

## How to... hold difficult conversations (successfully)

**T**hey're the ones most of us dread and can be thought of and experienced as difficult because...

The conversation involves giving unexpected or unwanted news. Giving constructive feedback, addressing poor performance, advising of redundancy. The conversation may be happening in the context of change and transition when people may be feeling vulnerable. In this state emotions are more often expressed.

The conversation may involve communicating changes that are likely to be perceived as having a negative impact on the other person. Yet difficult conversations are a core part of the leader's role. Done well they can make a difference to the individuals involved and make a positive contribution to the culture of the organisation.

**How to get it right?** Preparation, process, practice.

### ■ Prepare for the conversation.

As well as the facts, the things you want/need to say – the message - consider...

- How you might say them?
- What energy you'll put behind them?
- What outcome you are aiming for?

- What on-going support are you going to provide?
- Have you allowed enough time?
- What else you might take into the meeting in terms of your mind set?
- How the other person may react?

In difficult conversations it can be hard to remain as calm and clear as possible and show appropriate empathy for the other person. Watch out for... being detached and impersonal, appearing not to care about the other person; or becoming overwhelmed, assuming responsibility for the other person's feelings.

The aim is to strike a balance between distance and closeness, deliver the message respectfully with the intention of helping them make sense of it and consider choices / actions they may take.

### ■ The process...

**State the facts** Avoid prevarication. State clearly the reason for the meeting and then deliver the message in a clear and matter of fact tone.

### Allow time and space for initial reactions

Let the other person have whatever initial reactions they have. Avoid temptation to get busy, especially if someone is upset, angry, silent.

### Acknowledge the other person's feelings

You may use phrases like:

"I can see this is difficult for you right now"  
 "I get the impression this is not what you were expecting"  
 "You look a little surprised/shocked"

Listen closely to what they have to say and acknowledge that you have heard them. No one can predict another's reaction so it's worth remembering some people may respond favourably, with relief.

**Re-state reality** Re-state the facts using the conjunction "and" rather than "but". So, "I can see that this is difficult for you right now.....and these are the facts/decisions, etc"

**Remind the individual of their choices and responsibility** Again with "and", remind the person that they have choices and responsibilities around how they react and respond to what you have told them/your expectations.

**Tell them what support you will be giving** And start straight away, either in the meeting or by setting another date if they need more time.

### ■ Practice... don't shy away.