



Let's Talk it Out

The art of difficult conversations for high performing and happy teams

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Whispers and war cries

Have you ever felt your heart race before a challenging conversation at work? Difficult conversations at work don't feel good for most of us. Cue the sweaty palms, the fear of grudges and the breakdown of team bonds. But taking things from awkward to awesome requires mastering those tough talks for the performance and wellbeing of everyone to improve.

The longer the conversations wait, the worse it is. And when those conversations do erupt without well thought-out steps, damage to trust, good will and collaboration can be near irreversible. But there's some untapped magic in that conflict that can bring everyone closer when the psychological safety is there. So, what are we going to do about it?

What does having difficult conversations mean at work?

So, what exactly is a difficult conversation? In the bustling corridors of every office, difficult conversations lurk like hidden obstacles, waiting to be navigated. It could be hashing out salary details, or talking about how someone is doing in their role. Or it might just be saying "my bad" when you've dropped the ball. One big hurdle for leaders is figuring out how to handle those tough talks.

It's especially hard when we're invested in the subject and the people we're talking to mean a lot to us. Sometimes they're about sharing the difficult truths that might stir the pot, or when something personal is on the line. Tension can run pretty high in these situations.

Every workplace has its fair share of tough conversations that can feel like an emotional roller coaster. Studies show that over 80% of people at work are avoiding at least one conversation they know they need to have, but are really not looking forward to (Castrillon, 2021). And a survey conducted by CMI points out that the top three hardest conversations we run into in our lives are all work related (CMI, 2020).



33%

Pay



31%

Colleagues'
inappropriate
behaviour



30%

Feedback on poor
performance

Top 10 hardest conversations

Considering that over half of the employees encounter a challenging conversation monthly, it begs the question: What makes dialogues in the workplace so hard?

1. Pay packets – 33%
2. Inappropriate behaviour in the workplace – 31%
3. Feedback on poor performance – 30%
4. Promotions – 23%
5. Sex – 19%
6. Relationship break-ups – 17%
7. Family relationships – 16%
8. Money – 16%
9. Health – 15%
10. Letting someone go from a job – 10%

Why do we avoid difficult conversations?

It's natural to shy away from workplace conflict. It throws us out of our comfort zone. Conversation requires us to manage our emotions and can go awry very quickly. One study found that 70% of employees avoid tough conversations at work. Why? (Bravely, n.d.)

- **Lack of confidence** – Our inner critic can be deafening during times of trouble
- **Unsure of the desired outcome** – Stress can make it hard to focus on the end-goal or even clearly see what it is
- **Fear of rejection** – No one strives to make enemies at work; we all just want to be liked and respected for who we are
- **Fear of upsetting someone** – Fear that means we end up shelving our own feelings
- **Bad past experiences** – They can feed fears of what might happen


Why did they keep quiet? Well, 45% of people were worried that speaking up might backfire. And another 46% didn't think it would actually change anything, given their views on company leadership and past job experiences. Ultimately, people need to see feedback being acted on to feel motivated to speak up and engage in constructive conversations (Bravely, n.d.).

All these tough talks have one thing in common - they stress out both leaders and their teams. People feel scared by bad news because it knocks their confidence and makes them unsure about what's coming next. Leaders feel awkward because they're the ones who have to be the bearers of bad news and they don't want to hurt their team. On top of that, worries about how they'll come across, feeling guilty, or expecting negative reactions from their team can make leaders even more hesitant to share bad news.

The cost of evasion



Those lacking in resilience show a staggering 59% drop in engagement levels

Peter Bromberg 

So, what is the cost of avoiding these conversations? It's high. According to a survey by Crucial Learning, 43% of US employees spend two weeks or more overthinking unresolved work issues.

