



## **Productivity**

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### **Difficult Discussions: Six Essential Strategies for Proper Preparation**

Whether a crucial conversation with a board of directors, a rating session with an underperforming employee, or one of several other situations managers handle on a daily basis, difficult discussions are a part of every manager's unwritten job description.

What is a difficult discussion? It is any conversation where: 1) the stakes are high, 2) emotions can be heated, and 3) personal opinions differ.

In recent years, several good books have been written on the subject to include:

- *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler
- *Crucial Confrontations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler
- *Difficult Conversations* by Stone, Patton, Heen, and Fisher
- *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott

### **The Importance of Difficult Discussions**

Why is this topic so important today? With corporate performance being number one on many agendas, tempers flare, stress levels are at an all-time high, and managers find themselves unequipped to handle the high stakes world of verbal judo.

Having personally taught the fine art of interview strategies to federal agents from almost every government law enforcement and intelligence agency, and then having read countless books on difficult business discussions, it is no surprise that the same techniques are used interchangeably.

So, how do managers deal with difficult discussions? I'll use a well-known psycho-physiological term to describe it--*fight, flight, or freeze*.

- 1) **Fight:** Deal with difficult discussions in a winning fashion.
- 2) **Flight:** Avoid difficult discussions all together.
- 3) **Freeze:** Get tongue tied, stutter and do nothing.

### **Six Strategies to Prepare For a Difficult Discussion**

First and foremost, managers must embrace the relationship with the other party and set the stage for trust, personalization, and growth. If a difficult discussion is initiated with a tone that is

harsh, the conversation will quickly dissipate. If a discussion is entered with a tone that exemplifies caring and empathy, the conversation has a good chance of producing positive results.

The six strategies that follow are offered to improve communication during your next difficult discussion.

### **1. Review the Situation**

When I was young, my mother taught me to think before I spoke. As an adult, I now know what she was talking about. Before initiating a discussion, ask yourself the questions below. By answering these questions, you will be able to plan an effective strategy for your difficult discussion.

- Do I need to have this discussion?
- If yes, then why do I need to have it?
- What do I hope to achieve?

Example: Bob, a key marketing manager, has exhibited declining job performance which is pulling down his team. A conversation initiated by Bob's manager is necessary to: 1) ensure Bob is aware of the change in his performance, and 2) discuss the impact of Bob's performance on his team and the organization. The goal of the conversation is to determine the cause of Bob's declining performance (personal, team, organization, etc.) and to collaborate on how it can be restored to an acceptable level.

### **2. Deal in Facts, Not Assumptions**

Are you assuming an employee or co-worker is acting or thinking in a manner without any evidence? Do you know their intentions? Often times the wrong approach is used in a difficult discussion because of a false assumption. Keep an open mind. Consider, if the other party can be correct? Can what they are suggesting be true and/or useful?

Example: In the case of Bob's diminished performance, his manager should obtain copies of reports to document performance numbers that verify Bob's output. Without making any assumptions, the manager should present the facts to Bob and create an opportunity for Bob to offer feedback in explanation.

### **3. Determine Your Needs and Wants**

Determine what you need from the discussion vs. what you want. Are you being honest? Do you or could you share common ground with the other person? Your needs are "must have" information, whereas your wants are nice to have or add-ons.

Example: As Bob's manager, you need Bob to be aware that his performance is hindering the team and that it must be restored to an acceptable level. You may want Bob to open up to you about the cause, but this is not absolutely essential.

### **4. Discover Your Emotional Triggers**

What are your hot buttons? Are they being pushed? Are your emotions piqued more than the situation calls for? Try to discover where an emotional trigger comes from before initiating a difficult discussion.

Example: Bob's declining performance has negatively impacted operations to the extent it has received attention from the company's CEO. The CEO has called Bob's manager on the carpet for an explanation, which has piqued the manager's emotions. A conversation between Bob and his manager at this time could easily go south because the manager is preoccupied with the CEO. Separating the two situations will allow the manager to respond to Bob and the CEO individually.

## **5. Consider All Sides**

Is the other person possibly thinking and feeling the same as you? Do they know a discussion is coming? What is the other person going through? Consider these questions from the other person's perspective.

Example: Bob is aware that his manager has noticed his declining performance and wants to speak with him. When they meet, the manager suggests Bob address the performance issue to gain an understanding of where Bob is coming from. With Bob's perspective in mind, emotions remain in check and a plan to resolve the issue can be sought.

## **6. Accept Responsibility**

Is it possible you are somewhat to blame for the situation behind a difficult discussion? If so, accept ownership of your part and let the other person know this during the discussion.

Example: Bob works for an organization with a culture of *produce or perish*. Bob knows his performance has been lackluster for some time. His emotions show it and it has begun to affect his self esteem. Bob's manager acknowledges that the organization's culture is a contributing factor. While sharing this with Bob does not alleviate his culpability, it can help by acknowledging shared responsibility.

By following the six suggested strategies for difficult discussions, not only will you be able to initiate conversations with a broader sense of understanding, you will also reduce the potential for emotional flare ups and maximize the potential for successful outcomes. Consider all sides and opinions first and you will be on the way to more effective communication.

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