



Five Essentials to Having a Courageous Conversation

In our professional lives, situations often arise that bring about the need to have difficult conversations: these are commonly called 'courageous conversations'.

Unfortunately we sometimes tend to put off having these conversations until the situation reaches boiling point. Or we avoid the conversation altogether which ends up working to our disadvantage.

We put off or avoid these conversations because we want to avoid the inevitable emotional discomfort, or the risk that we believe we will be taking. It is often the case that the imagined or projected risk is far greater than the actual experience. Ultimately, when we conduct a courageous conversation constructively, in most cases we come away much relieved, with shared understanding and a positive outcome.

To engage in an effective courageous conversation we need to focus on what matters: that is, working for a solution with the other person in mind, or, to put it another way, dealing with the issue at hand while working authentically to preserve the relationship.

What follows are five crucial steps to take when engaging in effective courageous conversations to resolve difficult situations and get the best outcome:

1. Make a request to talk and declare your intentions upfront

Show your humanity by making a genuine request – let the other person know where you're coming from by stating your intention. For example: Have you got time to talk? I'd like to speak with you about an issue that is concerning me. These first two steps can be done interchangeably. Both are essential in initiating a courageous conversation as they decrease the perception of threat and increase the level of understanding. By making a request to talk to the other person and being open about your reason for the conversation, you are being direct yet inviting, and you are also giving the person the chance to defer the conversation if you have approached them at an unsuitable time.

2. Find agreements

The first agreement you have already found is the agreement to have the conversation, now or later. Keep working to find more agreements. For example, does the other person agree that the matter is a concern to them? Is it possible to agree on the facts at hand? Is it possible to agree to work for a solution? The more agreements you find early in the piece the greater the certainty that is created for both parties. This begins to lower the threat level and provides a positive basis upon which to look for a solution.

3. Keep it objective and positive

You need to discuss the current condition from an objective and positive point of view. Talk about the facts objectively. Ask

objective questions. Also, be objective about any emotions you are having. Emphasise what you are experiencing in the current state. For example, saying things like “I feel disappointed when you don’t ask for my opinion”; or “I have some frustration around this...”. Be authentic about how you are feeling and invite the other person to talk about the current state from their perspective, what are the facts as they see them and how they are feeling. This creates a shared understanding of where you are both coming from.

4. Work with optimism, not judgment

During the conversation, it is important to be conscientious of two things. Firstly, to remain calm and not get caught up in the drama of the situation. Secondly, it is essential to work with optimism and non-judgement by looking for the best in the other person and the situation.

5. Invite collaborative thinking about a solution

Put it to the other person that you are open to working towards finding a solution, rather than just focussing on the problem. It is important to establish this from the get-go and by doing this, you are inviting them to look to a positive outcome that is mutually beneficial, as well as showing that you are open to discussion and moving forward in the situation.

Invite the other person to put forward ideas about what you can both do together to come to a solution, while making suggestions of your own. Therefore, you are both working together to move forward in the situation, rather than getting bogged down in the issues. Remember to focus on what matters and that is preserving the relationship.

Further Reading:

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Mager, D. (2017), How to have difficult conversations, Psychology Today, published March 13 2017: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/some-assembly-required/201703/how-have-difficult-conversations>

Rozen, M (2015), Courageous conversations: How to handle difficult conversations in the workplace and in our personal lives, Huffington Post, published December 1 2015: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-rozen/courageous-conversations-_b_6446860.html



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