

# The Art of Constructive Confrontation

Frame difficult conversations as opportunities to increase respect and deepen trust, explains Jason Liem

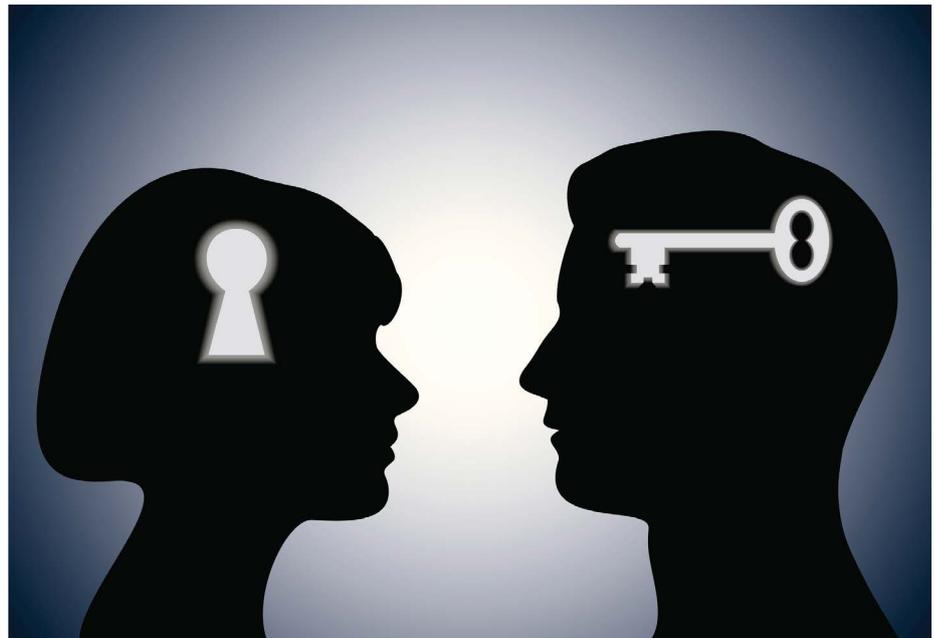
Many of us dislike having a challenging conversation with someone, especially if we consider them to be diligent workers who only need development in a couple of places. What happens quite often is instead of taking up the issue with the person when it is relatively minor, we procrastinate only to watch it balloon into a more severe performance issue later.

What makes these discussions so tricky before we even start them? Why do we feel increased pressure and feel reticent about having the conversation? What is it that makes us afraid?

For close to two decades, I have been helping people to answer these types of questions. I usually start by exploring the thoughts that fuel my clients' reluctance to have tough conversations.

Below are a few reactions they have shared with me:

- I don't want to hurt anyone.
- I may have to deal with someone's irrationality or emotional outbursts.
- I may have an emotional outburst.
- I hope that the issue will resolve itself.
- I don't want to end up looking like the bad guy.
- I don't want to rock the boat.
- I might discover I am part of the problem, and I might have to change too.
- I may have to engage at a deeper level with this person.
- It takes up too much time – time I usually don't have.
- I may have to share information that makes me uncomfortable.
- Other team members may question my credibility because I fail to address a problematic issue with someone. I risk losing people.
- I dwell on issues without taking action. The stress undermines my health and peace of mind.
- I try to convince myself that they must see the problem, and they will resolve it.



## Facing Our Fears

When we take a moment to reflect on any of the points above, we realise that the first difficult conversation we need to have is often with ourselves. The concerns around confronting are always variations of one underlying fear: that we will somehow hurt the other person or get hurt ourselves. The reason we tend to avoid engaging people is to avoid potentially damaging the relationship. But, unfortunately, the paradox of not facing an issue is that we end up hurting the relationship.

## Maybe the Issue Will Resolve Itself?

What if we just let it go and do nothing? That is also a choice, but many of us know too well where that leads. Our frustration towards the person grows because we see neither the person changing nor the situation resolving itself. When we take a moment to dive deeper into our frustration, we also realise that it springs from our unwillingness to give feedback to the other person.

Our inability to talk guarantees an outcome we don't want. We will continue to get the behaviour we don't want. Our indecision puts at risk our working relationship with the person we need to confront. It also puts at risk our credibility in the eyes of others because they see we lack the courage and professionalism to deal with an issue that needs handling.

