen. Really listen. And receive the feedback as gracefully as you would like the other person to."

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