One in three employees thinks that not speaking up during a critical moment has cost their organisation a colossal \$25,000

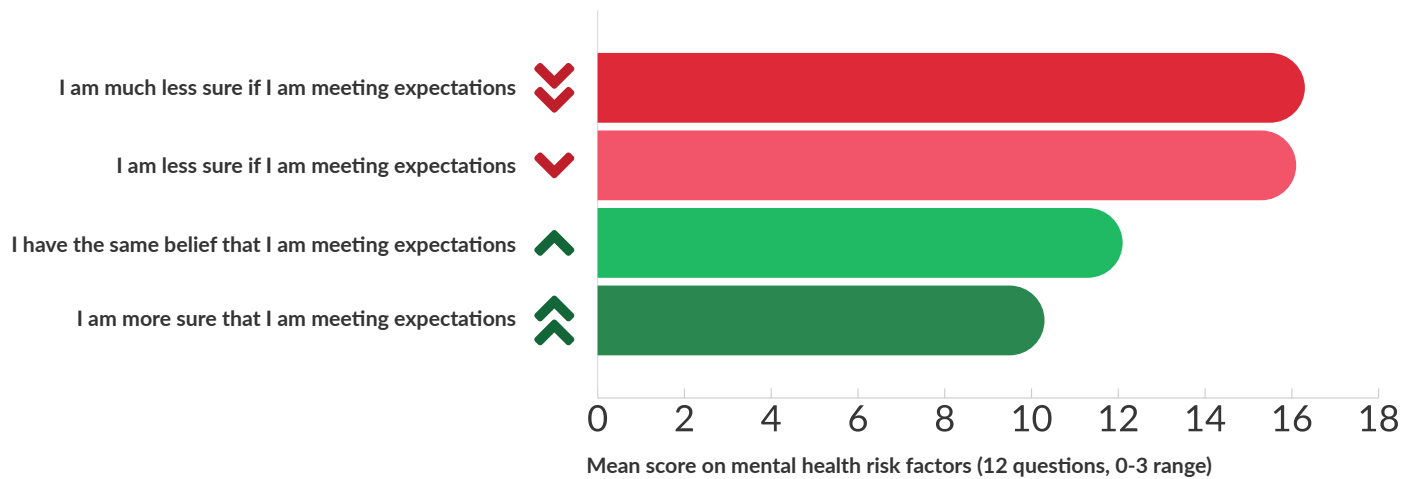


And one in three employees thinks that not speaking up during a critical moment has cost their organisation a colossal \$25,000 (Drenik, n.d.). Apart from the jaw-dropping sums of monetary loss, there are other hidden costs that are pretty concerning. People who took the survey said that these communication breakdowns damaged employee morale, relationships, the company culture, and even project schedules and budgets.

Distressingly, mental health can also be impacted by a lack of communication. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Lumina Learning researchers discovered that people who were uncertain about meeting their manager's and organisation's expectations had up to 16% higher mental health risk factors compared to those who were confident in their standing. So, it's worth paying attention to those seemingly small conversations. Talking about performance management and setting expectations might seem like a mundane task, but it's actually very important (Lumina Learning, 2021).



Mental health risk factors versus certainty of meeting organisational expectations



Like ever-increasing piles of washing up and unpaid bills, avoiding difficult conversations won't make them go away. Ignored problems will fester and bubble until they explode, most often when the stakes are highest, and pressures are felt most. Organisations can be sure that those explosions will cause a lot more damage than any initial ripples.

Building bridges, not walls

So, we've highlighted that most of us expect tension, conflict and negative outcomes when thinking about those difficult conversations. Before we even address a solution, we need to diffuse the tension and flip these events on their head.

When we're gearing up for those difficult conversations, it's all about **building bridges, not walls**. A lot of conversations at work are poorly managed, and having good, clear communication is key to building trust and getting along with everyone. It's important to be on the lookout for common ground and try to see where others are coming from. It's not about avoiding the tough topics, but about talking it out in a way that's thoughtful and builds the team up. When we make sure everyone feels heard and valued, that's when the team can really start to thrive.

Tough talks might seem like they're shaking things up in a bad way, but they can also be a chance to learn, get creative, and freshen things up.

