



FOCUS ARTICLE

How to Have Difficult Conversations at Work

Whether the issue is a missing signature, a serious incident or something in between, unpleasant or uncomfortable discussions will inevitably arise in the workplace. How these conversations are initiated and received both reflects on organisational culture and has an impact on it going forward. An awareness of our instinctive approaches to delivering and processing unpleasant news as well as strategies for counteracting our less productive tendencies can defuse tense situations, lead to more productive outcomes and make courageous conversations less daunting.

Avoidance Is in Our DNA

We, as humans, are designed to save energy. Just think of the paths worn bare in public parks that shorten routes delineated by designated walkways. These are physical manifestations of a very human tendency, which we also see at work in our mental landscape when we think of excuses, activate avoidance mechanisms and procrastinate. We easily find justifications to leave tasks that we perceive as unpleasant undone, and certain kinds of conversations that arise at work may fall under this category.

Already when we start to think of something as “difficult” or even “challenging” our energy-saving mode kicks in. It takes courage and self-awareness to overcome this natural inclination.

In a high hazard environment, where the consequences of leaving things unsaid endangers people and the planet, it is especially important to cultivate the courage to communicate, even if it means being the bearer of bad news or having to acknowledge errors or blind spots. Fortunately, we can all develop a degree of psychological awareness and **human performance** to soften the edges of these types of conversations, whether we are giving or receiving information. In addition, there are practical aspects that those initiating the conversation can keep in mind to ensure that the outcome is productive rather than destructive.

Five “Person States” That Facilitate Courageous Conversations

E. Scott Geller has theorized the importance to human interaction of what he calls “person states”: self-efficacy (I know I can do this); optimism (I expect the best); belongingness (I care about my team); self-esteem (I care about myself); and personal control (I am in control). When these states are healthy and strong, it’s easier to muster the courage to broach a sensitive subject.



Person States by E. Scott Geller

Even when one or two of them are sufficiently robust an individual feels empowered enough to embark on a delicate conversation. But we ourselves often undermine these states as we look for energy-saving reasons not to act, and our courage starts to dwindle. We may say to ourselves, for example, that speaking up will change nothing, thereby undermining our optimism. We may decide that others would not take the risk, sabotaging our sense of belonging and team spirit. Our minds are creative when finding ways to duck responsibility and take the path of least resistance. As an individual, being aware of this propensity and the five conditions that bolster our sense of self gives us an advantage when battling our less noble instincts.

Initiating a Conversation with Care and Consideration

With a strong dose of self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of personal control, an individual is ready to engage their colleague or supervisor in a conversation about a persistent problem or urgent

matter. In many ways, the initiator has an advantage, since they have more time to digest the relevant information and prepare than their conversation partner does. Recognising this advantage and asking a few practical questions can get things off on the right foot.

For instance, consider asking permission to share the information before launching into the discussion. While most people initially see this as an unnecessary step, it is a means of sharing responsibility for what follows and gives the person on the receiving end some sense of control. He or she might prefer a more convenient time or setting, or at least have a moment to mentally prepare for what is coming. The initiator should have already considered time and place, in fact, so that both parties can fully focus on the topic at hand.

In addition, before beginning the conversation, the initiator should be certain that he or she is the right person to speak up. Would someone else be in a better position to share the information or be better able to convey it? An auxiliary question regards motivation: is the reason for having the discussion related to a concern for safety or for the wellbeing, productivity and performance of the team or organisation? If the initiator is unsure, it might be better to ask a colleague for advice or support.

Delivery and Dialogue

Once a conversation is underway, body language, tone, word choice and pace affect the quality of the exchange. Avoiding the language of blame and personal references keeps emotional responses to a minimum, as does authenticity. This is important, because fear and other strong emotions operate 5 times faster than cognitive functions and are therefore more difficult to regulate. Eliminating emotional triggers from the start and speaking from the heart and not from a script makes it easier to have a constructive conversation.

Even though one of the two interlocutors is tasked with conveying information, remember that a conversation is a dialogue. The initiator should give their partner space to process what is being said, which means both slowing the pace and taking time to listen.

On the Receiving End

The person taking in the new and presumably unpleasant information inherently lacks the luxury of foreknowledge. The best way for the recipient to prepare is to develop Emotional Intelligence (EI) and self-awareness and to practice regulating emotions in

matters small as well as big. Becoming conscious of habitual reactions, for example, and mindfully allowing a moment to pass in order to head off an emotional response is one way to engage courageously with others in these situations. Remember that a conversation is not a threat, but rather an opportunity to become informed, make better decisions and be more effective in your position. The recognition, too, that we are not always aware of everything around us, and that, because we are human, we are prone to tunnel vision, can help us welcome even uncomfortable news.

Learning the Art of Courageous Conversations

It is in the interest of every organisation to encourage communication and hence positively influence their **organisational culture**. When individuals explicitly invite others to approach them, no matter what the topic, everyone benefits. Equally important is the quality of the communication and the sense that it leads to improvement. At DEKRA, many of our workshops incorporate training in Emotional Intelligence, and our **Leader Care Profile**, in particular, addresses the qualities and behaviours necessary for courageous conversations. Awareness and practice are the keys to developing the humanity, integrity and competence that build courage and foster productive communication.

DEKRA Organisational & Process Safety

DEKRA Organisational and Process Safety are a behavioural change and process safety consultancy company. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to assess the process safety and influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference'.

In terms of behavioural change, we deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees; supporting our clients in creating a culture of care and measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal.

The breadth and depth of expertise in process safety makes us globally recognised specialists and trusted advisors. We help our clients to understand and evaluate their risks, and work together to develop pragmatic solutions. Our value-adding and practical approach integrates specialist process safety management, engineering and testing. We seek to educate and grow client competence to vide sustainable performance improvement; partnering with our clients we combine technical expertise with a passion for life preservation, harm reduction and asset protection.

We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 45,000 employees in 60 countries and 5 continent. As a part of the world's leading expert organisation DEKRA, we are the global partner for a safe world.

We have offices throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

For more information, visit www.dekra-uk.co.uk/en/dekra-organisational-and-process-safety/

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