

Time for a Tough Talk at the Office? Remember These 5 Steps

By Marcia Reynolds | April 16, 2015 | [Success](#)

Are you a leader? Then you know there will be times when the people you work with aren't performing as expected - and you know you need to confront them about it but are afraid the conversation will stir up emotions and make the situation worse. Or maybe you feel comfortable *calling* the meeting, but you're not sure what to actually say that will motivate change without having to threaten consequences.

Tough talks can actually have positive outcomes. If you handle them well, you can help people grow beyond their limitations - and *exceed* expectations.

Try these five steps to [achieve a conversation](#) that results in improved work:

1. Let go of knowing. If you think you already know how the person will react, they'll probably prove you right. Because if you already know how you want them to think and act, they'll feel like you're pushing them - uninterested in their point of view.

On the flip side, if you truly believing anything can happen, they might surprise you. Go into the meeting curious about what they think and the solutions they might have to offer.

2. Set the tone before you start. You must consciously choose the emotions you want to project before you speak. If you appear to be angry or disappointed with the person, they might question your intention - so aim for hopeful, calm, proud or encouraged. Take a deep breath, say to yourself the word you want to feel and let it sink in. Then begin.

If something unnerves you during the conversation, say that word to yourself to shift back to the feeling you want to express. Can't get over feeling angry or disappointed? Tell the person why you are feeling that way, but follow it up with hopefulness and encouragement about the future should they choose to work toward your goal for them.

3. Listen to their story - before you ask to look at solutions. [The purpose for listening](#) goes beyond ensuring that people feel heard - it's to help others think

more broadly for themselves by reflecting what they hear and sense, and then by asking questions that expand how people think. What do you think they are holding onto that is keeping them from moving forward? What do you sense they want but are angry or fearful about not getting - like respect, predictability or appreciation?

As the person tells their side, ask how they know their assumptions are true and if anything else might be possible instead. Then ask about the disappointments and fears you sense they are feeling. And if you're wrong, they'll tell you what's right - which takes the conversation to a deeper level. When you help them see how their emotions play into their thinking and actions, their blind spots come to light.

4. Clarify an incentive that appeals to the person. The “what’s in it for me” principle works well when asking people to alter their behavior. Payoffs that inspire change are usually related to something the person values - a leadership role, peer respect, challenging projects, time with family, peace of mind.

Tying the change to someone’s personal desires and career dreams will help ensure long-term results. If you aren’t sure what they want, *ask them* what they want - and never assume you know them too well to ask. What outcome would make changing how they work worthwhile? Then tell them how improving their performance will help. And be sincere - if they sense you’re there only because you want the problem to go away, they’ll see you as a threat, not an ally.

5. Be patient. If the conversation might start to feel messy, breathe in and recall the emotion you want to project. Because if you slip and just outright declare what’s wrong with their thinking or their performance, they’ll shut down. No one likes being made to feel wrong or stupid.

Remember that they might need time to think about the conversation before they change their minds. Sometimes the best work comes after people have a chance to release their emotions and sleep on it, to process the conversation. Trust - and hope for the best.