

THE POWER OF COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

“It takes two to speak truth – one to speak, and another to hear” – Henry David Thoreau

As leaders, we all know when we need to have difficult conversations – I like to refer to them as courageous conversations. These are conversations, which, if they took place, would improve life for us and everyone else in the team. The problem is that fear often causes us to put this off and as a result the offending team member continues to provide sub-standard performance, miss deadlines, engage in inter-personal conflicts and exhibit “toxic” behaviour.

Honest communication is essential to the success of any business and therefore it follows that if there is good communication between team members, productivity will increase and people will feel more valued and motivated. They will become more connected to the business. Communication creates interaction and it is this interaction that creates results.

This connection to results was shown clearly in the McKinsey & Co. study *The War for Talent*, which compared the top performing quintile of companies with the mid-quintile (not the lowest performing quintile). This study found that there was a dramatic difference between the two in terms of openness and candour in meetings. Furthermore, a CPP Inc study of workplace conflict revealed that team members in the US spend roughly 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict and a study by Accenture revealed that, even in the recent challenging economic climate, 35% of team members leave their jobs voluntarily because of internal politics.

Yet time and time again I find that business leaders and team members are not very adept at communication and are worse still at having what I call courageous conversations, in which it is necessary to address a difficult topic such as poor team

member performance. Many leaders shy away from these conversations for fear of “rocking the boat” but this ostrich-like approach never works and in my experience only comes back to haunt at a later date.

The best teams have free, open, respectful and yet challenging conversations in their meetings. In far too many meetings, however, the team leader is conflict averse, so no-one wants to bring attention to *the elephant in the room*. This results in superficial, information exchange type meetings rather than honest dialogue.

One of the companies surveyed by McKinsey & Co. was Home Depot. They have a great motto regarding meetings: “Say what you think in the room, not after the meeting.” Likewise, ‘Yum! Brands’ David Novak team’s motto is, “Team Together, Team Apart.” To them, that has a special meaning. Everyone openly dialogues and shares different points of view in meetings but once a decision is made, they speak with one voice to the business in owning and implementing the decision.

“Team Together, Team Apart” at Yum! Brands also means that they support one another outside the meeting, helping each other be successful and never speaking negatively about one another. This mindset has kept Novak’s company successful through many challenges over the years.

Interestingly, a Gallup poll in 2013 called *State of the American Workplace* revealed that when a boss ignores team members, 40% disengage from work, but if the boss criticises team members on regular basis only 22% disengage. The implication is that if team members get criticised, they are actually more engaged, as at least it shows that someone is acknowledging them. There is benefit in communicating and connecting with team members, however that happens; beyond this, courageous conversations provide everyone with clarity about what is happening and this avoids even more difficult situations further down the line.

For many self-employed business leaders I work with, the area where they most struggle to have courageous conversations, apart from with team members, is around money and how to price their products and services. For some reason, having a conversation with a potential client around money seems “dirty”, and so the issue is avoided. The result is that both parties end up feeling uncomfortable: the client is not sure whether or how much they have to pay and the business leader does not know when to bring up the issue. No-one wins and in fact everyone is confused, which raises stress.

I remember making this mistake when I first entered into a joint venture partnership to co-deliver a workshop to a client. At the time I was embarrassed to bring up the discussion of how the profits would be split and I just made an assumption that a 50:50 split would be agreed. But I never verbalised this and so I entered into the contract with no definitive knowledge of what I was going to get paid. I abdicated responsibility in this instance and became the ostrich sticking my head in the sand. The net result was unpleasant for all of us. My joint venture partner had a completely different perspective on how the fee should be split and I became resentful when she took more than a 50% share. It was a powerful lesson in the fact that whilst honest conversations may be difficult to have, they provide everyone with clarity and avoid misunderstanding. Rest assured I have never made this mistake again!

How To Prepare for a Courageous Conversation

As you go through this process of examining the conversation from the different perspectives, I suggest that you ask yourselves these questions:

1. What is the purpose for having the conversation? What exactly is the behaviour that is causing the problem? What impact is this behaviour having on the team and the business? Having clarity on the problem is crucial to ensuring that the conversation stays on track and does not get derailed by sabotaging ancillary issues.

