

Tools, Tips, Tidbits and a Forum for continuing conversation...

A Word from the Editor...

In our conversational coaching clinics, we're often asked about the challenges of talking to people about performance issues. They're one of the most commonly avoided and widely feared species of difficult discussions. Most of us would rather walk on hot coals than have to conduct a conversation with a low performer. In this issue we look at what you can do to make *performance conversations* less painful and more positive, whatever conversational side you're on. We also preview a new Change Forum clinic, *Positive Performance Conversations* and review Kerry Patterson's excellent book on *Crucial Confrontations*.

Bill Cropper, Director – The Change Forum

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There's a widespread reluctance amongst managers to raise hard issues or give difficult feedback to people. Why do so many stall? The number one barrier is the fear of raising defensiveness and then a fear of being unable to manage it...

Managing Performance – Dealing with Defensiveness



Organisations spend thousands on performance management programs, training and systems software but in the end many managers play Hamlet and still procrastinate, sidestep or totally avoid having conversations with low performers.

Even the most seasoned managers can come up with a multitude of excuses for avoiding or delaying a difficult performance conversation. Here's a few we most commonly hear:

- ✘ They're retiring, leaving or transferring soon – so the problem will fix itself
- ✘ Saying something to them will only make things worse
- ✘ It will only de-motivate them or make them more hard to get along with
- ✘ I don't think they'll change no matter what I say or do
- ✘ I'm frightened of how they'll react or what they'll do
- ✘ This person has a lot of influence – they can make things difficult for me
- ✘ I have a pretty good relationship with this person and I don't want to upset that
- ✘ I'm concerned they'll lodge a grievance or complaint against me
- ✘ I don't know what to say – I hate dealing with conflict
- ✘ Maybe they'll pick up on my subtle hints and start doing the right thing
- ✘ I don't know what the solution to this performance issue is
- ✘ Their performance is good in others areas – so on balance I'll just ignore this bit

Any of these sound familiar? Of course, you can't let poor performance go and here's the main reason: it's simply not fair to others on your team who are performing well or doing the right thing. They see you turning a blind-eye. They feel it's not fair or consistent. They lose respect for you as a leader. Sometimes they'll even slack-off too in silent protest.

Why do so many managers stall when it comes to difficult performance conversations? It's certainly not identifying the performance issue that's the obstacle. Everyone in your team can usually tell you about that.

The number one barrier is the fear of *raising defensiveness* and then a fear of being unable to manage it that puts off a lot of people. Giving hard feedback to people where their reaction is likely to be emotionally volatile and the conversational course you chart unpredictable, is certainly no walk-in-the-park – more like mucking about in a mine-field. ...Continued over >>>

Managing Performance - Dealing with Defensiveness

Recurring confrontations between managers and team members, where defensiveness on both sides runs high is discomfiting. So it becomes easier to just avoid addressing performance issue altogether. When it comes down to it, there's no real mystery as to why managers tend to steer clear of hard talks and why staff don't like being on the receiving end of hard feedback either!

You'll probably have few difficult performance conversations that are defensiveness-free. As we say in our clinics, if you don't encounter at least some defensiveness, your discussion is probably not all that difficult. Learning conversational and feeling-control techniques like those we cover in our *Emotional Intelligence* and *Difficult Discussions* clinics, to manage your defensiveness and defuse or minimise it in others, can help create a safe climate for more positive performance conversations.

Dealing with poor performance is one of the most commonly avoided and widely feared species of difficult discussions. It's tantamount to pulling teeth for most of us... But if it's painful for you to conduct the conversation, what about the person whose performance is under question?

Performance Conversations – “like pulling teeth”

Dealing with poor performance, as most leaders will tell you, is one of the most commonly avoided and widely feared species of difficult discussions. It's tantamount to pulling teeth for most of us.



In fact, given the choice between having root canal work or conducting a conversation about poor performance, most people we know would choose the former. But wait a minute. Let's drill down on our dental analogy a bit (*ouch – excuse the pun*) and see what else we can find. If it's painful for you to conduct the conversation, what about the other person whose performance is under question?

After all, from their perspective, it's you who's doing the dental work.

“Relax, this isn't going to hurt”, the dentist says. “Sure”, you think to yourself. “It's not going to hurt you – but what about me?” HR people tell us the same thing about performance conversations but most staff still dread them. For them, it is going to hurt – because you're going to give them some feedback that's painful, personal and provocative.

“Open-up wide”. Not likely. Many people in performance conversations are in shut-down mode. Why? Because what you're saying or how you're saying it is making them feel unsafe – and when people feel unsafe they're likely to clam up. Helping them to open up by creating a sense of safety in the conversation is one of the first things you have to do.

Now let's talk extraction. In this case, not teeth. Getting people to talk is the first challenge. We need to extract information – and in many performance conversations, you can forget it. The person sits across from us giving one-word answers, sullen looks, huffs or grunts. You momentarily think you're talking to your teenage son, not one of your team members!

Confronted by this, most of us now commit the cardinal error: we take control of the conversation and find ourselves doing all the talking. We're back at the dentist's again. Have you ever noticed dentists can happily conduct a one-way conversation while they've got our mouths filled with drills and other toothy-tools?

You want them to tell you what's going on. You want to get to the *root* (oops, here I go again) of this performance problem and the obstacles getting in the way of correcting it. To do that, you have to put aside the temptation most of us have to lead the conversation and let them do most of the talking. No matter how clearly you put forth your perspective of the problem you see in their performance, if you control the conversation it becomes a one-way, “let me tell you what's wrong with you” monologue. You shut-down, not open up, the conversation. People sit there – even agreeing with you – knowing there's other angles about this you don't seem interested in knowing about.

Painless performance conversations may not be entirely possible – though some leaders I'm sure would like a supply of anaesthetics handy! So next time you're in the dentist chair, why not distract yourself constructively by thinking of how you can handle your next poor performance conversation differently...

➡ Our Book Review
this issue...

