



# Five Formulas to keep you on top of difficult Performance Conversations

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Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching master class and guidebook on *Positive Performance Conversations* © Bill Cropper 2011-17

Many leaders tell me dealing with difficult performers is one of their most commonly avoided and widely feared kind of difficult discussions. *Why do so many of us steer clear or stall when it comes to difficult performance conversations?*

The number one barrier, it seems, is fear of raising defensiveness. You fear how they'll react. The other major obstacle that puts off people is lacking confidence or the tools to handle defensiveness if we do raise it. Leaders often feel under-prepared and afraid they'll say things that make things worse and raise even more defensiveness. So it becomes easier to just avoid confrontations like this altogether.

My one-day master-class works through a set of carefully-crafted footings, frameworks and formulas to handle difficult performance conversations in more positive, solution-focused and less defensiveness-raising ways. *I thought I'd share five formulas from that program to help keep you on top of your next tough performance talk...*



## Formula 1: Keep it Safe

When people start to feel unsafe in a performance conversation, defences go up and emotions run riot. Tempers flare, conversations heat up, our amygdala takes over. We're hijacked! Game over. Most of us then act to protect ourselves by doing one of two things. We either:

- retreat into silence, say nothing and smoulder away as we go into shut-down mode
- or we retaliate – we say things that are blunt, abrasive, blaming or belittling, as we fight back.

The whole purpose of the conversation gets misplaced and winds up in argument, acrimony, accusation or abandonment. We lose focus of our overall purpose – *what we really want* – and do displacement activity like disproving what they say, disputing their story, being blunt or putting them in their place.

Most of us get defensive when we feel unsafe. We start feeling blamed, accused, judged, intimidated, coerced, threatened or under-attack.

With safety, we can talk openly. But conditions like this often don't apply in difficult performance conversations, because what's being said, or how, is making them feel unsafe. Creating safety is one of the first things to do. For example:

- If feelings get out of control, stop, refocus and ask yourself: *“What is it I really want from this conversation? And is what I'm saying now moving me closer or further away from that?”*

- ☑ Can you find a mutual purpose that means something to both of you? This can act like an anchor in the conversation that you can drop whenever it seems to go off-track or gets defensive
- ☑ Sidestep the accusations and connect with their concerns when people get provocative or hostile. Head-ons with hostility just escalate conflict and distract from keeping the conversation on-track.
- ☑ Use the 3-R's formula to restore a bit of safety. **R**espond (*"It sounds as if you feel your efforts aren't valued around here"*), **R**e-assure (*"I'm sure you had good reasons for handling it that way"*) and **R**edirect back to your mutual purpose (*"What I want to resolve with you help is....."*)

Restoring safety does not mean letting them off the hook or letting them slip out sideways. You will gently, respectfully but determinedly, persevere by going back again and again to unpack the issue or try to get to the bottom of it.



## Formula 2: Keep it Positive

Many of us are in the habit of describing performance gaps in negative ways – what they failed to do or what they lack – rather than portray to them what a positive performance looks like. This makes many of us feel deficient, and then we get defensive. Sure, you can say it's so-called '*constructive criticism*' – *from your end maybe, but generally not theirs*.

- Keeping performance conversations positive works on a simple principle: focus more on describing the future positive performance you want to see, rather than dwell too much on past negatives like what's gone wrong or what didn't happen.
- Focusing less on deficiencies and more on what's expected, creates a different emotional climate that enables you to give difficult feedback in more constructive ways.
- It keeps their dignity intact, their defensiveness at bay, so they're more likely to hear what you have to say and focus more on bettering their performance, rather than your battering. They learn what you expect of them, as opposed to what's wrong with them.

*Do you really know what a good performance looks like?* If you do, you now need to put your description of their performance gap, and what you want to see, in positive terms. The key is to use '*can-do*' not '*don't, can't do or you're not*' type words. One of the easiest ways to do this is to write down what your first inclinations tell you to say (without worrying about whether it's positive or negative) and then re-think how to describe it from the positive side.



## Formula 3: Keep it Specific

You think you described the performance gap you want to talk about crystal clearly. They look quizzical and don't seem to get it. *"What do you mean be more attentive to customers? I handle more customers than anyone else on the floor."* They're talking quantity. You're talking customer connection.

Suddenly, you realise you haven't really explained clearly enough what you meant by '*attentive*'. It's still vague to them or they're running on a different thinking track. You also realise that in the process of describing the issue, they've felt attacked, under-valued and grown defensive. They dispute your observation and want to defend their performance.