Three mistakes we make during tough conversations

When people are passionate and emotions are heightened, misinterpretations can make those conversations even more challenging. We can never assume what someone else is thinking or feeling. Impact doesn't always equal intent, either. Let's not reduce people.

Typically, most of us make three key mistakes during tough conversations (Stone, Patton and Heen, 2011):

- We hide our emotions - or unleash them in ways we afterwards regret
- We assume we know everything required to understand and explain a situation
- We ignore who we are, acting as if our personality is separate from the problem

It's easy to lose sight of ourselves in such a stressful situation. How many times have you walked away thinking, "I wish I hadn't said that"? Effective communication involves not just understanding others but also being self-aware and managing our own emotions.

Feedback as Fuel

Think of feedback as the fuel that drives the team to succeed. When giving feedback, it's important to put a positive spin on it and connect it with the team's goals and values. This way, even the sticky conversations can turn into a chance to get the team performing better. Feedback is like a nudge in the right direction. It's about celebrating the achievements and also pointing out where there's room to grow. Harvard Business Review says that people actually want constructive feedback, even if it's a bit tough. In a study, more than half preferred to hear about what they can do better over just getting a thumbs up. A whopping 92% agreed that the right kind of tough feedback can help them do their job better (Zenger & Folkman, 2014).

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A recent Betterworks study involving 2,105 employees reveals a striking revelation into workplace dynamics. 2 in 5 people are not getting peer feedback and a colossal 40% of employees are missing out on crucial conversations and feedback from their bosses. And it's seriously impacting people's growth at work. Turns out, people who get regular one-on-ones with their boss are three times more likely to feel like they've got the support they need to do great at their job, sharpen their skills, and see a future for themselves in the company.

Employees who engage in regular one-on-one conversations and receive constructive feedback are:



3x more confident in their job performance



3.4x more capable of enhancing their skills



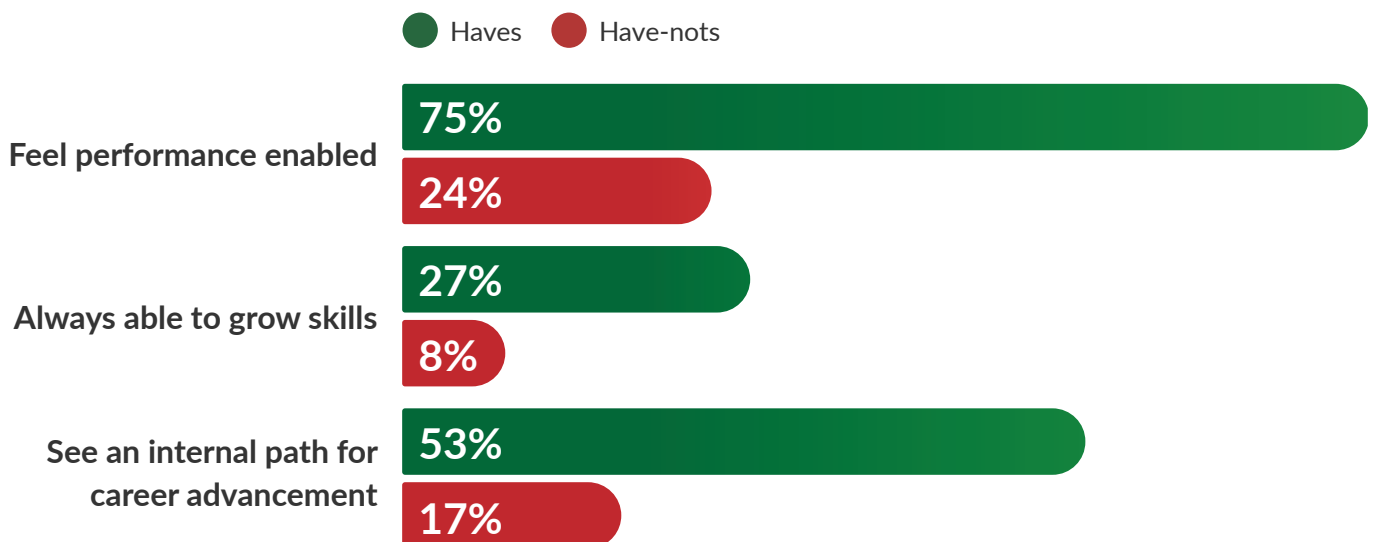
3x more likely to envision a clear career path within their organisation