Our inaction leaves us stewing in our thoughts. Negative thoughts, feelings and actions will taint our communication, which often takes the form of sarcasm, cynicism, belittling and talking behind backs. Inaction inevitably damages the relationship and respect we have for the other person.

## The Threat of Confrontation

We often frame confrontation negatively, which leads our brains and bodies to interpret such interactions as threatening. The typical response to any threat, perceived or actual, is to avoid it. This reaction is the default survival response of our central nervous system to keep us safe



and out of danger. To override these primal instincts requires us to be cognizant of how we frame difficult conversations.

If our brains interpret tough conversations as a threat, our bodies respond in the same manner. Emotionally, we feel an assortment of reluctance, fear and anger, which elicits behaviour in avoidance, defensiveness and irrationality.

Logically, we know relationships that avoid disagreement or disharmony are flashing neon signs pointing to dysfunction. But unfortunately, we often think people will trust us if we are nice to them; we equate trust with a lack of discord. We couldn't be more wrong.

One of the most significant determinants of how much trust and respect we have in one another is how we deal with discord. Learning how to confront people constructively is a direct way to increase confidence and credibility.

Addressing issues around performance and communication provides us opportunities to help someone improve and to move forward. The dividends of this investment are enhanced relationships and the fostering of trust and respect.

## Constructive Confrontation

How do you feel when someone has a difficult conversation with you and treats you with respect and compassion? Even when you know they feel frustrated, apprehensive and angry?

I might not always like to hear the feedback. At the same time, my respect grows for that person knowing how hard it can be to make the effort and muster up the courage to have a difficult conversation. Of course, I need to know the person is coming from a sincere and genuine place.

Inauthentic relationships, disagreement and challenging issues are part of the landscape and are unavoidable. A good starting point is to frame difficult conversations as opportunities to increase respect and deepen trust. However, if done poorly, they weaken respect and trust.

For example, if I am your direct report and you are my manager, my trust in you is built on the knowledge that you will act responsibly to help me develop and improve. I need to know that you will not become spineless and leave me to continue doing something wrong, making a bad impression or fouling up without letting me know.

If we continually fail to address performance and behavioural issues, the inevitable fallout impedes positive relationships, job satisfaction and productivity. What is equally irresponsible is proceeding with a challenging conversation without a clear plan. These are the kinds of conversations where we don't want to wing it.

## Preparing for a Challenging Conversation

Preparing yourself for a challenging conversation is akin to preparing for a speech or negotiation. We need to think thoroughly about the issue we want to address. We also want to align the intent of our message with the impact we want it to have for the intended recipient.

For instance, I want to address a minor issue with someone, and I would like the impact of my message to be received in a light and informal manner. However, the conversation will be more serious and formal in another instance where a problem has been escalated. In this case, I want my message's impact to be sobering and have a jarring effect.

An essential part of the preparation is to understand our motivation and our

intention. Sometimes this can be hard because our good intention can be clouded beneath feelings of impatience and irritation connected to someone's behaviour and performance.

Time is needed to uncover our intention to have the difficult conversation while deciding on a clear script for what to say and do. Preparation is essential with the natural resistance that surfaces when we challenge someone to change. In addition, preparation is vital if we want to properly align our intent with the impact of the message we want to deliver.

We want to build a culture of feedback loops, where giving and receiving feedback is seen as normal behaviour, whether the feedback is supportive or corrective. You can read more about providing feedback in one of my previous articles: [The Art and Science of Feedback](#).

Preparation clears the path for people to hear the feedback within the context in which it is intended. Having challenging conversations is not the only way of giving people feedback. It also means noticing them, commenting on their work, listening to their ideas, suggesting better methods, encouraging them to develop their plans, and being present to their ongoing development.

There is no doubt that it takes an investment of time to uncover, plan and structure difficult conversations. However, over time, and with repeated effort, we perceive these conversations less as a threat. Our minds are more occupied with the benefits, and with this, our confidence grows. Procrastination becomes less desirable than confrontation. From my experience, challenging conversations never become easy, but they do become easier.



**Jason W Birkevold Liem** helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and

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Jason is also part of our Speaker Bureau. If you are interested in Jason training your Assistants or speaking at your event, either virtually or in person, please visit [executivesupportmagazine.com/speaker-bureau](http://executivesupportmagazine.com/speaker-bureau).