

How to have those **DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

Ideas for Team Leaders to have difficult 1:1 conversations with problem members.

In my experience, team leaders struggle with what I call “tough conversations” with people they find “difficult” – teammates who underperform or behave badly and show no signs of changing. Unfortunately, research shows that engaging and resolving issues with difficult team members is one of the six things people most want from their team leaders.

“I’ve found most team leaders don’t engage confidently in “tough conversations” because they struggle with assertiveness, often declaring, “I don’t want to come across as aggressive.”

So instead, they avoid them altogether. Or engage in “join the dots” conversations where they give half the story and expect the other person to figure out the rest, which they rarely do. By avoiding tough conversations or tiptoeing around them, they let down the team.

So, how do you engage in tough conversations that work? You learn to be assertive.

ASSERTIVENESS VERSUS AGGRESSION

For me, assertiveness is explaining the change in attitude or behaviour you want while holding your connection to the other person with enough skill to make the result you want more likely. If you don’t hold the connection, assertiveness can slide into anger, accusation and aggression. That’s when you’re unlikely to get the result you want. Here’s how I summarise the difference between assertiveness and aggression:

It comes down to your attitude towards the other person.

Do you see them as a real person with feelings, hopes, values and needs, who can make mistakes, just like you? If so, you’re “holding the connection.” When you deal firmly with other people from this



FROM THE UK

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underlying stance of “I’m okay and you’re basically okay too,” you’re being assertive.

Or do you instead see them as an object that’s getting in your way, meaning your subconscious attitude is, “I’m okay and you’re not okay”? If so, you’re being aggressive.

KNOWING WHEN TO BE ASSERTIVE

There are times to assert and not assert your position. Knowing the difference is crucial. The two points to consider are intent and wisdom. These questions can help you:

(A) Intent: What is my aim? Do I want a verbal or emotional reaction from the other person; if so, what? Do I want a behavioural change; if so, what? Or do I simply want the satisfaction of venting my feelings? Be specific. And be wary of the third aim.

(B) Wisdom: Will I lose something I value in following this intent? Or might I gain something I don’t want? Either way, do I feel the benefits from asserting myself exceed the unwanted consequences? (Remember the story of King Midas? A Greek god granted him a wish. Midas wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. He realised he’d chosen unwisely when on kissing his daughter she became a golden statue.)

KNOWING HOW TO BE ASSERTIVE

This technique uses a four-part framework. Normally, you need all four steps. However, you may not need step #3 if the conversation isn’t taking place within an organisational context.

1. DESCRIBE THE OTHER PERSON’S BEHAVIOUR

You describe (without judging) the specific behaviour in question. That means describing it factually without applying negative labels. This avoids giving the other person a chance to dispute what you’re saying while holding your connection with them. This could focus on what they’ve done or failed to do. The key is to talk specifically, clearly, simply and accurately. What you’re saying must be indisputable. Just as important, stick to the facts – don’t label the person (e.g. “you’re a bully”) or try psychoanalysing their motives. Get this step wrong and the rest of the framework won’t work.

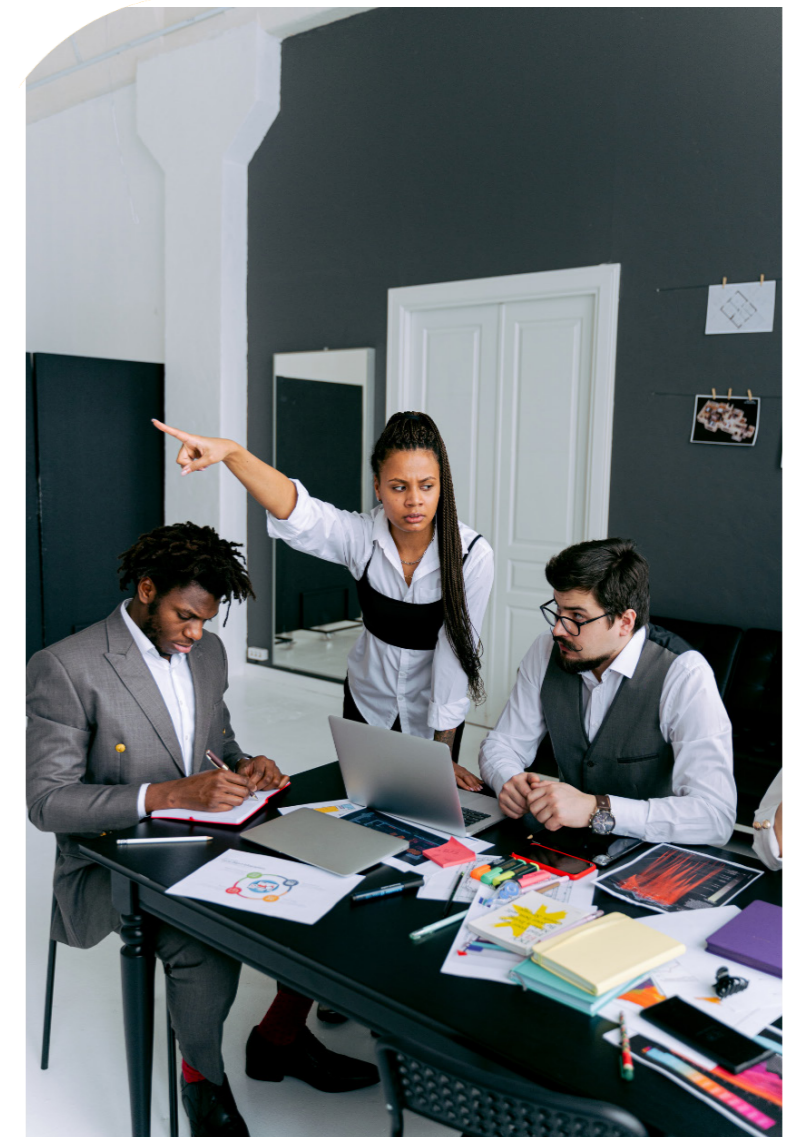
2. SUMMARISE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON’S BEHAVIOUR