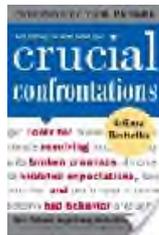
Constructive Confrontations – they're Crucial!

If Warner Bros could try to sue *The Marx Brothers* for using “brothers” and Kesha (or was it Gaga – but who really cares?) can copyright “that's so hot”, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, co-authors of *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*, definitely have a claim on the word ‘crucial’. I haven't been able to use the word freely in years without being reminded of their books every time I do. It's a curse! >>>

Crucial Confrontations - Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behaviour

By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler McGraw-Hill NY 2004

Highly Recommended reading...



Seriously though, this invaluable book is jam-packed with conversational gems – concepts and formulas you can learn to use to handle crucial confrontations better. Their starting premise is that a common fear of confronting people face-to-face over lapsed promises and failed commitments plagues families, teams and organisations. Unresolved but crucial issues then grow into chronic problems. Their research shows most organisations lose between 20-80 percent of potential performance because they haven't mastered the skills to have crucial confrontations and keep people accountable...

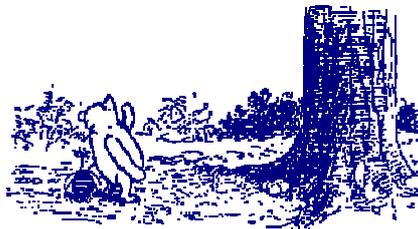
As the authors say: *“Many confrontations fail not because others are bad or wrong but because we handle them poorly. We subtly attack the other person. He or she then gets hooked, and we’re now in a heated battle. Naturally we see the part where the other person gets hooked but miss the part we played in escalating the problem by doing such a shoddy job of bringing it up in the first place.”* (*Crucial Confrontations* p. 46)

I still keep *Crucial Confrontations* and its partner volume on my top-reading shelf – and often dip into from time to time. It's a great resource for leaders who have to have difficult performance conversations, not to mention its wider applications to family and social life.

Some tips and techniques from the book summarised later this issue.... page 6.

Real Jagulars are rare in the 7 Acre wood - just as rare as the number of difficult discussions that do just 'drops' on you *completely* out of the blue.

If we tell ourselves this difficult discussion's a Jagular we don't have to face up to or initiate it, when it catches us unprepared. It's part of that common avoidance syndrome most of us suffer from when it comes to Difficult Discussions...



Difficult Discussions – “They just drops on you”

At the start of our *Difficult Discussions* clinics, someone always says you can't prepare for this kind of conversation. *“They take you completely by surprise – they just drop on you out of nowhere and*

there's little you can do about that”, they say with a note of certainty.

“It's true”, I say. *“Some difficult discussions are like Jagulars – they just drops on you.”* AA Milne devotees look quizzical at this point. What's the connection, they're thinking?

Well, in Chapter IV of *'The House at Pooh Corner'*, impulsive Tigger, egged on by derring-do Roo to display his tree-climbing prowess, gets them both stuck up a very large pine-tree. Luckily, Winnie and Piglet on one of their adventurous 'expotitions' overhear the embarrassed yells for help.

“Look Pooh!” said Piglet. *“There's something in one of the Pine Trees.”* *“So there is!”* said Pooh. *“There's an Animal.”* *“Is it One of the Fiercer Animals?”* he said. Pooh nodded. *“It's a Jagular,”* he said. *“What do Jagulars do?”* asked Piglet, hoping they wouldn't. *“They hide in trees and call 'Help! Help!' and then when you look up as you go underneath, they drops on you,”* said Pooh. *“I'm looking down,”* cried Piglet loudly.

Real Jagulars are rare in the 7 Acre Wood – just as rare as the real number of difficult discussions that actually do just 'drops' on you *completely* out of the blue.

We like to say they do. Yet a lot of the time, *I suspect – and this is only a suspicion* (to put it in Pooh-speak), that this is more a story we tell ourselves to cover up that deep-down feeling that we knew this was coming (*we were just hoping it wouldn't!*) – that we've been avoiding this difficult discussion, hoping it wouldn't drop on us (*which it will*), willing the issue to go away (*which it usually won't*), trusting that troublesome person will change without us having to say anything (*which they probably won't*) or that tricky issue will magically resolve itself and go away all of its own accord (*as if!*).

It's all part of that common avoidance syndrome most of us suffer from when it comes to difficult discussions. If we tell ourselves this difficult discussion was a Jagular, we don't have to face up to or initiate it, when it catches us unprepared and we trip over our own tongues trying to retreat from it. We have the *“took-me-totally-by-surprise”* excuse to fall back on – even though we know deep-down something like this was bound to come up and we should have been more alert and better prepared to deal with it in the first place.

Sure, there are real Jagulars out there in that conversational jungle – they're just not as numerous and well-concealed as we'd like to think. So be alert, pay attention to your instincts that tell you something's lurking overhead. *“Look up! Not down”* and prepare ahead for that difficult discussion (see our article on *Preparing for Performance Conversations* in this issue).

Positive Performance Conversations

Coming to your region soon...

See our website for [Schedule](#) of dates, locations and [more information](#) on this program



Helping Leaders Tackle Hard Talks...



This year, we're running a new conversational coaching clinic concentrating on *positive performance conversations*.

Another conversational coaching master class – and an extension to our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinic – this 1-day practice-based program provides a step-by-step approach and carefully-crafted conversational formulas to make managers feel more comfortable and competent delivering difficult feedback and deal with low performers more constructively.

Conventional performance conversations centre on 'constructive criticism' but criticism is criticism. *Positive Performance Conversations* works on a simple principle: focus on future positive performance rather than past negatives. Focusing less on what's wrong and more on what's expected is far less likely to trigger defensiveness. It creates a very different emotional climate where people are far more likely to hear what you have to say.

