



Four Tips to Facilitate Tough Conversations

A change in approach and open mind can make tricky conversation easier to have and more effective.

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When engaging in a difficult conversation, mental agility is critical. Leaders must be able to recognize when to shift their emotions and thoughts, because to change other people's minds, they may have to change their own minds first.

The following four tips can be taught in leadership development programs to enhance mental agility and enable leaders to hold difficult conversations that lead to breakthroughs in thinking and performance.

Let go of knowing. Leaders have to be excellent listeners. That means letting go of any notions about how the person they're talking to should think or act. Instead, the leader must begin a conversation with a curious and open mind, and be willing to let the conversation unfold by facilitating rather than controlling the process.

Believe in the person's potential. Leaders will achieve a greater payoff when they are perceived as people who authentically care about, respect and believe in employees. Rather than trying to "fix" people, leaders should try to help people think more broadly. Employees are more likely to commit to change when ideas come from their own realizations.

Clarify, reflect and explore instead of offering answers. Leaders must encourage people to share their perspectives. Then, they should summarize, paraphrase, clarify, affirm and ask questions about the assumptions, beliefs and emotions expressed. After the full story is on the table, the leader can explore what desires and fears may be affecting the employee's actions or inaction and help reveal any blind spots hidden by excuses or an inability to think outside the box.

Be patient and comfortable with discomfort. Leaders should recognize when they are uncomfortable or reactive. When the conversation begins to feel risky, messy or emotional, they must remember the

purpose is to help the other party think clearly so the employee can discover new ways to see a situation. If the leader simply declares what is wrong with the person's thinking, that person may shut down. No one likes to be made to feel wrong or stupid. Stress management skills can help keep leaders from getting caught up in their reactions.

Difficult conversations that explore and challenge thinking create the discomfort zone — the moment of uncertainty when people who were blocked suddenly see different solutions to their problems. Leaders must develop the mental agility to engage in these conversations; that requires them to stay calm, patient and be mentally resilient so they are open to exploring situations without jumping in with answers.

Remember, people want their leaders to be present more than they need them to be perfect. The most effective leaders promote mental agility in others and in themselves to promote change and growth.

This article is a sidebar to Chief Learning Officer's November 2014 feature, "Can You Act Your Way Into a Leadership Role?" (<http://www.clomedia.com/articles/5905-can-you-act-your-way-into-a-leadership-role>)