



Why We Avoid Difficult Conversations

You have nothing to fear but fear itself

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At work one of the things a person fear most, and actively try to avoid, is having a difficult conversation with a boss, a peer or a report.

Let's face it, we don't like it as it represents the unknown – whenever you enter into a difficult conversation you never know where and how it is going to go. Our natural reaction to uncertainty is fear and, when we are in a fearful state, two things happen:

1. We try look to avoid that which causes our fear (in this case a difficult conversation);
2. Our primitive brain perceives this as a threat, and we automatically go into "fight or flight" mode. When this happens our brain reduces the blood-flow to non-essential areas, including those parts of the brain which control our executive thinking (reasoning, problem-solving and decision-making), and increases it to essential areas (*e.g.* leg muscles for running, arms for fighting etcetera). The net effect of this is to reduce our ability to have a difficult conversation successfully.

In effect, your response to a difficult conversation is an emotional reaction which we then try to rationalize. A survey of 500 managers found the following reasons as to why they tried to avoid a difficult conversation:

Reasons Why People Avoid Difficult Conversations

REASON	%age
• Didn't want to create a bad atmosphere	29%
• To avoid confrontation	18%
• Didn't know how to say it	16%
• Worried about the reprisal	11%
• Thought it might make the situation worse	11%
• Didn't want to upset someone	8%
• Other reason (e.g. lack of back up, lack of time etcetera)	7%



The surveyed managers when then asked what happened to the issue which underpinned the difficult conversation. The following results were found

- The issue resolved itself 4%
- The issue got worse 43%
- The issue stayed the same 49%
- Someone else tackled the issue 4%

So what are the key takeaways for leaders from this? Firstly, avoiding a difficult conversation is not an effective strategy and it demonstrates a lack of leadership to your team and those around you. Secondly, if the underlying issue is not addressed it is likely that the situation will deteriorate; this makes it harder to address. Also, by not addressing the issue you are tacitly giving it your seal of approval as you are being seen to tolerate it – this can give the green light to others to act in way that is not acceptable or does not meet expectations. Thirdly, although the issue may stay the same the extent and pervasiveness of it may worsen. Difficult conversations often focus around matters relating to performance (because if people were performing you would be happy with what they were doing, and you would not need to have a difficult conversation) so, even if the issue stays the same, you are still performing at a level below that which is wanted or required. Finally, if someone else tackles the issue it does not mean that they have dealt with it in an effective or efficient manner, or that their approach and results achieved are suitable. Furthermore, someone else's dealing with the issue only serves to heighten your own shortfall in dealing with the issue.

So what do you need to do to handle difficult conversations well?

- Have the right mindset and attitude going into a difficult conversation. Have an open mind; be prepared to listen, learn and change your point of view; and see it as an open two-way dialogue
- Make sure you have the necessary skills to handle a difficult conversation, this will give you confidence
- Know what you want to achieve from the difficult conversation.
- Have the difficult conversation in a way that is respectful, safe and constructive for you and the other person.
- Listen, reflect and check for understanding
- Come to a joint agreement on the next steps and accountability
- Learn and implement the learnings you have realized



So don't fear difficult conversations, embrace them! Look out for them and use them as opportunities to help improve yourself and others in a positive and constructive way. So if you have been avoiding that difficult conversation and I know you have, now is the time to step up and have it. You will be pleasantly surprised by what can happen!

About Andrew Cooke

Andrew Cooke is the director and founder of Blue Sky GPS and is known for his work with executives, managers and teams in helping them to grow, develop and achieve results. Using a blend of consulting, facilitation and coaching he is noted for his ability in "bringing people potential to life". Andrew takes the time to understand and assist successful business executives in creating a customized plan that allows them grow and develop their leadership effectiveness. In doing this he guides executives to manage, direct and make change work for them and their stakeholders and teams in an increasing volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environment. From this he helps others to become more successful in both what they do and how they do it.

Andrew demonstrates a proactive attitude and empathy that blends enthusiasm, energy and a pragmatic approach in engaging leaders and their stakeholders. He has over thirty years of international business experience and insights on which to draw, and has worked with blue-chip clients and other leading businesses across a range of industries. Andrew is passionate about helping others to be more successful personally and professionally.

Qualifications & Accreditations

Andrew is an experienced international expert in executive coaching, leadership development and business consulting. He has qualifications, certifications and accreditations from recognized leading global organizations, including:

- International executive coach with certifications for Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder Centered Coaching and Global Leader of the Future 360⁰ Assessment
- Masters of Business Administration (MBA), London Business School, UK
- Bachelor of Business BA (Hons), University of Plymouth (UK)
- Diploma from the Institute of Marketing (UK)
- Accredited DISC Facilitator & Coach