(Betterworks - 2024 Global HR Research Report, n.d.)

This paints a picture of two distinct worlds in the workplace: the 'haves' with access to feedback and the 'have-nots' without. The difference? It's night and day.

Those with the privilege of personal feedback sessions and peer reviews are soaring, feeling enabled, skilled, and aware of their growth trajectory. On the flip side, those lacking these opportunities experience a dip in their performance and growth potential.

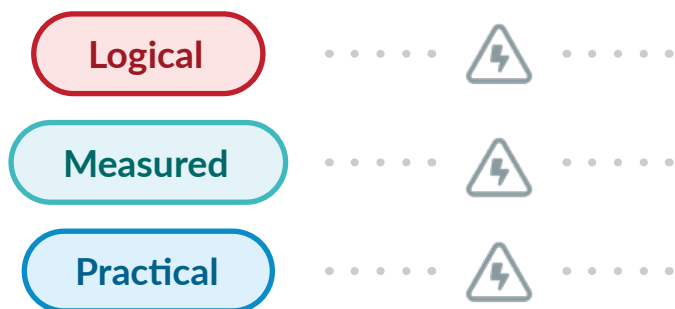
Haves versus have-nots: processes that support growth



Close the gap between intention and perception

If we're not careful, we can introduce an intention/perception gap in our interactions with others. It's a common stumbling block that can completely change our message and happens when our words are perceived differently than intended. We all see life through our own filters. Our backgrounds, where we come from, our values and experiences shape our communication style and our perspective of feedback we receive. We often judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions, so it is important to consider how your behaviour could be coming across to someone else. For example:

You think you are

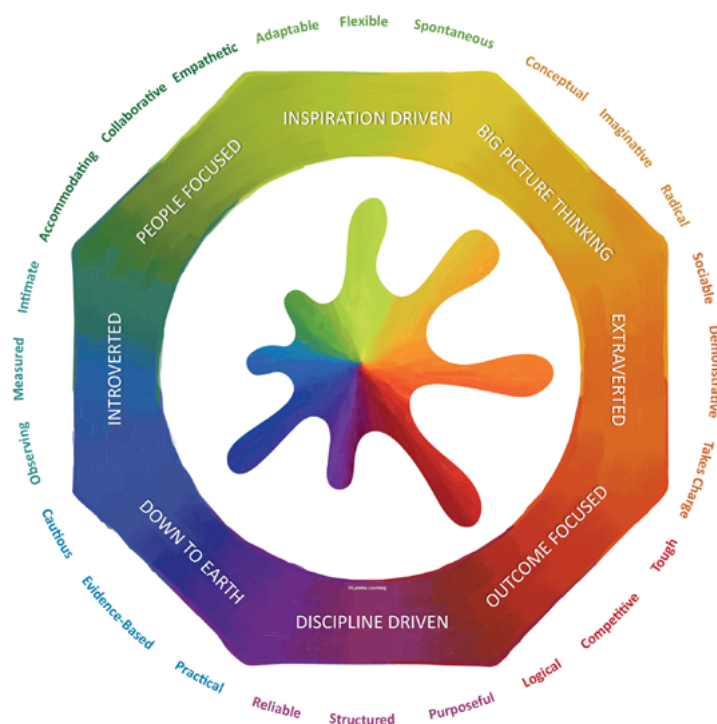


You can be perceived as



How does this play out in people's personal qualities?

