

Difficult conversations – A guide for leaders working with teachers

It takes time to build such a culture which is based on trusting relationships and ongoing learning



“Research supports school leaders’ fears about difficult conversations with teachers. DeNisi (1996) found that people are demotivated when they receive feedback that threatens their self-confidence. Other organizational psychologists found in later research, “If a leader believes that he or she can successfully manage the performance of subordinates in a way that performance improves, they will be more likely to actually influence subordinate performance” (Corbett & Anderson, 2011).

Chett D, *How to Have Difficult Conversations with Teachers*, 2014

Many schools are moving towards developing a culture where feedback is present. It takes time to build such a culture which is based on trusting relationships and ongoing learning. Even within such cultures school leaders find themselves in situations where they need to have difficult conversations with teaching staff. The reasons for having a difficult conversation can vary from situation to situation and leaders need to consider the context and experience of the teacher. For example, the way you would approach a graduate teacher compared to an experienced teacher in regards to classroom

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behaviour management would be very different.

Any difficult conversation needs to be planned for and thought about. This will help to safeguard the relationship between the leader and teacher. As the leader you need to prepare for the conversation.

Ringer (2017) in *We Have to Talk: A Step-By-Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations*, presents questions leaders can ask themselves prior to entering a conversation.

Before going into the conversation, ask yourself:

- 1 What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? Watch for hidden purposes. You may think you have honourable goals, like educating an employee, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.
- 2 What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalised, but be cautious about assuming that this was the speaker's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
- 3 What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
- 4 How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.
- 5 Who is the opponent? What might he be thinking about this situation? Is he aware of the problem? If so, how do you think he perceives it? What are his needs and fears? What solution do you think he would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as partner.
- 6 What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
- 7 How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?

The following steps provide a guide which may be used by school leaders during a difficult conversation.

Step 1: Explore/Investigate

As the leader you need to create an attitude that

displays discovery and curiosity. Be open to the teacher and try to learn as much as you can from the teacher and what their perspective is. You need to consider the teacher's point of view and find out what they value and their priorities. You need to notice the teacher's body language and understand what they are saying and why. Let the teacher speak until they are finished, unless it is to acknowledge what they are saying. This can also be done without speaking – by nodding for example. It is important that you understand that whatever the teacher is saying is not about you – do not take the conversation personally. During this step you need to learn as much as you can. It is important not to rush this step and give the teacher the time they need to speak.

Step 2: Recognition

Recognition means that as the school leader you have heard and understood what the teacher has shared. You have listened and now you are able to explain back to the teacher what you think the situation is. As the school leader you need to show empathy towards the teacher. If the teacher feels understood and can see where you stand in the situation they may change their position. You need to acknowledge what you are saying as well as what the teacher may be saying. For example during the conversation you may find that you are defending your position as you can see the teacher is getting angry. This can be addressed by saying, "I feel as though I may be coming across as defensive and I think it's because you are sounding angry." Let the teacher know that you want to speak about the topic and you are not trying to convince them to change their point of view.

During this step you need to ensure that you do not confuse recognition with agreement. Using a statement like, "This sounds really important to you," ensures that you as the leader recognises the stance the teacher has on the situation but does not mean that you are going along with the teacher's decision.

Step 3: Recommendation

When you feel as though the teacher has shared their version and displayed their understanding of the situation, it is then your turn. Based on the teacher's perspective you need to consider what they may have missed. This is done by clarifying, not accusing or making assumptions. As the leader you can use statements such as, "From what you've told me, I can see how you have come to that understanding that...I don't mean to be critical but I can also see another point of view. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues..."

Step 4: Working together to solve the problem

When the teacher is ready you can now work together to create a solution. Discussion and questioning are essential as you need to ensure that you and the teacher are on the same page and have the same

understandings. Ask the teacher what they think will work. Listen to the teacher and build upon what they are saying. Always go back to asking questions if the discussion goes in a direction which is not desirable. By asking the teacher for their opinion and point of view the leader continues to keep the relationship intact by providing safety and encouraging engagement. As the leader you may need to change your responses and attitude; you need to consider the needs of the teacher.

Prior to taking part in any difficult conversation it is essential to practise. The more time you spend doing this, the easier the skills required will come to you. The following suggestions presented by Ringer (2017) may help to further support leaders as they consider how to approach difficult conversations:

- A successful outcome will depend on two things – how you are and what you say. How you are (centred, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.
- Acknowledge emotional energy – yours and the teacher's – and direct it toward a useful purpose.
- Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.
- Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help the teacher come back to centre.
- Don't assume the teacher can see things from your point of view.
- Practise the conversation with another leader before holding the real one.
- Mentally practise the conversation. See various possibilities and visualise yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you are hoping for.

It can be difficult for leaders to think of ways to approach and begin difficult conversations. Ringer (2017) presents the following ideas to support leaders with this:

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)? If the person says, "Sure, let me get back to you," follow up with him.
- I think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas about how to _____.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

The relationship you have with the teacher must

always be put first and as a professional you must consider the needs of the teacher so that the relationship is not damaged. The following suggestions made by Ringer (2017) may support keeping the relationship intact.

Do:

- Take regular breaks during the day; the more calm and centred you are, the better you are at handling tough conversations when they arise
- Slow down the pace of the conversation — it helps you find the right words and it signals to your counterpart that you're listening
- Find ways to be constructive by suggesting other solutions or alternatives

Don't:

- Label the news you need to deliver as a "difficult conversation" in your mind; instead frame the discussion in a positive or neutral light
- Bother writing a script for how you want the discussion to go; jot down notes if it helps, but be open and flexible
- Ignore the other person's point of view — ask your counterpart how he sees the problem and then look for overlaps between your perspectives.

"If you're gearing up for a conversation you've labeled 'difficult,' you're more likely to feel nervous and upset about it beforehand. Instead, try 'framing it in a positive, less binary' way (Manzoni). For instance, you're not giving negative performance feedback; you're having a constructive conversation about development. You're not telling your boss: no; you're offering up an alternate solution. 'A difficult conversation tends to go best when you think about it as a just a normal conversation' (Weeks in Knight, R How to handle Difficult Conversations at Work).

References

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- Ringer, J. *We Have to Talk: A Step- By- Step Checklist for Difficult Conversations*, 2017. <https://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>

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A man's character may be learned from the adjectives which he habitually uses in conversation.

Mark Twain