

3.3 Competence – planning difficult conversations

Slide 1

As we have seen in the presentation on the emotions of conversations, thinking about and engaging in difficult conversations can be stressful and create anxiety.

Important conversations like giving a difficult message or critical feedback need careful planning so that you get the right message across and give both you and the other person as much scope as possible to be heard and to stay in a rational and logical mindset.

In this presentation, we will look at some simple steps you can take to plan an important conversation well, and reduce the stress involved in initiating and having the conversation.

We will use a useful model that describes the process of how to plan and construct your conversation. It is adapted, by kind permission, from a model by Dr Robin Henderson of MyConsultants.

Slide 2

Firstly, in anything we do, but particularly for a difficult conversation, we need to be clear about our intention or purpose.

As Stephen Covey wrote, effective people always begin with the end in mind – they have clarity about what will be different once they have achieved something – this can help us to plan and also give us the motivation to take action.

Try and write your intention down. Can you articulate the ideal outcome once you have had the conversation?

Slide 3

Think about: What's In It For Me... and What's In It For Them?

Imagine that you have a really successful conversation, by the end of it, what do you want to know or think?

How do you want to feel? What will you be able to do?

Likewise: what do you want the other person to think or know that perhaps they don't know now. How do you want them to feel? What action do you want them to take?

Clarity on these things helps us plan how we have the conversation, what we will say and even when and where we will say it.

Slide 4

So... we are clear about our intention.

Next, we need to calibrate our position with that of the other person. This means that we need to check our understanding of the situation against that of the other person or people.

In every situation, we may have made an observation or had an experience. Perhaps we saw the other person act inappropriately, or perhaps they did some work of poor quality.

Our belief about what is appropriate or good quality is just our interpretation. The other person could have an entirely different interpretation, and they may have very different observations that you have not been aware of. They might have had a different experience or expectation to you. So, if you go straight in with your interpretation, this could provoke a defensive or emotional response (if you have seen the presentation on the emotions of difficult conversations, then you will recognise that these emotional reactions are likely to come from a child or parent ego state... this will set you up for an unproductive conversation).

Slide 5

So, after we have clarified our intention, we plan the calibration phase. We first ask the other person for their view, asking questions to elicit their viewpoint. What did they expect? What were their observations? What was their experience? What is their interpretation and assessment of what happened? Make sure you actively listen to really understand their viewpoint and be open to a different interpretation.

Then you give your viewpoint. You may find at this stage that the other person feels exactly the same as you. In which case, you would be simply confirming that you feel the same.

Or:

You might find that they have a very different perspective and that you don't agree with them. In this case, instead of confirming their viewpoint, you will then put across your alternative viewpoint. If you have listened to them first, you will be able to tailor your description of events accordingly.

Give your experience. Give specific observations as much as possible, rather than beliefs or interpretations. If you do want to give a belief or interpretation, make sure you explain that it is your opinion, and you are aware that this is just one interpretation. This is in line with being in an adult ego state, which we explored in the presentation on the emotions of difficult conversations.

Another useful thing to explain when you give your viewpoint is how the conversation or the information you are imparting relates to a goal that you are trying to achieve. Explain why what you are saying is important and how a change in actions, thoughts or feelings might enable you to achieve your goals or the other person to achieve theirs. It could also be a mutual, organisational goal.

Once you have both given your interpretation, move the conversation on to collaboratively problem-solve – ask what needs to happen next in order to capitalise on any successes and make improvements.

Try to set specific smart goals, so that you are both very clear what needs to change or happen next.

Again – ask them to explain first what they think should happen next? It shows that you trust them and are treating them as an adult that is capable of working things out for themselves and taking responsibility for the next steps, rather than doing it because you told them to.

You may agree with their ideas and so don't fall into the trap of 'telling' them what to do and risking provoking an emotional response (telling can hook a child ego state response from the other person, which would not be productive).

Finally – agree on how you will follow up or review anything you have agreed.

Take time to plan out your conversation – you will find a conversation planning template in the resources section. Planning will help you to stay rational and focused on facts when you have the conversation. It will also help you to feel more motivated and confident.

If you are still feeling nervous about the conversation and are avoiding taking action...

Slide 6

A crucial tool on the coach's toolkit is an awareness of levels of listening. Once you have this, you can notice HOW you are listening; you can then manage yourself to listen more effectively in the moment.

At any one point in time, during a conversation, we are in one of three levels of listening.

In level one, we are focused on our internal thoughts, feelings or experience – this means that we are listening for information that relates to ourselves – we will be thinking about how the conversation relates to our own experience, or how we can benefit from what we are hearing. As we listen to someone, internally, we are working out how we can contribute or gain from the interaction, and we are looking for a gap to step in to and share our perspective.

This often results in a 'ping pong' style conversation – where person A makes a statement, and then person B replies with their thoughts or ideas on that statement. We can converse like this and ping pong back and forth for a long time, by the end of the conversation, we have learnt very little – we are mostly reporting to one another and gathering information for our own use and interest.

In level 2, our focus is entirely on the person we are talking to – our intention in listening is to really understand that person, their experience, and needs. Our comments and questions are directed towards the other person; they are not about us. We are either trying to find out more about them, or we are enabling them to find out more about themselves.

In level 3, we are paying attention to what the other person is saying, but we are also tuning in and noticing other information from their body language, tone of voice, and this helps us to tap into our intuition – what is this person NOT saying? What might be this person's beliefs or blockers? What might be their values? What is going on in the environment that might be obstructing learning? Noticing and using these pieces of information helps the coach to adapt their approach and enhance the learning opportunity

Slide 7

Consider – what would it feel or be like in the future – say 3, 6 or 12 months if you have managed to say what you need to and the problem is resolved?

And what would it be like in those time frames if the conversation doesn't happen and the problem remains unresolved?

What is the worst thing that could happen if you go for it and have the conversation? ...and what would that be like? Thinking this through might just persuade you to take action.

Finally – think about referring to your personal board of directors for advice on how to handle the conversation. The board is a tool that is explained in the presentation on networks and creating a personal board – take a look now if you haven't seen it already.