We've spent the past 15 years looking into the personal qualities people show at work. It makes a useful map exploring how we all respond differently to pressure. Think of it as a solid blueprint for understanding why people react differently when difficult conversations are needed at work. When you make the most of these traits, you can navigate through those challenging work conversations, and shine a light on all the ways we can resolve the rough patches. It's all about mixing your personal skills to master those tricky discussions.





Adaptable

Being Adaptable means being able to adjust to the dynamics of a difficult conversation, making last-minute changes as needed. This adaptability can lead to more productive discussions and resolutions



Unfocused

Excessive adaptability can result in missed deadlines and a lack of goal-focus, leading to inefficiency and a potential failure to address key objectives during negotiations



Flexible

Flexibility in thought and action allows individuals to bend rules when necessary, which can be useful in finding alternative solutions during tough conversations



Chaotic

Too much flexibility and disregard for process can lead to chaotic work environments and risk-taking that undermines the effectiveness and efficiency of projects, which can be counterproductive in achieving consensus or implementing solutions



Spontaneous

A Spontaneous person's ability to make quick decisions can inject energy and fresh perspectives into difficult discussions, potentially leading to innovative resolutions



Impulsive

An overreliance on spontaneity can lead to poor planning and impulsive decisions, undermining the structured approach often necessary for resolving conflicts



Purposeful

Setting and adhering to goals, purposeful individuals can keep difficult conversations on track and focused on tangible outcomes



Goal-Fixated

An obsession with goals at the expense of relationships and experimentation can foster a rigid environment and hinder cooperative engagement during difficult conversations



Structured

Organised and detailed, structured individuals can ensure that conversations are productive, and all necessary points are covered systematically so that nothing is neglected



Rigid Planning

Excessive adherence to rules and processes can stifle flexibility and innovation, making it difficult to adapt to new information or perspectives in a conversation



Reliable

Their strong sense of responsibility and timekeeping ensures that difficult conversations happen in a timely manner and are followed up on diligently



Hesitant

Overemphasis on time management can come across as inflexibility, potentially limiting the ability to respond to unexpected but important developments



Conceptual

By merging ideas to form new perspectives, a conceptual thinker can provide depth and novel solutions during challenging discussions, moving the conversation forward constructively



Unfeasible

Overcomplicating issues with excessive theorising can detach conversations from practical solutions, leading to inefficiencies and frustration among those seeking actionable outcomes



Imaginative

Imaginative individuals can envision scenarios where problems are resolved, helping to guide difficult conversations towards these positive outcomes



Fantastist

Excessive imagination and creative thinking can mean crucial details are overlooked, making it challenging to ground discussions in reality and address the immediate needs of a situation



Radical

Embracing change, a radical thinker can help shift perspectives during tough talks, encouraging openness to new solutions



Change for the Sake of Change

An unbalanced pursuit of change can disregard the value of more traditional approaches, potentially alienating stakeholders who are cautious of too much disruption



Practical

A practical approach to problem-solving can help ground difficult conversations in reality, focusing on achievable and concrete solutions



Narrow Sighted

Being overly focused on practicality can close off creative solutions and alternative viewpoints, limiting the scope of potential resolutions



Evidence-Based

Using facts and data to guide discussions ensures that conversations remain focused on objective criteria rather than subjective emotions or opinions



Lost in the Details

An excessive focus on data can lead to a neglect of intuitive and creative problem-solving, potentially overlooking innovative solutions



Cautious

The Cautious quality brings a level of prudence to discussions, ensuring that decisions are well-considered and based on proven methods



Change Resistant

Excessive caution towards change can hinder progress and innovation, leading to stagnation and frustration among more future-focused colleagues



Extraverted



Sociable

Sociable individuals can use their ease in making connections to foster a positive atmosphere, even in challenging discussions



Can't be Alone

Over-sociability can distract from tasks at hand and be perceived as intrusive, potentially undermining the focus required for productive discussions