2. What am I hoping to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? What are the non-negotiables? Watch for your hidden purpose as this can unconsciously sabotage the conversation. For example, your tone of voice could make a team member feel reprimanded when what you in fact wanted was to support them.
3. What assumptions am I making about this person's intentions? Adopt a mindset of inquiry. Be open to hear first what the other person has to say before reaching any conclusions in your mind. You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalised, but be cautious about assuming that this was the speaker's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
4. What "buttons" are being pushed? Am I more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "back story," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
5. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.
6. Who is the person you need to have this conversation with? What might they be thinking about this situation? Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it? What are their needs and fears? What solution do you think they would suggest? If you catch yourself thinking of the person you need to have your courageous conversation with as an "opponent", it's likely to be a little more easy to have the conversation if you reframe them as being a "partner".
7. What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be? How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?

6 “C”s to a Successful Courageous Conversation



Step #1: Centre

It is key that you stay in charge of yourself, your purpose and your emotional energy throughout any courageous conversation. Breathe, centre and notice when you become off centre and choose to return to centre again. This is where your power lies. By choosing the calm, centred state, you'll help the person you are speaking with to be more centred, too. Centring is not a step; cantering is how you are as you take the steps.

Step #2: Clarity

Be clear on the reason for the conversation and the outcome that you desire. Most courageous conversations falter because there is a lack of clarity about the real issue. Get to the root cause and focus on this matter rather than the symptoms that might be showing. Consider how the behaviour you are addressing is impacting the team and the business. Remember this is not about you, so ensure that you control your emotions and approach the conversation in such a way that you do not contaminate it with unconscious feelings or mixed body language. (For most people this means doing some preparation work in anticipation of the courageous conversation).

Step #3: Curiosity

Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity. Pretend you don't know anything (you really don't) and learn as much as possible about the other person and their point of view. Pretend you're entertaining a visitor from another planet, and find out how things look on that planet; how certain events affect the other person, and what their values and priorities are.

If the person you are having the conversation with was really was from another planet, you'd be watching their body language and listening for unspoken energy as well. Do that here. What do they really want? What are they not saying?

Let the person talk until they are finished. Don't interrupt except to acknowledge. Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you. Learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush things.

Step #4: Coherent

Coherent means showing that you've heard and understood. Try to understand the other person so well you can make their argument for them. Then do it. Explain back to them what you think is really going on for them. Guess at their hopes and honour their position. They will not change unless they see that you see where they stand. Then they might. No guarantees.

Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up. It's fine; it just is. You can decide later how to address it. For example, in an argument with a friend, I said: "I notice I'm becoming defensive, and I think it's because your voice just got louder and sounded angry. I just want to talk about this topic. I'm not trying to persuade you in either direction." The acknowledgment helped both of us to re-centre.

Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. Saying, "this sounds really important to you," doesn't mean I'm going to go along with your decision.

Step #5: Congruent

When you sense the other person has expressed all their energy on the topic, it's your turn. What can you see from your perspective that they've missed? Help clarify your position without minimizing theirs. For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. I think I am. When I introduce problems within a project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. I don't mean to be a critic, though perhaps I sound like one. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."

Step #6: Co-create Closure

Now you're ready to begin building solutions. Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here. Ask the other person what they think might work. Whatever they say, find something you like and build on it. If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to inquiry. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates a sense of safety and encourages them to engage. If you've been successful in cantering, adjusting your attitude and engaging with inquiry and useful purpose, building sustainable solutions will be easy.

Case Study - The Power of Honest Communication: Continental Airlines

An extreme example of how communication can turn a business around was demonstrated by Gordon Bethume, who changed the fortunes of Continental Airlines. When Bethume joined the company in 1994 it was a mess; it had gone through bankruptcy twice and had ten leaders in as many years. The company had not made a profit in a decade and flight schedules were erratic. It was reported that the company had three times as many complaints as any other airline. There was massive distrust within the company and a massive lack of co-operation between teams.

Bethume set about changing the culture of the business and whilst this did not happen overnight, his policy of engaging with team members and sharing his plans for the

company's turnaround and his accessibility to team members to answer any questions they had, contributed massively to getting people back on track. Team members began to trust their leader for the first time in decades and as a result the company turned round from posting a loss of US\$204 million in 1994 to generating a profit of US\$202 million in 1995.

What Bethume's approach clearly demonstrates is that team success is dependent on the quality of leadership. Would General Electric (GE) have gained the respect of the corporate world without Jack Welch? Would the US have sealed victory in the Gulf War without the leadership of Generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell? Whatever team you are part of, its success is dependent on the leadership. So whether you are leading a company of thousands of employees or a team of just ten people, or even seeking to be a leader for your horse or your own life, the outcome of that relationship will be due in large part to your leadership capability and your ability to communicate.

For further information on how to develop courageous and authentic communication skills in your team, please call:

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