Positive Performance Conversations covers specific steps and conversational tools that will make tough performance conversations easier and the feedback you have to give more 'sayable' and 'hearable'. It touches on topics like:

- ◆ 'De-vaguing' – being specific about the performance you envision
- ◆ Putting negative performance issues across positively
- ◆ Using non-judgmental, neutral language without diluting a difficult message
- ◆ Handling anxiety and other high-pitched emotions
- ◆ Anticipating objections – dealing with excuses, justifications and downplays
- ◆ Saying what you need, why you need it and why they need it too

All Change Forum clinics are practical, down-to-earth, challenging, stimulating and fun and come with a comprehensive take-away Toolkit to help you put your learning into practice in real time back at work. Check our [website](#) for program dates in your region...

At what stage do most managers typically intervene when there's an issue about poor performance? You'd like to think the answer was early on but less than 10% of managers actually do...

Avoid, Delay, Attack – *Fire!*



At what stage do most managers typically intervene when there's an issue about poor performance? You'd like to think the answer was early on to nip a downward performance trend in the bud. Or at least you'd expect it to be when a pattern begins to become noticeable...

But that's not the case according to a survey report I came across recently. The trend seems to be that less than 10% of managers tackle a performance issue early-on or as soon as it arises by having an

informal conversation to correct or coach.

50% tend to wait for a known pattern to develop and sometimes worryingly, they admit this can equate to months and even years! But wait – this is the really scary bit. Around 40% of managers wait until they are ready to fire the person (or at least feel like it) before having a performance conversation. Talk about horses, gates and bolting! Of course we know you as a manager fit into the first 10%.

- ◆ You clearly and consistently communicate what the standards are and what a good performance looks like so there's common understanding amongst all your team
- ◆ You don't put things aside until the annual or bi-yearly performance review, which at least in my experience, no matter how hard HR sells it, people don't put a lot of stock in – including many managers and leaders.
- ◆ You know that difficult feedback in small doses is better than a massive injection during a put-off performance conversation where you're fed up!
- ◆ And you avoid all this anyway by taking a coaching approach to leadership! You have regular coaching conversations with your team because you know prevention and potential-building is better than curing performance problems once they develop.

But imagine the anxiety or even blissful ignorance of those who have a 40% manager? Maybe they even thought they were doing an OK job right up until the fan colliding with proverbial excrement! I'd want to hope my leader was in one of the other percentiles. For all the glitzy performance-review instrumentation and other bling, nothing replaces a good relationship where people can sit down face-to-face and talk over what's going on.

In Difficult Discussion clinics, we often come across people who say they're 'straight-talkers'. They don't feel the need to be tentative, conditional or concerned about the impact what they say and how they say it, has on others.

Is straight-talk bad? That depends on what you think straight-talk is...

Straight-Talking – *'let me be frank about this!'*



In our *Dealing with Difficult Discussions* clinics, we often come across people who characterise themselves as being 'straight-talkers'. They say they're 'upfront', 'direct', 'open', 'honest' 'business-like' – 'brutal' may be optional. They don't 'beat around the bush' or 'pull any punches'. They "tell it like it is".

They don't feel the need to be tentative, conditional or concerned about the impact what they say and how they say it, has on others.

Well, let's be frank about this (or *Bruce* or even '*brusque*' if you like) – you may *think* you come across this way. But those on the receiving end of your straight-talk may find you abrasive, over-bearing, offensive, curt or lacking in tact or sensitivity.

Managers we've met who take a hard line in hard performance conversations sometimes say giving difficult feedback or tackling poor performers doesn't concern them that much. If the other person gets defensive, that's just too bad – it's them that need to *harden-up*. The idea they may need to *soften-up* a little and be a bit more mindful about the messages they give simply doesn't occur to them.

Is straight-talk bad? That depends on what you think straight-talk is. Often when people feel they're being open and honest, they misinterpret this as: "Good. Now I can really tell them what I think about this and not have to pull any punches." To continue our boxing metaphor, we expect the other person to "take it on the chin – without flinching."

We're not talking rudeness or insults here. But sometimes our so-called straight-talk backs people into a corner. We get them 'up against the ropes' with what they regard as unfair judgements, harsh criticisms, personal attacks or even just confronting truths.

We may think this is direct and to the point but it's not well received when we spatter a performance conversation with 'below-the-belt' jabs (sorry, my boxing-image is hard to give up) like: "This just isn't good enough!"; "You're making too many careless mistakes!"; "You need to stop being so disrespectful!" or "This is inadequate, unacceptable, unprofessional ...etc."

Passing judgments like these on someone, then voicing them during a performance conversation may sound direct to you but it only raises defensiveness – and when people get defensive they stop listening or only listen to fend off more attacks.

Most of us harbour the thought: "Why can't I just say what I think and speak my mind without worrying about how the other person might mistake it, get offended or grow defensive? Why do I have to bend over backwards, dressing it up in polite, time-wasting, fluffy or flowery verbiage?"

Wouldn't it be great and so economical to just do this? And sometimes we can with people who know us – where there's a relationship of mutual trust and respect and we don't have to bend over backwards worrying about how the other person will react. We just say what we have to say and it seems to work just fine. This is the kind of "straight-talk" most of us enjoy.

But even with friends, there are times as we all know too well, when this goes awry. We tread on their daisies, step on their sore-spots or press their buttons. And when it comes to troublesome topics, contentious confrontations and performance conversations, being direct can really derail the discussion. Want to know why? Read the article in this issue on "*Hurdles we make ourselves*" to find out more.

You may still think being tactful is tantamount to being soft. But if you want to resolve a performance issue, get people back on track and preserve the relationship, you need to see what you say from the other's person's perspective, not just your own.

Performance Conversation or is that condemnation?



When it comes to tackling poor performance, most managers have been trained to prepare a bullet-proof brief listing all the charges relating to an employee's infractions, infringements and inabilities – with dates, times and facts to back it up.

After all, you have to prove them guilty of under-performing beyond the shadow of a doubt. It's what we see those TV lawyers do in courtroom dramas and it always seems to work for them... >>>

Conversations about performance should not correlate to a courtroom conviction - you're not there to pass sentence...

When condemnation comes into it, the person gets defensive and achieving anything remotely resembling a productive outcome simply evaporates...