Demonstrative

Their energy and animated nature can lighten the mood, making difficult conversations feel less daunting and more positive



Overbearing

Excessive energy and a failure to regulate emotions can overwhelm others, especially those who are less expressive, potentially creating an uncomfortable environment for open dialogue



Takes Charge

By naturally taking the lead in groups, those who take charge can steer difficult conversations toward resolution efficiently and effectively



Controlling

Being overly domineering can damage relationships and inhibit collaborative problem-solving, as it may suppress diverse perspectives crucial for resolving complex issues



Introverted



Observing

By listening and observing, these individuals can gather perspectives that help in understanding all sides of a conversation, leading to thoughtful interventions



Detached and Aloof

Excessive restraint can prevent the sharing of valuable findings, diminishing an individual's influence in conversations and potentially leading to misunderstandings or overlooked perspectives



Measured

Their ability to control emotional expression and proceed calmly can help maintain a composed atmosphere during difficult conversations



Serious and Withdrawn

An overly reserved emotional expression can be perceived as disinterest or lack of empathy, making it difficult to connect with others on a personal level during sensitive discussions



Intimate

Preferring one-on-one interactions, Intimate individuals can facilitate deep and meaningful discussions, ensuring that difficult topics are explored thoroughly and sensitively



Passive

Excessive preference for one-on-one interactions can limit effectiveness in group settings, potentially missing opportunities to address and resolve issues that affect the wider team



Outcome Focused



Tough

Being direct and unafraid of conflict, tough individuals can address core issues head-on, facilitating a faster resolution



Seeking Conflict

Excessive directness can lead to confrontations and create resistance, making it challenging to achieve consensus or foster a constructive dialogue



Competitive

A competitive mindset, focused on winning, can motivate the individual to find resolutions that ensure the best outcome for the team or project



Win at All Costs

Overemphasis on personal interests can undermine teamwork and be perceived as selfishness, hindering collective efforts to address challenges



Logical

Logical thinking helps in analysing problems and presenting rational arguments, which can clarify and streamline complex discussions



Argumentative

An overly analytical approach can dismiss the emotional and subjective aspects of conflicts, potentially alienating colleagues and hindering empathetic understanding



People Focused



Accommodating

By avoiding forceful arguments and choosing words carefully, an Accommodating individual can diffuse tension, making difficult conversations more amicable and focused on resolution rather than conflict



Acquiescing

Overly diplomatic behaviour can lead to avoidance of critical issues and suppression of personal opinions, hindering the resolution of conflicts and potentially allowing problems to escalate due to a lack of direct communication



Collaborative

A collaborative mindset seeks win-win outcomes, which is crucial in difficult conversations. By valuing others' contributions and needs, collaborative individuals can find solutions that satisfy everyone involved



Consensus Obsessed

An excessive focus on team needs over individual needs can result in self-neglect and a lack of competitive drive, possibly leading to missed opportunities for personal growth and advocacy



