

How learning to have challenging conversations can transform your organisation

By Mia Forbes Pirie

Learning to have challenging conversations improves everything

Inability to have difficult conversations is one of the most significant issues that gets in the way of good leadership. Beyond leadership, it also affects our productivity, our culture, our ability to develop strong and effective teams and our ability to have real diversity in organisations. It may even help prevent nuclear disasters.

The Chairman of the Commission investigating the Fukushima nuclear incident focused on “mindset” as an underlying cause. Based on his views it would not be much of a stretch to say that the inability to have challenging conversations in Japanese culture was partially responsible for the disaster. This is not limited to the Japanese context. In 1979 the US Commission investigating the Three Mile Island nuclear incident found that “fundamental problems are people-related problems and not equipment problems (...) there are deficiencies in various processes, and there is a lack of communication among key individuals and groups.” Poor communication can result in disaster.

The best results require people to be able to challenge each other appropriately

The best results come from organizational cultures where people know how to challenge each other appropriately and feel comfortable doing that. The best teams communicate well and give and receive great feedback to help them grow both individually and collectively and develop the best results. The best ideas do not consistently come from everyone agreeing with the first (or loudest) suggestion put forward.

A recent Google study found that the most important factor in highly performing teams is psychological safety – feeling that you can speak freely and will not be blamed or shamed. This is a question of mindset.

Psychological safety needs to be balanced with an appropriate sense of accountability and responsibility. Otherwise the result is apathy. We want to develop a collegiate environment focused on results through collaboration. Being able to give and receive constructive feedback is essential to growth and improvement. The skills involved in having difficult conversations are key to that.

The cost of avoiding conversations

Most of us instinctively shy away from difficult conversations. Many managers, and some HR professionals, do not have the skills or confidence to have effective difficult conversations. They either avoid them or have them badly.

Handled badly, a difficult conversation can lead to resentment and disharmony. If a difficult issue is not properly resolved those involved can experience stress and anxiety, affecting the quality of their work and leading to increased absenteeism (not to mention the knock-on effect on the rest of the team).

For example, let us say that an employee has asked for a promotion and you need to tell them that this is not possible right now. The conversation does not go well, or you do not have it at all. Not only does the employee feel under-appreciated and personally rejected,



Mia Forbes Pirie is a mediator, executive coach and trainer. She works with teams, directors and boards restructuring organisations, and individuals in conflict. Mia helps people to work better together and communicate under pressure. In addition to commercial clients, she has worked with MPs, governments, religious organisations, NGOs, and charities. Mia provides training online and in person. For more information see: www.miaforbespirie.com

they feel you do not care about their professional development (a view they share with their colleagues). They feel demoralised and their productivity suffers. Colleagues notice and resent having to pick up the slack. Stress levels increase and the working environment becomes unpleasant.

Effective feedback is a key to growth and results. Most organisations just do not have the skills to give it. If people are too ‘nice’ to each other (what Kim Scott calls ‘ruinous empathy’), they can be ineffective, not grow and end up acting defensively and not taking responsibility. If feedback is too harsh and critical, on the other hand, they shut down becoming either aggressive and argumentative or passive.

It does not need to be that way. Difficult conversation skills and feedback skills can be learnt.

The opportunities

What if your managers had a toolkit that allowed them to handle situations differently? What if they were comfortable having those conversations, knowing that it is possible to achieve a positive future-focused outcome where all parties feel heard, respected and valued?

With strong people skills in place, and a culture that the whole organisation believes in, it is possible to deal with difficult situations and achieve a positive outcome that draws people together and builds trust instead of pulling teams apart.

The truth is that difficult conversations can be empowering conversations.

Conversations that might have been avoided in the past can be positive catalysts for shared understanding and mutual respect. When you look at it that way they feel far less daunting.

The key lies in giving people the skills they need to get the best possible results out of difficult conversations. Successful conversations help people to develop trust in each other. That leads to virtuous circles: psychological safety, development, improved feedback loops and better results.

First help people to understand why it is important to have these conversations. Then give them the training they need to create a safe environment and hold successful conversations that lead to positive outcomes.

Who knows, you may not just avoid nuclear disasters in your organisation but also see a better culture developing with better results across the board.