Trouble is, most leaders are not lawyers, far less judges. A performance conversation shouldn't correlate to a courtroom conviction and you're not there to pass sentence. Sure getting your facts straight is important – but so is how you use them. Many discussions about poor performance quickly turn from constructive conversation into condemnation.

Confronted with an iron-clad list of their sins and shortcomings (and in their view, little chance of getting a fair-hearing) many employees feel accused. Their natural response is to defend themselves. They blame others, fixate on or argue over the details, make excuses, dispute the details as incorrect or accuse you of not managing them properly.

All too often, from an employee's point of view, when a manager starts a performance discussion, it sounds to them like finger-pointing, fault-finding, coercive or disciplinary.

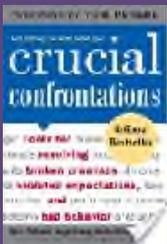
The traditional approach to giving feedback often comes across in a harsh, "let me tell you what's wrong with you" tone. Poorly crafted, clumsily-delivered messages trigger feelings of self-doubt, confusion, indignation or even worthlessness. This is particularly true if this is the first time they've even heard about the issue you have with their performance.

What's the answer? Try to make your performance conversations more judgement-free.

Judgement's when you sneak in (often unwittingly) your own opinions, beliefs, preferences or conclusions. They come out in words and phrases like "careless", "lacking in..." or "incapable of..." Even the word "poor", which we throw around willy-nilly in the workplace, implies a value judgment on the person, rather than an objective assessment of their work. Using words like these throws up enormous obstacles to resolving performance issues and are certain to raise the temperature of any performance conversation.

So why not whisk-away the wig, down the gown, stop judging and just be curious. As soon as condemnation comes into it, the person on the receiving end gets defensive, so any hope of achieving anything that remotely resembles a productive outcome will simply evaporate. *The case gets closed or suspended – pending a further hearing!*

Add this to your reading list. We give it 4 stars



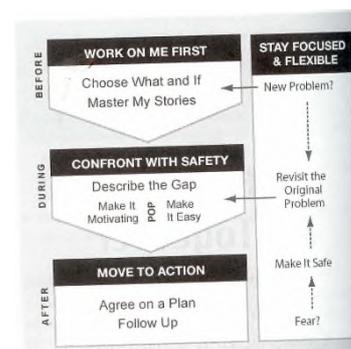
Crucial Confrontations - Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behaviour

By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler McGraw-Hill NY 2004

Crucial Confrontations – really useful read!

As we said at the start of this issue, this invaluable book is jam-packed with conversational gems – concepts and formulas you can learn to use to handle crucial confrontations better. There's so many useful techniques in this easy-to-read book, it's hard to unpack them all, so we'll just touch on here, some we find most appealing:

- ◆ **Do you go to silence or violence?** This is a crucial concept to grasp the underlying fight-flight dynamics of all difficult discussions and one of the touchstones of the book.
- ◆ **Think CPR.** It's an acronym to target what level to address in a crucial confrontation. Is it **C**ontent – a single event that's happened for the first time? **P**attern – a series of events that keeps happening over time? Or **R**elationship – a bigger concern than content or pattern that is starting to put a strain on how we work together.
- ◆ **Being specific.** "You have to distil the issue to a single sentence. Lengthy problem descriptions only obscure the real issue. If you can't...the issue almost never becomes understandable and focused as a conversation unfolds." (Crucial Confrontations p. 31-2)
- ◆ **Master your stories.** Things we make up about other people's motivations, intentions or character that wind us up, making us less balanced to deal effectively with a crucial confrontation. The idea of controlling your story to retain balance is powerful practice.
- ◆ **Restoring Safety.** If people feel safe, they can tell their version of the truth frankly without fear of recrimination. It's a rare commodity in many conversations. Mostly we're weighing up degrees of unsafety. People feel unsafe in a conversation anytime they start feeling blamed, accused, judged, intimidated, coerced, threatened or bullied.



- ◆ **Describe the gap.** The gap between what's happening and what was agreed should happen – and you need to describe it honestly, directly and factually, without blame or assumption-making. Explore ALL the reasons why this person may have not done what you expected. It may be an ability problem, not a dereliction or motivation one.

Crucial Confrontations is highly recommended reading – a great resource for leaders who have to have difficult performance conversations, not to mention its wider applications to family and social life.

Defensive patterns are so ingrained in some people that they respond that way no matter what you say. In poor performance conversations, one of the first things to do to prepare yourself is to expect a defensive reaction - don't be surprised by it...

I'm not being defensive – you're attacking me!

While we say a lot in this issue about making conversations with poor performers positive, you also have to accept that defensive patterns are so ingrained in some people that they respond that way no matter what you say. Even if it's praise, they'll still suspect you're having a go at them somehow.



Now there's no need to get defensive about this! But maybe you're one of these people? We all are sometimes. *Do you think everyone is out to get you? Do you treat simple questions as accusations? Do you find factual feedback (even when you know it's true) confronting and try and distract with an attack?*

Everyone gets defensive – it's human nature and we're hard-wired that way. We pick up defence mechanisms from childhood on, as we learn to cope--for better or for worse--with harsh treatment and stress. They're like a suit of armour to protect you from harm – and when the going really gets tough, they take on a life of their own. But when defensiveness boils over in frequency or intensity, it can ruin relationships and jeopardise job success.

As a leader, it's a really tough job to give negative feedback to people. Confronted with criticism, they get defensive. This can be awkward, off-putting and upsetting, leading you to steer away from your intended message. Of course, that's the intention of defensive routines. But it does others things too. Defensiveness is known to worsen listening ability. You can walk away from the confrontation, still uncertain whether you were heard.

In tackling poor performance conversations, one of the first things to do to mentally prepare yourself is to expect a defensive reaction – don't be surprised by it.

Remind yourself that you can't control the other person's level of defensiveness (though you can say things to either increase it or lessen it). What you can do is notice when you or the other person is becoming defensive, connect with their feelings, reassure and restore some sense of safety before continuing on with your conversation path.

