



Managing Difficult Conversations

Module One - Understanding Difficult Conversations

Introduction

Welcome to '**Managing Difficult Conversations.**' During this course you will learn about what can make a conversation difficult and why these conversations are important to have. You will develop skills in being an effective communicator and learn how to prepare both physically and mentally for a potentially difficult conversation. Finally, we will identify how to approach both planned and spontaneous conversations with both parents and school staff.

I am Steve Burnage, an international training consultant, inspector, and author with over 35 years' experience in teaching and school leadership. It is my pleasure to guide you through this course. Every one of the examples and scenarios used during this course are real 'difficult conversations' that I experienced as a headteacher of an inner-city comprehensive school. So, let's begin!

What makes a conversation difficult?

In my time as a school leader, I was an active participant in many conversations that some would classify as 'difficult': capability conversations, disciplinary conversations, reintegration conversations or restorative conversations. However, looking back on those conversations and many more that I had, the intent for each one was always positive – to bring about improvement, to turn round poor decisions, to learn from mistakes. Frequently, what turned good intentions into a difficult conversation was not the words used but the expectation around the conversation. If we want to shift the focus of a conversation from how difficult it could be to the good intent behind it, then it is not the conversation we need to change, it is the expectations of those involved in that conversation.

So, why do so many conversations turn out badly? We might consider five factors that can contribute to a difficult conversation:

1. **The extent to which emotion is linked to the situation:** Conversations can become difficult when there is a mismatch between how we feel and the action we are taking.

For example, our reluctance to tackle the underperformance of a member of teaching staff who is having relationship difficulties. The solution here is to separate the two issues and offer personal support for their relationship and professional mentoring to help them improve professionally.

2. **Worries about what might happen:** Don't try to second guess how your words will be received. An effective strategy here would be to play through scenarios, however unlikely, and rehearse how you and they might react to each one.

3. **Not getting the power relationship right:** Sometimes we can feel too powerful or not powerful enough.

For example, you might want a colleague to understand that it is your decision to talk with them about the quality of the homework that they are setting (you have the power), or you might want to suggest that you are just voicing the concerns of the headteacher (they have the power). The solution is to focus on the outcome – why are you having this conversation and what needs to be achieved from it, not who instigated the conversation. Look forward to a solution rather than backwards to the problem.

4. **You've been here before:** We have all been on the receiving end of a conversation that you are about to instigate.

For example, there may have been a time when your team leader spoke to you about something that needed improvement. The solution here is to again, focus on the outcome. When you were in that position, what did you need to hear from your team leader? What did you learn from the way that conversation was conducted (for good or bad)? Use that learning to direct the way you manage your own conversation.

5. **Saying 'Yes' to everyone:** Trying to please everyone can be the biggest cause of conversation difficulties. Make sure you have a clear direction of where the conversation needs to go, why it needs to go there and the evidence you have that tells you this. That way, your conversation will have a clear direction that you can keep returning to.

Evidence-based conversations

Whatever reason (or reasons) we identify for conversations being difficult, we still need to have conversations that bring about change and improvement. An effective school leader uses evidence to identify a problem, works with others to remedy problems and avoids the procrastination and delay that can make problems worse not better.

As James Brown states in 'Navigate difficult conversations with staff' (2018)

"While there is always a temptation to avoid tackling the conversation you know you need to have, this should be avoided at all costs. Not only will an important issue remain unresolved, which could hold your team back, but it will also continue to play on your mind while the other party often remains completely in the dark."

So, what can we do to make every conversation an effective conversation rather than a difficult one?

Being an effective communicator

Conversation is about communication and communication is not just about talking, it involves what we hear, see, and say.

Research by Professor Albert Mehrabian showed that when communicating feelings and attitudes, only 7 percent of the message is in the words that are spoken, 38 percent is in the way the words are spoken and 55 percent is in body language and facial expression. In other words, what people see can be far more powerful than the words being spoken.



I learned this early in my headship. For example, I decided it would be a good idea to email colleagues to ask them to drop by my office at the end of the day for a chat. I knew that the intent was to thank them for a job well done and to ask them to share their expertise or experience with others. Sadly, the recipients didn't know this. They received a message from 'the boss' asking them to drop by his office at the end of the day. It wasn't until my deputy head told me about the anxiety I was causing that I realised I needed to make my messages clearer. You see, without tone of voice or body language, there was too much potential for my colleagues to misunderstand my intent.

As Emily Hardwicke states in 'Why you can't hide behind email for tricky chats' (Feb 2021):

"Words with an absence of tone, facial expression, body language and gestures have the potential to twist and turn into their own amorphous mess of misunderstanding. In person, there is a connection, a chance for dialogue and an opportunity for immediate clarification."

