Managing difficult conversations at work

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Two fears we are born with are the fear of loud noises and the fear of falling. Every other fear we have we learn – including the fear of conflict. However, conflict at work usually has to be addressed and effective management of employees sometimes requires difficult conversations to be undertaken.

This article looks at difficult conversations and why we avoid them. It will also look at the consequences of not confronting conflict at work and what happens when we do not have those difficult conversations. In addition, we will have some tips on how to have difficult conversations while reducing the chances of making things worse.

A problem in the work context

Avoiding what needs to be said at work can grow to become a major barrier and obstacle to excellent performance. Avoiding difficult conversations is something that many of us learn from our experiences of the pain felt when we confront someone’s behaviour. The solution of course is to avoid additional pain and not say what needs to be said.

What really happens is that we do not have the conversation we need to have with those with whom we need to have it. We have the conversation with anyone except the person with whom we need to have the conversation.

Sound familiar?

There is a person in your open plan office who rarely achieves deadlines and who talks loudly and often. They talk about their social life, about how easily others take offence, about – well anything really.

Do we confront this person?

Usually not. We will talk to others though about the behaviour that we are choosing to feel upset about. We may even let others know that we could achieve more work if we did not have to put up with this person. Over coffee our talkative colleague becomes a monster, the reason we cannot perform, the cause of all workplace problems and in Australia the cause of the worst drought in history.

On days when our talkative colleague is not in the office we all talk about that, 'Quiet in here today isn’t it?', and we laugh about it with each other. Why do we avoid difficult conversations - why are we so afraid to have the difficult conversation with our talkative co-worker?

Reasons we avoid difficult conversations

Some reasons why we avoid difficult conversations are:

- We convince ourselves that talking about the problem will make the problem worse rather than resolving it
- The cure may be worse than the disease
- We do not want to feel bad
- We do not want the other person to feel bad
- We may hear things in the conversation about ourselves that we do not want to hear
- We and/or the other person may get emotional
- We are not sure where the conversation will end
- We fear the consequences, retribution
Imagine this

‘Even with my eyes shut I can tell when Eileen comes into work. She is usually late – 10 or 15 minutes every day. She stomps in, across to her desk, makes no eye contact with the six of us between the door and Eileen’s desk – except to glare. She dumps her bag onto the desk.

I used to say "Hi Eileen - good weekend?"

No answer was the stern reply. Sometimes she might say – "I don’t do mornings OK" – be more accurate to say "I don’t do days - period!"

I don’t even say "Good morning" now.

She is rude to customers. Slams the phone down into the receiver after the call is finished. She’s rude to us – tells us never asks. Blames her mistakes on us. Our team leader does nothing about it.

What is it like to work here – in a word? It’s like walking on eggshells all the time. I fronted her about her rudeness and she said "That’s the way I am – you’ll get used to it."

Or this

‘All my boss is interested in is looking good to his boss. He’s into fear. Always going on about how he plays golf with the Director-General on weekends. He probably lets her win too.

‘There are three mistakes in this report – fix them. Your job is under review. There’s a place for people who ask lots of questions but it’s not here.’

It’s just a barrage of abuse, negative comments – we stay back to get stuff done – never a thank you. Some of my colleagues said something to him one day – they’ll never do that again. In a staff meeting soon after he talked about the ‘precious princesses on the petticoat floor (most of our team are female) – well they’d better not expect me to be their Prince Charming’

How can you trust a boss who presents one face to his bosses and another side to us – Jekyll and Hyde with an MBA?

Riddle me this!

Why do people put up with it?

What happens to good people as their careers progress in profitable businesses and world-class acclaimed government agencies?

How do people get sucked into miserable workplaces – where being critical becomes more important than solving problems?

No secrets

Over the last few years we have conducted hundreds of workshops for businesses in every industry sector on workplace culture. Helping work groups to focus on ‘How we do things around here?’

We found hundreds of teams that work. Dedicated people – spending long hours doing what their customers value.

We also found teams that succeed in spite of their bosses. We found that uncooperative and unhelpful behaviours were tolerated. Poor performers were moved around rather than moved out. Reporting systems that emphasised positive results and buried or ignored anything
negative.

We found no secrets. Everyone in the workplace knew about these unreasonable behaviours and the lack of reporting integrity.

Collaboration and respect were talked about. Disrespectful, uncooperative and abusive behaviours were tolerated, sanctioned.

People do what works. What was working in many of these workplaces was the kind of behaviour expected to be left behind after the junior years of high school.

What was missing?

One thing was common to every one of the work groups where people reported high levels of unreasonable behaviour.

People avoided talking to those whose behaviour created problems. They talked about them and not to them. Where some had tried to talk directly with the person whose behaviour was of concern – invariably the conversation missed the mark and created some additional problems with work relationships.

'It's like telling someone they have bad breath.' Was how one person described it. 'You don’t do it. You know you leave some mints on their desk – ask you had garlic for dinner last night – but eventually you just keep your distance.'

The 3Rs

The consequences of not frankly sharing our concerns about our relationships at work are clear. We call them the 3Rs. They are:

Resistance - We do have trouble separating people's ideas from what we think of their behaviour – we tend to resist and dismiss ideas, opportunities from those whose behaviour we choose to find irritating.

Resentment - We may become resentful of the success of those who have said or done things about which we choose to become irritated and perhaps find ways to publicly attribute their success or accomplishments to favouritism.

Retaliation - We may strike back against those who we perceive have done us wrong. We may be pleased at a colleague's poor sales results and make sure that the results become common knowledge. Some take their partner to lunch on the company credit card and excuse it by saying 'well my boss doesn’t appreciate me so I deserve lunch – after all – my partner puts up with all my late hours.'

Poor relationships also cost money.

Fact Box- Costs of avoiding those difficult conversations

Conflict costs

In Australia employee turnover comes to an average 15% a year with typical employee replacement costs of between 48% and 61% of annual salary.

Exit interviews reveal that chronic unresolved conflict is a decisive factor in at least 50% of all employee departures – more than half.

The most common reasons cited for employees leaving a company are related to poor practices in preventing and managing conflict between people at work.

With the average time taken for recruitment being 57 days, it is not uncommon for
replacement costs for a manager or professional to equal 80% to 90% of an employee’s annual salary.

Psychological injury claims arise from workplace conflict - 70% of workers’ compensation claimants report on-going conflict at their workplace.

WorkCover NSW figures indicate the cost of psychological injury claims is around $30 million annually and rising.

In 2003-2004, Australian Government claims for psychological injury accounted for 7% of total workers’ compensation claims, though nearly 27% of total claim costs.

6 tips on having those difficult conversations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledge that there will be differences in how you and others see things</th>
<th>We all have to get on with a wide range of people at work – colleagues, customers, suppliers – you won’t like them all</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When possible let others know how you feel in a direct and non-threatening way</td>
<td>Create a basis for looking collaboratively not combatively at what you are choosing to be concerned about</td>
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<td>Talk about the impact the situation has had on you</td>
<td>Look people in the eye – let the facts talk and not your judgement of what happened</td>
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<td>Ask how the situation has affected them</td>
<td>Many hurts are not intended – we all have gaps between what we say and what we do – listen more than you talk</td>
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<td>Acknowledge your contribution to the situation</td>
<td>Someone who does not agree with you may not be wrong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invite the other person to work with you to make things better</td>
<td>What would help us to avoid doing this again</td>
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