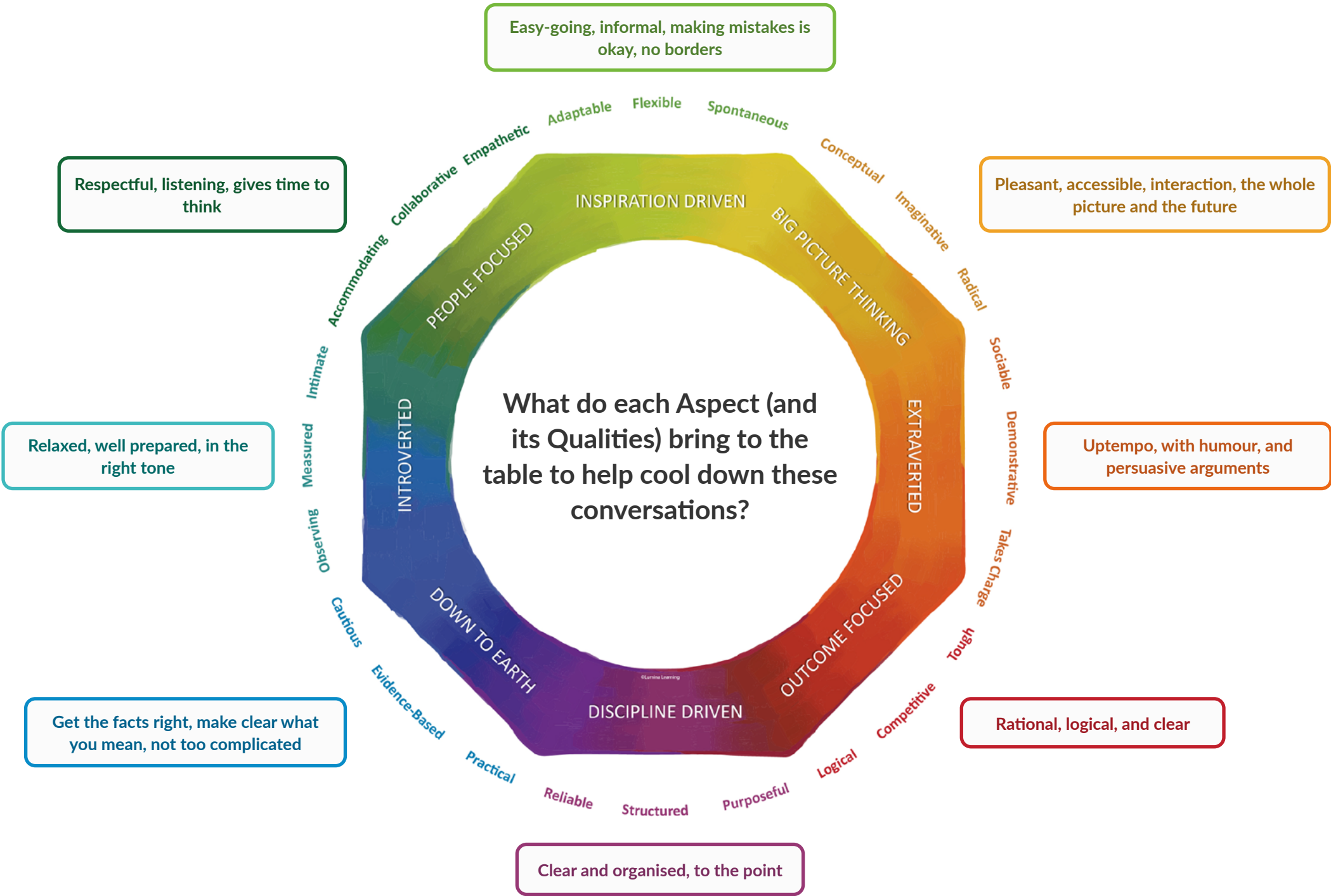
Empathetic

Empathy allows a person to understand and connect with others' emotions, making it easier to navigate sensitive topics. An empathetic approach can facilitate a supportive environment where difficult matters are discussed openly and with care