The stories we make up in our heads going into a difficult discussion can affect how we are in it. This is especially the case when it comes to dealing with difficult performers...

Ugly Stories – what's your less-than-noble motive?



So now you decide to finally front up to that difficult performance conversation. You've probably caught yourself thinking about it, making up movies in your head about how it will go.

Maybe you see yourself as a super-hero – *Difficult Discussioneer* or perhaps *Super-Performanceman* – firm, full of steely resolve, steering powerfully through the discussion with strength, wisdom, confidence, mental agility and, most importantly, right on your side. *A classy-looking super-costume may not go astray either!*

Or maybe it's a horror flick. You're stalked by a psychopath you can't deal with rationally, whose only aim is to suck you dry and tear you apart bit by bit. Or is it a bad comedy, where you trip over your own tongue, get completely outwitted, cave in to their demands and leave feeling what an idiot you must have looked like.

Of course movies never end up being exactly like real life. But they do demonstrate how the stories we entertain in our heads going into a discussion can affect how we are in it. It's a recurrent theme in our coaching clinics: pay attention to the *ugly stories* we make up about people, the ones we take in that influence the way we are in the conversation that ensues with them. This is especially the case when it comes to dealing with difficult performers.

Ugly stories have a big impact on how we feel about a difficult performer, the motives we attribute to them, the tone we take and how we decide to treat them during the discussion. If we believe the ugly story we make up about them, things are bound to go off the rails. Great if you feel a good argument might just make your day. Not so good if you're trying to sort through a critical confrontation and stay in dialogue with them.

One of the greatest challenges is to actually own up to the idea that we do make up ugly stories. Many of us are slavishly attached to them. We don't see how they wind us up and make us act irrationally and out-of-control. The big sticking point is feeling our story is right.

It's a fact that they're *'slack,' 'a waste of space'* or *"radically redefine incompetent"* – there's *your* ugly story! Once the story sticks with you (and you stick it on them), you find your begin to harbour hidden *'less-than-noble'* motives towards them that you lug into the conversation with you.

...Continued over >>>

Ugly Stories - what's your less-than-noble motive?

Here's some 'less-than-noble' motives people tell us about:

- ✘ I wanted them to see how slack or incompetent they really are or accept the blame
- ✘ I wanted to win, score a point or prove how right I was (and wrong they were)
- ✘ I wanted to give them a piece of my mind, tell them off or put them in their place
- ✘ I wanted them to squirm a bit and feel apologetic, guilty or contrite
- ✘ I wanted to get even. punish them and make this painful for them

With hidden motives like these, there's no way your performance conversation is going to turn out positive. What can you do?

First, front up to your ugly story – admit you may have a grudging motive about them. Now tell yourself a different story – one that's more even-minded. This isn't about 'right', it's about calming you down and staying in control, so you can be more focused, rational, more balanced and less prone to emotional over-reactions in your difficult performance discussion.

A side-effect of staying emotionally balanced is that it makes you more understanding and less defensive – something the other person may pick up on and which can make them act differently too.

In our Difficult Discussions clinics, we usually spend time looking at common conversational errors people make when they bring up troublesome topics. Here's a few of the most common ones...

Difficult Discussions – hurdles we make ourselves...

In our *Difficult Discussions* clinics, we spend a lot of time looking at common conversational errors people make when they bring up troublesome topics. Many of these hurdles we stumble over right from the start, without even seeing how we put them there in the first place – and they can be easily avoided. Here's a few of the most common ones...



- ✦ **Don't start with a blame-blast.** We wind ourselves up like a watch-spring emotionally before the conversation. By the time we start, we hurl everything we have at the other person, often laced with vitriol and vengeance. We bombard them with blame and accusation, which puts them on the defensive straightaway. (eg. "I think it was very selfish of you not to consider how that would affect the rest of the team?") → **Just start with the facts and describe the issue neutrally in a single sentence or two.**
- ✦ **Don't start with a barrage of complaints.** We put off having this difficult discussion for so long with this particular person, we've got a list of complaints a mile-long. Since we can't avoid the confrontation any longer, we figure we may as well work through the whole list. So we start by reading out all the charges. Trying to roll several difficult discussions into one confuses issues and blurs focus. → **Concentrate on a single issue and work through that instead.**
- ✦ **Don't insult, label, generalise or personalise.** Labels and accusations like "You're totally disorganised or slovenly" where we judge the kind of person they are only spark defensiveness. If you want to make things worse, generalise: "You always/never do this!" Scolding people like they're children is not only disrespectful, it distracts from the real point of resolving an issue. → **Remove judgmental words from what you say – keep it clean, factual and neutral**
- ✦ **Don't Over-Control.** Many managers are told to take control in a difficult conversation but there's a fine line between *taking the lead* and *over-controlling*. Hitting them with *all* the facts at once and the judgment you've made definitely says who's in control. But a monologue about what *you* see is wrong, leaves little room to explore issues. They won't open up. The trick is to be firm without cutting conversation. → **Suspend judgment. Ask questions to understand their side of the story first**
- ✦ **Don't be casual and chatty:** Don't start a difficult conversation with things like "Well, how are things going?" or "How do you think you're doing?" Trying to ease your way into a difficult conversation by being casual and chatty is dishonest. They'll smell a trap! → **Just state the issue straight up – clearly, cleanly and calmly – then openly ask for their side of the story.**
- ✦ **Don't try to cushion the impact.** We try to soften the impact this discussion may have, saying things like: "This probably isn't really all that serious/significant BUT..." The other person then thinks: "Then why bring it up at all?" → **Instead of discounting the issue, state clearly what you think the impact is.**

...Continued over >>>

Difficult Discussions - hurdles we make ourselves...