Having navigated the first part successfully, the second part becomes all-important. Now you say what you feel about the person’s behaviour. This builds on step #1 to give the assertiveness framework its power. Without this injection of emotion (your feelings) you’ll weaken your act of assertiveness, meaning it may fail. Why is it so important to inject emotion? It’s

because emotion acts as the bridging force between ideas and actions. Thus, you bring intensity and direction to your description of the person’s behaviour by adding your feelings. This makes it penetrate the other person’s psychological shell. It’s like the extra power needed to send a rocket into orbit. Without it, the rocket won’t blast beyond the atmosphere.

3. EXPLAIN THE WIDER IMPACT OF THEIR BEHAVIOUR

Now you explain the wider (perhaps less obvious) impact and consequences of their behaviour on you and/or other people. This might cover how you see them, your future relationship with them, the impact on your



team's reputation, how it negatively affects customers or clients, or how it makes life harder for teammates. You get the idea. By providing the big intellectual answer to "so what?" concerning your feelings, it builds on the emotional power of step #2.

4. EXPLAIN WHAT YOU WANT INSTEAD

Here you request a specific change in the person's behaviour. It must be specific so they can't misunderstand what you want

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them to change. Don't leave them wondering. Occasionally, but not always, it's important to say what will happen if they don't deliver the change you want, especially if you may have to dismiss them if they don't shift their attitude and behaviour.

You can vary how you apply this four-step approach.

You can insist your colleague shifts their attitude or behaviour (or both) and make the implications (the "or else") ultra-clear if they don't change.

But you can use it in a softer, kinder way by varying your voice tone and body language. So

don't see assertiveness as "going into battle." This tool is more flexible than it first appears; use it in different ways.

DOS AND DON'TS

- Ideally, do it in private, although sometimes that isn't possible.
- It's usually best to start step #1 in an empathetic way. If you can, express your understanding of the other person's feelings. This gives you the best chance possible of showing you're not trying to pick a fight and may help settle their emotions at the start.
- Make sure what you've described in step #1 is factually correct. It must be watertight. No wriggle room allowed. Get that wrong and you'll find the process unravels.
- In step #1, don't use labelling or judgemental words (like "useless", "lazy", "bully") that say what a person is (in your opinion) rather than what they've done. Nor should you label the behaviour (e.g. "incompetent", "bumbling"). Stick to the behavioural facts. Simply describe what they've done or failed to do. And don't generalise.
- Just as important, in step #1 don't try to guess why they've done what you're objecting to. Don't play psychoanalyst. Don't try to read their mind.
- Don't omit step #2. Step #2 makes your act of assertiveness pack a punch.
- Make sure you align your body language with your words and your wish to be as empathetic as possible at the start. Face the other person. Stand or sit up straight. Keep your voice soft and calm, not abrasive. Don't use dismissive gestures.
- Use "I" statements. Everything you say must centre on your feelings. Not someone else's feelings, nor your team's feelings. Your feelings. You must own this statement.
- With more difficult, high-risk or high-impact conversations, rehearse beforehand. If necessary, practise your statement with a trusted friend and hear their thoughts. ■

JAMES SCULLER is an executive coach in Flitwick, England, UK. He is the author of the trilogy, *How To Build Winning Teams Again And Again* published by Hawkhurst Publishing, each book priced at £13.99. The three-part series will be available on Amazon and all other major bookstores.

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