

Episode 44 – Making Difficult Conversations More Comfortable

How many of you enjoy difficult conversations? How many of you have had a difficult conversation? My guess is many of you have. It doesn't make it any easier. Each situation you face requires courage and empathy. Difficult conversations are often viewed as conflicts. Difficult conversations are never easy but they are simple.

Some people believe that if you avoid having these difficult conversations or avoid discussing the elephant in the room that they'll just go away. What happens when you will avoid a difficult conversation? This behaviour actually compounds it adding more discomfort and even tension to the room. It could eventually blow up and cause a lot of damage in relationships.

Avoiding Difficult Situations

Why do you think we avoided it? There can be a number of reasons why we avoid having difficult conversations:

- Some people believe that if you talk about the difficult situation you're only making it worse by adding fuel to the fire per se.
- Others believe that difficult conversations make both parties feel that so why would we want to go there?
- When we have those difficult conversations, sometimes there's nothing preparing us for what we might be told.
- The uncertainty of the impact and the outcome can make people uneasy.

I remember when I was a new manager at performance conversation my manager had suggested that an area of personal development for me was to get more involved in people management and being able to handle those difficult conversations. I was very wary about inking that on paper. I now understand why because as soon as I inked it on paper it was like the universe was saying and 'Here it is!' Difficult conversations seem to come fast and furious. There were times that I could feel my stomach flipping but play out the conversations in my head and sometimes I was even sick to my stomach because I was so uncertain of the outcome. As time went on, I developed a system in which I no longer am afraid to have a difficult conversation and my stomach doesn't flip out as much on occasionally uneasy but not to the point that I feel I need to visit the bathroom.

Everyone Wants to Be Heard

The one thing that I feel is most important when having a difficult conversation is that everyone's voice be heard whether you agree with it or not. You must take a nonjudgmental approach where you challenge your assumptions by asking yourself questions. It is important to stick to the facts. I'm not saying that your emotions are not important however they may not be the drivers of the miscommunication or the feedback that needs to be delivered.



When Emotions Run High

When emotions are high, it's best to give it space and time to let it settle out. When emotions are high, people may say things that they later regret and did not intend. What happens is, there is a part of the brain that tries to protect you and when emotions are high you do not think rationally. Knowing this, you might choose to step back from the situation to really gain a clear picture and gather those facts. Acknowledge that there may be differences. Even though, you are putting the emotions aside as you review the facts, it doesn't mean that what had occurred or the feedback gifts delivered to have an impact on you.

Take Time to Self-Reflect

It is important to do some self-reflection especially when the miscommunication may be with you and another person. Do check-in on yourself and take responsibility for your contribution to the miscommunication or the problem - I call this "owning your stuff."

People forget that it takes two people to tango and have a conversation. Each person comes forward with their own contribution to a situation. Put aside all blaming or complaining. Faultfinding does not help people move forward.

Preparation Meets Conversation

One of the best ways to prepare for difficult conversation is to prepare and script out, rehearse, and even role-play what you would like to say to take the anxiety out of having this conversation that you see is difficult. **Assess the current situation and compare it to what you expect. What is the gap?** Come from a place of curiosity to gain an understanding of what the



true picture is versus what is imagined. This way you won't forget anything and sometimes looking at the written piece of paper may help you control your own emotions.

Difficult conversations need to be discussed in a private area between the parties involved. Remember that you are working toward preserving a relationship and even though you may think differently and you may agree to disagree, you want to make sure that each person walking away from this conversation still remains intact. Let the person that you are speaking with know that you might be feeling uncomfortable. Pay attention to the other person's emotions and your own. Watch their body language if face to face. I do not encourage anything but! It is not good to have these conversations by phone as you miss the visual or body language and there is no tone in email or text. It is okay to share how you're feeling about the discussion. You will also want to express what you look need and expect for future actions of another person or what you are willing to do. Knowing that outcome can help you understand if you actually met the needs of that conversation.

Awesome Strategy

This discussion has often been referred to as the XYZ method:

X – When this happened...(What was said – facts!)

Y- I felt ...(Feelings)

Z – In the future, I would like...(Expectations)

I have used this method on several occasions and I do have to tell you that not only is it empowering but it allows you to focus on the facts without bottling up your emotions.

No matter what the difficult conversation, you need to remember that both parties come with their own perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. They are upset is about them because you cannot be responsible for someone else's feelings and they cannot be responsible for yours. Ask yourself why you feel triggered in the conversation. Is it that you never felt heard, valued, or appreciated? Treating people with respect is imperative even if we disagree with what they might be saying. You too, come with your own perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. Expectations may be different. Work toward finding a common ground that both parties feel comfortable with as they walk away from that conversation.

Every difficult conversation is different. People are driven by emotion and also need to be where the facts. With practice and the use of these simple steps, you will be able to have difficult conversations with grace and you will find them more comfortable as you develop confidence and competence in having them. Sometimes you may realize that

the bond between two people gets even stronger because they've been able to have a difficult conversation. No one said it would be easy but it will be worth it even if it is for your own peace of mind in ensuring that you say what you needed to say versus holding onto it.

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