- ❖ **Don't do 'kiss-kick'.** Also called 'honey-vinegar-honey' or 'sandwiching', where we put a distasteful filling between two sweet pieces of bread in the hope of making our message more palatable. (*"Hi Susan. Great report. Too bad it wasn't on time so your section will have its budget cut because it was late. It was really well thought-through though."*) → **Keep 'kiss' conversations where you praise separate from 'kick' ones.**
- ❖ **Don't get tangled in detail.** Some people immediately discount, dismiss or argue the detail with everything you say. If you get dragged into this, you get distracted and the conversation gets derailed before it even starts. By all means explore differences in stories and acknowledge they have a different view. → **To avoid arguing detail, move to overall patterns, state your concerns and focus on future behaviour you want.**
- ❖ **Don't be vague.** We fail to explain clearly what we want or the new behaviours we'd like to see. Saying things like *"I want you to more of a team-player"* or *"more courteous to customers"* may seem specific to you, but leaves them wondering how you want them to behave differently. → **Focus on the performance you want and explain to them what that looks like in terms of specific behaviours.**
- ❖ **Don't commentate the conversation:** Many of us think it's being open to *name-the-game*, to draw attention to what the other person is/isn't doing in the discussion. For example, *"You're not listening to me"*, *"You're just making excuses"*, *"There's no use arguing the point"* or our two favourites: *"There's no need to get defensive"* or *"take this personally."* → **Stop saying things like this. It inflames but achieves nothing.**
- ❖ **Don't ignore emotions.** Managers are often told to avoid emotions in performance conversations. They end up saying things like: *"Now let's not get emotional about this"* or *"You need to put your feelings aside"*. Fat chance – they can't. Neither can you. Feelings leak into difficult discussions whether you like it or not. → **You need to acknowledge feelings, and learn to express them in a controlled, balanced way.**
- ❖ **Don't start with your side of the story.** There are two sides and starting with yours' first only draws a defensive reaction. It says to the other person that you're on the right-foot and they're on the wrong-foot. If they agreed with your story, you wouldn't be having a difficult conversation in the first place. → **Name the issue briefly and neutrally without sneaking any of your bias in, then invite them to tell their story first.**
- ❖ **Don't use Loaded Words.** We all have different ideas of what's a harmless statement of fact and what isn't. You think you're being neutral and objective. They see it as curt or presumptuous. Telling someone their way is "wrong" may seem like a fact to you, but feel like an attack to them. "Wrong" sounds right if you say it about someone else's approach but "wrong" sounds wrong when others say it to you. → **Be more tentative with the words you choose and sort real 'facts' from your interpretation.**

"Why can't I just say it the way I see it?" people in our clinics sometimes ask. *"You can"* we say, *"and be prepared to put up with the defensive flack you get as a result."*

Sure, adopting these 'less-direct' formulas costs in terms of more words and more care. It can feel slow and tedious. But if you want a difficult discussion to make headway, be more cautious of raising unnecessary defensiveness.

If you want to plow on regardless, get used to being criticised yourself for being too insensitive and abrupt.

Leading Culture Change:

Coming to your region soon...
See our website for [Schedule of dates, locations and more information](#) on this program

Feedback from the Field... tuning up your culture



Last year we launched our new **Leading Culture Change** clinic. Since then, one and two-day public programs have been conducted in Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville, and a number of organisations have run the program in-house as part of their cultural revitalisation plans.

Senior leaders have been the most frequent participants and they've offered lots of favourable feedback. *"Leading Culture Change emphasised how understanding organisational culture can't be underestimated and that changing it is complex and difficult but by no means impossible"*, observed Ian Church, CEO of Tablelands Regional Council. *"The guide is an excellent resource"*, said Ian *"and all my senior managers learned a lot."*

Staying up north, Jenni Dillon from Cairns Regional Council said she enjoyed *Leading Culture Change* which provided *"a very interesting eye-opener with fantastic tools and an excellent guidebook to be utilised back at work."*

...Continued over >>>

Feedback from the Field... Tuning up your Culture

Use this link for more information about [Leading Culture Change](#)

The first thing you can do to better handle tough performance conversations is prepare for them. While it doesn't mean the actual discussion will be easy, it will definitely make it easier.

We've summed up some useful things you can do prepare yourself under 10 P's...

This sentiment also resonated by Kerry Russo, Campus Manager at Townsville's Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE: *"Leading Culture Change was an excellent day of learning and insight. I enjoy the way Bill facilitates and engages his audience – a relaxed format with well-organised structure and the workbook is brilliant."* As with most of our clinics, people seem to like our comprehensive toolkit-style guides.

Down south to Brisbane, a number of senior managers remarked that the clinic was time well-spent. Darren Campbell, capability consultant with Justice, though it was *"well worth the time to get my management team on board with leading cultural change"* while William Custance from Project Services said it *"was excellent – very useful and well presented – well worth the time and expense in order to learn about culture change processes and ways to enact it effectively – and the tools in the guide were very helpful and relevant."*

Again, seems like our toolkits really hit the mark with people. *"It has so much valuable information – it's absolutely marvellous"*, said Julie Pike. In the same vein, Judy Gayler from Justice said: *"I'm sure I'll benefit from the toolkit – I'll be taking my team through some of them at staff meetings."* But we'll leave Sally Hooper to have the last word: *"I enjoyed your presentation on Leading Culture Change more than I have any presentation in the last few years. Extremely interesting and informative. I've told colleagues that the program was very good, you knew your subject and the two days really kept my interest."*

Coming along to this clinic equips you to handle a culture change effort better – whether you lead a team, a division or a whole organisation. Like all our programs, this one has lots of take-away tools and ideas to help people get started in earnest on culture change – and we explore areas instrumental in doing it like understanding the dimensions of constructive culture, conducting culture scans, recognising danger signals and working out the best place to start with a culture change effort.

Leading Culture Change can also be run **in-house** for leadership groups at any level charged with the job of creating constructive work cultures or senior teams who want to factor in culture change as part of strategic planning and organisational development. Call Bill Cropper to talk over the state of your culture on 07-4068 7591 or use our online enquiry form at www.thechangeforum.com.

Preparing Poor Performance Conversations – 10 P's



While some difficult discussions tend to take you unprepared and by surprise (see *Difficult Discussions – "They just drops on you"* in this issue), performance conversations are not one of those *Jagulars*. You've been observing their performance for a while. You know it's time to tackle it even though you keep putting it off. What now?

