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…tools to tackle tough talks and turn the table on poor performance

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 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…

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Positive Performance Conversations

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• Brisbane	July 31
• Rockhampton	Aug 1
• Hervey Bay	Aug 4
• Townsville	Aug 12
• Sunshine Coast	Aug 18
• Cairns	Sept 9

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