



People Make The Difference whitepaper

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Stop avoiding difficult conversations and learn how to approach them with confidence

Difficult conversations are a routine part of leading an organisation. Beyond the typical performance management problems that we tend to think of, confronting conversations can often be part of the day to day operations of an organisation. If leaders choose to avoid and delay those talks, there can be detrimental effects for the business.

Successfully managing difficult conversations can mean integrating information signals from our heads, hearts and tummies. We need to listen to and respect the nervous and uncomfortable reaction of our gut, but balance that with the logic of our brain to determine the right course of action for the particular circumstances at hand.

It's my experience that people avoid or delay difficult conversations for two main reasons. They are either not confident in their ability to lead the conversation, or they are afraid of conflict. But learning how to successfully manage these situations is one of the most important skills leaders can develop, whether they are a school principal, the head of a government department or a senior leader of a company.

Thankfully, there are some proven strategies leaders can use to help tricky discussions run more smoothly. Overleaf are tips that I've successfully used and have seen coaching clients use with great success.

Five steps to better difficult conversations¹

1. *Analyse the situation* and think about any potential outcomes, both positive and negative. Consider any consequences from delaying or avoiding the exchange. Also determine what you want to achieve from the conversation and any topics you need to avoid.
2. *Work out your strategy*. You should consider where the conversation takes place, where to position yourself, how to open the conversation, and what sort of tone and body language you should use. Free tip – never cross your arms!
3. *Practice and prepare*. Aim to practice what you want to say at least five times. Try doing it the mirror!
4. *Deliver with confidence*. Tone and body language are critical – you don't want to be too firm, or too kind and nurturing.
5. *Don't forget to follow up*. Once the conversation has taken place, it's important to regularly check in to make sure agreed actions are taking place and to monitor any results. Otherwise you could find yourself having to have yet another tough conversation down the track.

I've always found that I have achieved the best outcomes from tough conversations when I've taken the time to stop and think about the problem, and how I should communicate. When I've had a clear strategy to know what actions and outcomes I wanted to achieve, and a plan for how to follow up on the conversation, typically there has been a result that has been productive for all parties. Conversely, when I've acted on the fly and not planned and thought through outcomes, the resulting talk has usually not gone well.

If you need help with strategies to help you manage difficult conversations, People Make The Difference can help. We hold workshops on this topic, as well as one-on-one coaching programs for leaders and executives. To find out more about our training and coaching services, visit www.peoplemakethedifference.com.au or call +61 412 333 415.

¹ Adapted from Doug Van Dyke, Leadership Simplified