Well, the first thing to do to handle a tough performance conversation better is to prepare for it. While it doesn't mean the actual discussion will be *easy*, it will definitely make it *easier*. We've summed up some useful things you can do prepare yourself under 10 P's...

- ◆ **Place:** Choose a setting that's private and neutral, where you both feel reasonably comfortable having this uncomfortable conversation. This rules out your office, their workspace, corridors and other public spaces. And, of course, never raise this issue with them in front of others.
- ◆ **Position:** You need to establish accurately what the position is with this person's poor performance. Is it a one-off event or is there a pattern to it? Check your facts. What is happening, when has this happened, what is the impact? Don't see your facts as loaded bullets to fire at point blank range but as points to explore in the conversation. Stay open to the idea some 'facts' may be wrong and some you won't know about yet.
- ◆ **Presumptions:** are things we believe to be true without having any actual evidence. They're ever-present in difficult discussions. It rhymes with assumptions and they're closely related. You need to sit down and sort out actual 'facts' from presumptions. They trip you up in difficult discussions. So take time beforehand to write down in two columns what you believe to be absolute fact and what are your assumptions.
- ◆ **Purpose:** Be specific about the purpose of the performance conversation. Why are you having it, what do you hope to achieve and what change do you want to see in their performance? Write a *'Mutual Purpose Statement'*. 'Mutual' means putting it in a way that is acceptable and fair to both of you and free of presumptions or judgments. It should be concise. You need to distil the issue down to a single sentence or two. >>>

Preparing Poor Performance Conversations - 10 P's

- ◆ **Practise:** saying your opening statement out loud to yourself – not just in your head. Rehearsing out loud lets you know how the words will come out, where you'll stumble and fumble and enables you to make adjustments like *"that doesn't sound very good"*, *"I'll never get my mouth round that when the time comes"*, *"They'll take it the wrong way for sure"* or *"that's not what I really mean at all."* (see our Tool Feature in this issue for more on developing opening statements)
- ◆ **Perspectives:** Your perspective of this issue is bound to be different from theirs. Be prepared to hear a different story. If you don't, you'll be hijacked into correcting and arguing over their version. The conversation must be two-sided. You must hear their perspective first, and then share yours.
- ◆ **Pin-point:** the ugly story you've made up about this person. If you take this into the conversation, it will get you riled each time you think of it. It will be a liability and emotionally unbalance you. Tell yourself a different story about this person that's good and you honestly acknowledge. If you can't, at least be alert that your story is likely to emotionally hijack you – which leads into our next "P".
- ◆ **Provocation:** In the coming conversation, both of you may be provoked into over-reacting. List feelings and emotional triggers that may come up for you and lead you to blow-up or break-down. Like an actor, 'feel' your way into the confrontation. Note what's likely to set you off, then name those feelings. Knowing feelings beforehand won't stop them, but it does have a calming effect and you'll be more emotionally prepared for the real thing. It's like an early warning system.
- ◆ **Pre-emption:** Anticipate possible reactions and your response. How will you handle sullen silence, a raft of excuses, vehement denial, escalating anger, blaming others or tears? What happens if they resign, threaten to lodge a complaint against you or agree with you and ask for help? Thinking through scenarios like these and having a plan sketched out in your mind will give you something to fall back on if you need it.
- ◆ **Plans:** hopefully the conversation will get round to plans to correct the gap in performance and follow-up. What do you think the next steps should be? What action might be required, what alternative can you think of, what timelines are involved and what help can you offer?

Preparing yourself doesn't mean the conversation will go the way you planned. In fact, it rarely will. But it does mean you will feel more balanced, confident and equipped to deal with it than if you just launch into it unprepared, shooting-from-the-hip.

Positive performance conversations focus on the future positive performance you want to see rather than dwelling on past negatives...

Keeping Poor Performance Conversations Positive



Keeping potentially destructive confrontations over poor performance positive and constructive is an art.

Many managers tend to deliver pre-formed judgements on people's performance deficiencies. They see this as being positively assertive. The other person sees it as controlling or coercive. They're unlikely to open up and far more likely to get defensive, triggering strong emotions that get in the way of hearing what you

have to say. The hope of getting a positive outcome dwindles away.

Our new *Positive Performance Conversations* clinic (preview in this issue) helps people practise some handy techniques to minimise defensiveness by putting a positive spin on tough performance conversations.

- ✘ Conventional performance conversations centre on 'constructive criticism' – but people on the other end won't see it as constructive no matter how much we tell them it is.
- ✘ Positive performance conversations work on a simple principle: focus on the future positive performance you want rather than dwell too much on past negatives.
- ✘ Focusing less on what's wrong (deficiencies) and more on what's expected (potential) creates a different emotional climate that enables people to give difficult feedback in constructive ways. It also helps on the receiving end by keeping defensiveness at bay so people hear what you have to say.
- ✘ Bypassing performance deficiencies and defensive reactions by describing negative behaviour in positive terms, allows people to respond more positively and focus on solution-finding and new commitments – the goal of giving feedback in the first place. >>>

Keeping Poor Performance Conversations Positive...

