



HOW WE HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: AND WHY WE AVOID THEM

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When we avoid
difficult
conversations, we
trade short-term
discomfort for long-
term dysfunction.

OVERVIEW

- **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T SPEAK UP**
- **REASONS WHY WE FIND SOME CONVERSATIONS DIFFICULT**
- **FEAR OF CONFLICT AND HOW THIS CAN BE MANAGED**
- **WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR BRAIN DURING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**
- **HOW TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

WHAT HAPPENS



RELATIONALLY

We can feel that the other person had control over us and situations.

EMOTIONALLY

- We can experience pain, guilt, anxiety & loneliness by remaining silent.
- we may be condoning behaviour we don't agree with.
- we may feel like we're not fulfilling our obligations (i.e. as a parent, friend, colleague etc.)



REASONS WHY

WE FIND

SOME CONVERSATIONS DIFFICULT



HISTORY OF ANXIETY

LACK OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION/ CONFLICT
RESOLUTION MODELLING IN CHILDHOOD

FEAR OF CONFLICT

'PEOPLE PLEASING' TENDENCIES/
FEAR OF 'ROCKING THE BOAT'

DIFFICULTY CONTROLLING EMOTIONS UNDER
STRESS OR PRESSURE

SHUTTING DOWN WHEN FEELING
OVERWHELMED

DISTRUST OF SELF AND OTHER

PRIORITIES/SURVIVAL

FEAR OF CONFLICT



FEAR OF CONFLICT

People in power avoid conflict and disagreement

When someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response can be to interrogate the person instead of interrogating the problem itself

Politeness is used to deny people the space to feel and express themselves. For instance, when an employee is angered by racism or discrimination, they are expected to mute their emotional reaction in the name of politeness and cordiality

Raising difficult issues is equated with being impolite, rude, disruptive. People in power might use this to maintain control and silence those who speak out.



MANAGING FEAR OF CONFLICT



Role-play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens

(e.g. de-escalation + conflict resolution)

Learn to hold open and honest conversations as a team and support people to feel heard

Unlearn attitudes around 'acceptable' ways of calling attention to painful difficulties and make space for emotions

Once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it, reflecting on how it might have been handled differently

MANAGING FEAR OF CONFLICT QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON



How is feedback used to assess and improve programs and activities?

If unexpected difficulties occur, how will they be addressed or responded to?

What techniques are used to regularly check-in with colleagues and community members about needs, processes, and goals?

MANAGING FEAR OF CONFLICT

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON



What are the unconscious beliefs that I or my workplace hold that create and sustain our fear of open conflict?

How can I, or my workplace, find ways to help manage fear of open conflict?

To what extent do I or the workplace have space for people to express themselves?

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR BRAINS DURING **DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**



THE BRAIN BECOMES **MORE ACTIVE** DURING DISAGREEMENT

Difficult conversations engage more of our brain in comparison to sociable ones

May be attributed to someone planning strategies of responses
(Hirsch, 2021)

More neural systems are activated to meet the cognitive load of implanting strategies for discourse

Difficult conversations come at a cognitive cost

People avoided empathy because of its inherent cognitive cost and found cognitive costs to be mentally draining
(Cameron et al. 2019)

PRIME SITUATIONS FOR TRUST

'Conversational intelligence model' Glaser, 2016

**LISTEN TO CONNECT AND ENGAGE IN
TURN-TAKING WHEN SPEAKING**

**INCREASE EXPECTATIONS OF BENEVOLENCE
AND UNDERSTANDING**

**ESTABLISH SET OF RULES FOR
ENGAGEMENT FOR TRANSPARENT AND
SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION**

TO EASE COGNITIVE LOAD

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

BEFORE

HAVING THE

HARD CONVERSATION



What is the intensity of this need?

Does it need to be handled now or can it wait?

Do I have to say anything, or will it resolve itself on its own?

Am I in the right frame of mind to say something or will I be too emotional?

Is this a good time to take a risk and pose challenge?

Is the person able to hear what I want to say?

TIMING

How high are the stakes for everyone?

If I speak up, who or what will be affected?

Are the negative effects greater than the potential gains if I speak up?

What would happen if I didn't have this conversation?

How vulnerable am I willing/able to get?

Is it essential to have the conversation or just somewhat important?

STAKES

How promising could the outcome be?

Have I thought through what the issue is so I can articulate myself?

If I say something, is this going to move the issue forward?

Have I got an action plan thought out?

Has this issue come up before?
Is it a pattern?

Can I support the person through the changes I would like to see?

LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS

Why do I hold this view so strongly?

If I speak up, who or what will be affected?

How do my beliefs guide my thoughts on the situation?

How vulnerable am I willing/able to get?

If I trusted this person...

and their intentions would I interpret their responses differently?

Is there a cultural lens that is influencing my silence that I need to acknowledge and address?

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

DOES A RESPONSE FEEL POSSIBLE?

Is there a response that won't feel overwhelming?

Is there a response that I can implement more effectively that would be as helpful?

IS THERE SPECIFIC EVIDENCE TO SHARE?

Is this evidence reliable?

How can I present this in a way that can be heard?

IS THERE ENOUGH TIME?

Will there be enough time to deal with the difficulty?

If there isn't enough time, will this lead to more difficulties?

HAVE I THOUGHT WHY?

Have I considered why the person is behaving this way?

Have I considered the internal and external factors impacting their response?

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