

Challenging unhelpful behaviour with the art of conversation

The following article was contributed by Nigel Purse, co-author of *5 Conversations: How to transform trust, engagement and performance at work*.

It is a rare workplace where people never experience any unhelpful behaviour from others; and as a coach, you will inevitably work with a client who will ask for strategies for how to deal with a difficult employee. You will of course advise them to speak to the person, but it isn't quite that easy is it?

When difficult behaviour does start affecting us, or the people around us, the fear of approaching someone often stops us from doing anything about it. Research* has shown that this fear is often grounded in a lack of confidence in their ability to handle such a situation, a fear of damaging the relationship with the offending person, or making the situation worse, with 22% of US workers choosing to avoid approaching someone for these reasons.

Even if you have mustered the courage to talk to them, there is a challenge of knowing how to have the right conversation in the right way:

“The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place, but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.” - Dorothy Nevill

When affected by unhelpful behaviour it can be easy to let emotions take over and reprimand a person, rather than seek the cause behind the behaviour. What is most needed is a way to have a deep, but anxiety-free conversation with someone that encourages dialogue between parties to understand the behaviour and seek change.

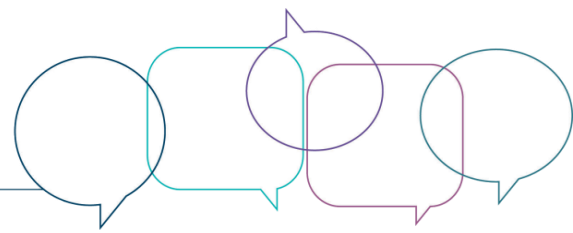
The approach we recommend for this type of conversation is based on the principles of Non-Violent Communication, a technique first developed by Marshall Rosenberg as a peace-making tool during civil rights movement in the 1960s. It offers a structured process for requesting change through the honest expression of feelings and needs and is based on three principles:

- Self-empathy: Developing and acknowledging your own inner feelings
- Empathy: Listening to your colleague and supporting them
- Honest self-expression: Expressing your own feelings and acknowledging the feelings of others

Small incidents of unhelpful behaviour are best tackled in the moment, however this approach is for the significant failures in performance and behaviour where there is a recurrent theme or pattern.

Before the conversation

It is important to prepare** for the conversation by ensuring you are clear on what the problem is, who it is affecting (Themselves? You? Your colleagues? A client?), and how and what change you would like to see.



Initiating the conversation

The courage to initiate the conversation comes with having the right mind-set, so ensure you start with the right intention – to help that person be more successful by modifying their behaviour.

Be mindful of how you word the invitation. In neuroscience terms, hearing the phrases ‘Can I give you some feedback?’ or ‘Can we talk?’ generates a similar ‘fight or flight’ response as hearing a window smash at night when you are alone. Try re-phrasing to a less threatening “Would you like to go out for a coffee sometime today?” or “I’d just like to go over a few things – can you spare a few minutes?”

The conversation*

Remember – this is a two-way conversation. Ensure the other person is invited to contribute at each of the four steps.

1. Make an observation: “I noticed you...”

State this as a fact and immediately ask the person for their side of the story.

2. Describe how it made you feel: “I bring this up because I feel...”

Use descriptive language to articulate the emotional effect of their behaviour. Then ask them what feelings were behind the behaviour.

For this approach to have true impact, the manager needs ‘own’ their feelings about situation and verbally acknowledge why they need a change to be made.

3. State what you need: “It is important because my need for X is not being met”

Marshall Rosenberg stated: “When people hear needs, it provokes compassion. When people hear diagnoses, it provokes defensiveness and attack.”

4. Request a change: “So would you be ok to...?”

State what you need, but leave room for negotiation. The other person should be given space to provide information on what they need to be able to make this behaviour change.

Finally, it is important to re-boot the relationship. Be sure to close with a thank you and recognition that you have the type of relationship where this type of conversation can be held.

With thorough preparation and the right mind-set, and unhelpful conversation doesn’t have to become a battle – your relationship with that person can come out even stronger. Give it a try!

*2014 Global Trust, Engagement and Communication in the Workplace Survey conducted by The Oxford Group and Atomik Research

**A helpful conversation planner

[http://www.5conversations.co.uk/documents/Conversation_4_Planner.pdf] and an inventory of ‘feelings’ words that you can use are included in the book.