Barriers to communication can involve the language we use, the physical space we are in, the emotional states of those involved, attitudes to the conversation, and how we feel physically and mentally. The key to overcoming barriers to effective communication is knowing what makes an effective conversation in the first place.

I would suggest that there are seven strategies to leading an effective conversation:

1. **Be clear** - The more precise your message, the easier it is for the receiver to decipher it in accordance with your actual purpose. Many barriers to effective communication occur due to a lack of clarity in the message.
2. **Be concise** - Get to the point and don't procrastinate. I often use the model
 - i. Make your point
 - ii. Provide evidence to support your point and
 - iii. Give examples to make it real
3. **Be concrete** - Use specific, tangible, and valid information. In other words, always make sure that your conversations are driven by evidence and not emotion.
4. **Be correct** - Whether in writing, spoken over the telephone or face-to-face, the words you use are as important as the meaning behind them. Correct grammar, spelling and syntax convey professionalism and precision and they matter.
5. **Be considerate** - Always talk about the action not the person.

For example, the statement *"I noticed that a number of students were out of your lesson this morning, why was that?"* has got to be better than *"Yet again, you didn't keep your students in your class. This needs to stop!"*

6. **Be complete** - Let the receiver speak first in response to a question before you bombard them with talk.

For example, the statement *"I noticed that a number of students were out of your lesson this morning, why was that?"* creates an opening for you to learn possible reasons before making judgements.

7. **Be courteous** - Manners and pleasantness cost nothing. If we want to hold a constructive conversation and not a difficult conversation, we need to maintain a polite, relaxed tone that holds its power in the evidence of our words, not in their volume.



Managing emotions in difficult situations

For conversations to bring about positive outcomes we do need to ensure that we have the tools and techniques to manage our emotions when others may not be so in control.

In my article 'Tough talk: handling difficult conversations at work' (August 2021), I talk about the need for empathy and resilience.

"Approach sensitive topics from a place of empathy. Be considerate; be compassionate. It might not necessarily be pleasant, but you can manage to deliver difficult news in a courageous, honest, fair way. At the same time, keep [your own] emotion out of any difficult conversation and focus on facts backed up with evidence."

In order to prepare for that difficult conversation:

1. **See a conversation as a conversation** - If you're gearing up for a difficult conversation, you're more likely to feel nervous and upset about it beforehand. Instead, try framing it in a positive way.

For example, you're **not** about to have a negative performance management conversation with someone; you're going to have a constructive conversation about their professional development.

2. **Breathe** - The calmer and more centred you are, the better you will be at handling difficult conversations. On the back of my office door, I had a poster with the words '*breathe, smile, relax your shoulders.*' This was my mantra for every time I left my office.
3. **Plan but be flexible** - It can help to plan what you want to say by jotting down notes and key points before your conversation. Always aim to keep your language simple, clear, direct, and neutral. However, keep in mind that conversations do not always go the way that you may have expected, so being flexible and adaptable is important.
4. **You have two ears and one mouth for a reason** - Don't start a difficult conversation with a my-way-or-the-highway attitude. Before you broach the topic, ask yourself two questions:
 - What is the problem?
 - What does the other person think is the problem?

If you aren't sure of the other person's viewpoint, ask them.

5. **Walk in the other person's shoes** - Approach sensitive topics from a place of empathy. Be considerate; be compassionate. It might not necessarily be pleasant, but you can manage to deliver difficult news in a courageous, honest, fair way.
6. **Slow down and listen** - Slowing your cadence and pausing before responding to the other person gives you a chance to find the right words and tends to defuse negative emotion or anger in the other person. My advice is always to listen twice – listen once until the other person goes quiet but then remain silent. After a pause they will start talking again. Listen for that second time and, after reflecting on what has been said, then start to speak.



7. **Create a win-win situation** - If you're starting a conversation that will put the other person in a difficult position or take something away from them, ask yourself: *"Is there something I can give back?"* If, for instance, you're faced with having to dismiss a colleague, you could say, *"I have written what I think is a fair reference for you; would you like to see it?"*
8. **Reflect and learn** - After any professional conversation, reflect on what went well and what you would do differently next time.

Handling any conversation well requires great leadership skills. However, handling a difficult conversation well is not just about skill, it is about courage (to have the conversation in the first place) and humanity (to bring about a win-win resolution). With careful preparation, flexibility, consideration of location and time of day, any school leader can lead their professional conversations so that all involved end the conversation with hope and a smile.

Summary

In this module we have covered what makes a conversation difficult and five factors that may be at play. We looked at why it is important to have evidence-based conversations, as well as seven strategies that will make you an effective communicator, able to lead effective conversations. Finally, we looked at what you can do to prepare for a difficult conversation. In the next module, we will focus on difficult conversations with parents.

This completes your first module. Simply close this window to save your progress and click 'Questionnaire 1' to complete the accompanying questionnaire.