When it comes to putting performance gaps into words, we're often vague, judgemental or way too general, when what we need to be is concrete, specific and factual. We call this '*de-vaguing*' – and it's something you need to do as part of preparation before you have the conversation. To de-vague, try to

- Stop using vague words. Be more precise. For instance, what do you mean by ‘*more attentive to customers*’, a more ‘*concentrated*’ effort, a more ‘*professional*’ approach? Explain what you mean: “*What I mean by 'attentive' is I want you to ask them what they want first, listen more to what they say they want and check-back with them to see if you got it right.*”
- Be concrete about the performance you want. Don't assume everybody knows. If we're vague on what we mean and what we want, what chance has the other person got? Be as specific as you can
- Describe the issue using facts – not impressions or interpretations. Many of us think we describe facts when what we really describe are impressions or interpretations. For example: ‘Attentive’ is an interpretation, judgment or conclusion. They may believe they are being very attentive by going straight up customers and pitching the product of the week at them.
- Describe the performance gap honestly, directly and factually, without blame, assumption-making or vaguely judgemental words like ‘*unprofessional*’. The facts you need to raise are you see them stride up and go straight to a sales pitch. They need to connect with the customer first by finding out why they are interested in a particular appliance. You want them to attend to ‘*connecting and relating*’.



#### Formula 4: Keep it Neutral

“*Why can't I just say what I think without worrying how the other person might take it? Why do I have to bend over backwards, dressing it up in polite, time-wasting, fluffy or flowery verbiage?*” It's a thought I'm sure we've all harboured at one time or another.

In our *Difficult Discussions* and *Positive Performance Conversations* clinics, I often come across those who style themselves ‘straight-talkers’. They don't ‘beat around the bush’ or ‘pull any punches’. They say they're ‘upfront’, ‘direct’, ‘open’, ‘honest’. 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. They deliver pre-formed judgments on people's performance deficiencies and see this as positively assertive.
- They *think* they come across as direct. But those on the receiving end may find it stern, abrasive, over-bearing, offensive, curt, coercive or lacking emotional intelligence. They're unlikely to open up, and far more likely to get defensive, triggering strong emotions that militate against mutual solutions
- Our so-called ‘straight-talk’ backs others into a corner. We get them ‘up against the ropes’ with what they regard as unfair judgements, harsh criticisms, or confronting truths. We think this is straight to the point. But it's not well received when we spatter conversations with ‘below-the-belt’ blows like “*This is inadequate, unacceptable, unprofessional*”

Those who typically take a hard-line sometimes say tackling poor performers doesn't concern them that much. If the other person gets defensive, that's just too bad. They 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 cross their minds.

You may still think being tactful is tantamount to being soft. But being too blunt and direct can really derail the discussion. So tone down your language. Don't use colourful, judgmental terms. Stick to the facts and ensure you use neutral language to describe performance gaps.



#### Formula 5: Keep Connected

Defensiveness and distancing both start with the letter ‘D’. When performance conversations get difficult, some of us tend to get adversarial and resort to disputing and arguing. This disconnects us from

each other – and when we disconnect, we stop listening and become solely concerned with defending our own position. We lose our ability to influence and take things to a more constructive footing!

To successfully navigate tricky performance conversations, you have to connect with the other person, and then stay connected. It's absolutely necessary. If either of us disconnect, chances of a good outcome are drastically reduced. This means being able to:

- Build and maintain a platform of understanding, empathy and *mutual respect*, no matter what the infringement is that you're discussing.
- Notice the signals that you, or the other person, are disconnecting from the conversation and then employ the right conversational formulas to get back in connection and refocus the conversation.
- Realise we go into difficult performance conversations with stories we've already made up – that if we're not mindful – these lead us to play 'I'm right – you're wrong' games and mishandle things.
- Get back on track and preserve the relationship, by seeing the other's person's perspective, not just your own. And you may have to do this *before* you relate your story.

If you blame, butt-in, contradict or get cutting, contemptuous, cynical, dismissive or domineering, you're not respecting them. And again, when we see others don't respect us, we start to feel it's unsafe to be open, and get defensive too, in turn.

So don't defend, correct or dispute the other person's story while they're telling it. Ask a 'what' question and find out more. When others see you value them as a person, care about their interests, and lend an understanding ear to their story (even if you don't agree) they'll give you an amazing amount of leeway.

## Putting it together...

Whether you're dealing with performers who are difficult or diligent, the tools we share in our *Positive Performance Conversations* clinic and accompanying self-coaching Guide can help you learn how to activate some these five formulas and deliver touchy feedback in more positive, encouraging ways.

Our Five Footings and Frameworks model offers you down-to-earth tools and conversational formulas that help you take an appreciative approach that minimises defensiveness and turns performance conversations into mutual problem-solving and coaching development sessions.

See our on-line [Course Calendar](#) at [www.thechangeforum.com](http://www.thechangeforum.com) for dates our public clinics are coming up in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line [enquiry form](#) or call **Bill Cropper** direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

More on Positive Performance Conversations on-line at [www.thechangeforum.com](http://www.thechangeforum.com).

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