One of the reasons managers avoid giving negative feedback is because they don't know how to craft a message that is 'sayable' and 'hearable'. The key is to use positive words to describe what you want to have happen. Here's some pointers on how to do this:

- ◇ First, identify the negative behaviour that's holding the person back. You're thinking of the gap between *what is happening* and *what should be happening*. For example, maybe they become brusque or dismissive if a customer questions them on a policy
- ◇ You now need to put this in the opposite, positive terms. So think of what a good performance looks like in this case or what you want to see happen. For example, with our customer stand-over situation, you might say *'we need to listen to carefully to what our customers say about policy and connect with their concerns first.'*
- ◇ Now you need to get more specific about the change you want. *"Listen carefully"* and *"connect with concerns"* are a start but they're probably still too vague. What do you mean by this? For example: *"What I mean is when a customer questions our policy, I want you to acknowledge what they say out loud to them and ask them a question or two to understand what their concern is..."*
- ◇ Next you need to make it safe enough to explore the thinking behind the behaviour. If you don't, it's likely to keep on happening. You need to uncover their mental models – ask questions like *"What do you think or feel when a customer questions our policy"*. They might reply: *"I don't think they have a right to. The regulations are clear. They're just being difficult."* Now explore this with them and talk over other ways to see this
- ◇ It's useful too, to explore together benefits of taking a different approach. Ask yourself *'Why do I want them to make this change?'* So, the *"here's why I want you to try this way"* part of the discussion goes something like: *"Why I'd like you to try this is we want our customers to see we listen to their concerns and value them. We get more respect from them this way and we don't want a reputation for being rigid sticklers to policy"*

Talking in terms of the positive performance you want while bypassing the negatives you don't, has two flow-on effects. First, we're more likely to initiate the discussion because the wording makes it more comfortable to deliver the feedback. Second, our people learn what's expected of them as opposed to what's wrong with them. Conversations with low performers will probably never be painless, but a few easy adjustments like this can make them less painful and more profitable to all parties.

Thinking about your next management conference, planning forum or staff get-together? If so, keep us in mind...

Bill Cropper delivers key-note talks and fast-track sessions on all kinds of topical themes and can tailor presentations to your group's issues, concerns, challenges and context.

➔ To discuss your next conference or seminar... [contact](#) Bill Cropper at [The Change Forum](#)

Key-note talk or fast-track session? Contact us...

Thinking about your next management conference, planning forum or staff get-together? If so, keep us in mind. Bill often delivers key-note talks and interactive, fast-track sessions on topical themes such as:



- ◇ *Emotional Intelligence and Connective Leadership*
- ◇ *Handling Toxic Emotions and Managing Stress at Work*
- ◇ *Dealing with Difficult Discussions and Constructive Conversations*
- ◇ *Culture Change, Respect-Building and Working Better Together in teams*
- ◇ *Leading Change, Preparing People for Change, and Challenging Change Resistance*

Bill's been a frequent presenter at the Brisbane-based public sector *Leadership Lounge* and you can download **key-notes** from his presentations on *Building Respectful Workplaces*, *Leading Culture Change* and *Connective Leadership* through our [website](#).

Bill's style is relaxed, down-to-earth, amusing, affirming and engaging. He connects with people and puts them at ease, at the same time as raising curiosity and gently confronting current thinking. Bill's talks reflect recent research and thinking and are supported by topical fact-files and optional takeaway mini-toolkits. Features of his presentations include:

- ◇ **Action-based:** he doesn't just 'talk theory' there's tips and tools to try back-at-work.
- ◇ **Real-life examples:** Bill draws on cases and vignettes that bring the topic to life
- ◇ **No 'Rah-Rah':** Bill's genuine and down-to-earth with no motivational gimmicks
- ◇ **Thought-provoking:** Bill confronts current thinking in a gently challenging way
- ◇ **Connective:** Bill talks seem to resonate naturally and easily with many people
- ◇ **Interactive and engaging** – not just a sit-there session. Bill gets people off-their feet talking and interacting

Conversational Tool Feature...

Highlighting a tool from our Coaching Clinics for improving your conversations...

➡ If you'd like a full copy of this tool... [contact us at The Change Forum](#)

Leaping Ladders & Hazardous Half-Minutes...



No matter what kind of difficult discussion it is, it's the first few seconds in terms of what we say that can pretty much determine the direction and tone it takes from there.

You have only a few sentences to set the climate and raise the issue cleanly without raising defensiveness in the other person to such a height the discussion degenerates into an argument straightaway. If you don't, everything turns disaster-like and it's hard to turn things around.

Kerry Patterson in *Crucial Confrontations* (see book review in this issue) calls this 'the hazardous half-minute'. To get it right takes preparation, planning and thought. In fact, the first 20 seconds or so may be the only thing you can really plan (and write down what you want to say) in advance with any degree of confidence. Sounds short, but it's crucial.

This tool is one of many conversational formulas we practise in our *Difficult Discussions* clinics. It's called **SIGMA** – an acronym for the order of conversational steps to follow in it:

- ❖ **Start with facts.** Say what you have to say clearly, cleanly and calmly starting with a solid foundation of facts. Make sure they *are* facts – not inferences, interpretations, assumptions and definitely not conclusions. If you mix in colourful adjectives such as 'deplorable' or judgmental terms like 'thoughtless' you've strayed off the fact-path. We often call this leaping up your ladder of inference – and you can go from the bottom rung of facts to the top rung of conclusions and accusations in a nano-second.
- ❖ **Identify Impacts.** Explain why this issue is important, the impact it has, indicate you want to resolve it, then invite them to address it with you. Don't assume they should know the impact is or what's wrong. Be explicit. Ask yourself: *How should it happen? How do I want things to be?* You can say things like: "And why that's important to me is...", "What I'm concerned about is..." or "What is at stake here is..."
- ❖ **Get to assumptions.** Don't steer clear of telling them your assumptions – they're part of your story but be careful how you introduce them and when (not at the beginning please). Again don't assume they should know what you think or feel. Say what your assumptions are tentatively and don't put them up as facts. For example, say "I'm starting to think that..." – NOT "It's a fact that you're..." or "It's clear to me that..."
- ❖ **Measure stories.** This is about comparing stories. Let them go first. If they say things you disagree with, resist the urge to contradict or correct – just keep listening. When you're satisfied they've had their say, then have yours. Use contrasting statements linked with 'and' (not 'but') to compare stories: "So you think that... AND I feel that..."
- ❖ **Angle to Actions.** You may not end up seeing eye-to-eye, but there comes a time when you've talked through and over the issue, to move to actions. Don't try to force the action part too early but once you both focus on a way forward, discourage back-tracking. Ask things like: "What can you do to handle this situation differently? How can you change your thinking or behaviour about this? What do you need to do this?"

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