Emotionally Stretched

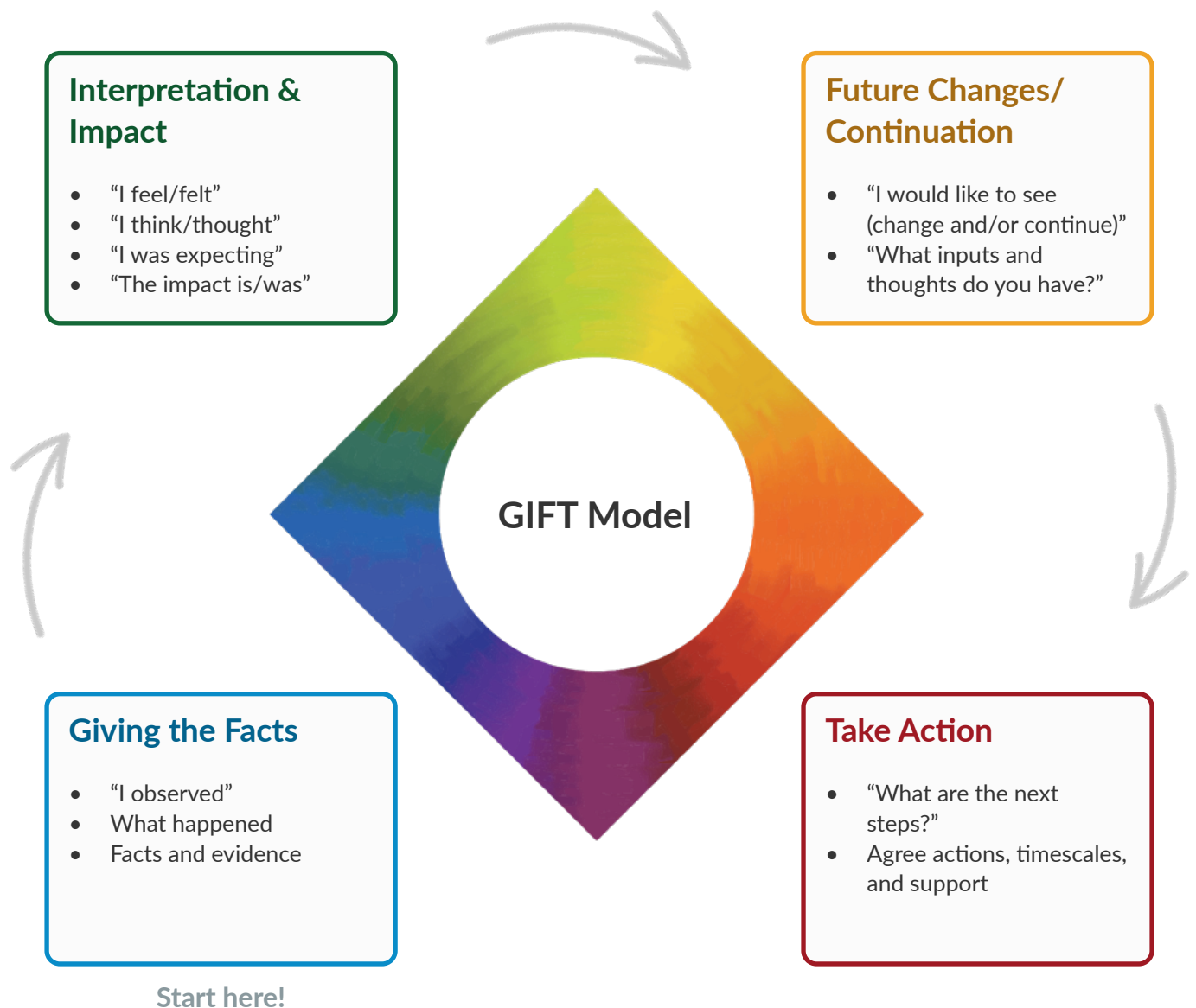
Being overly empathetic can cause an individual to become drained and lose sight of personal needs, complicating the ability to set boundaries and say no, which is crucial in maintaining professional integrity during difficult discussions



The flow of the conversation – feedback as a GIFT

When facing the daunting task of navigating difficult conversations, leaders think about how to manage the conversation as well as manage themselves. The absence of team support can leave leaders feeling adrift and when it's crunch time, not getting that pat on the back can really shake things up. And it looks like leaders are often left to handle it solo, even if these conversations can rock the boat for whole company. Drawing clear boundaries is important to ensure that everyone has a safety net to fall back on (Green & Molenkamp 2005).

Think of giving feedback as a gift, figuratively speaking. Think of the GIFT model as your shortcut to nailing feedback.



Two points to consider when using GIFT



Creating psychological safety

Creating a safe place where open communication is a cornerstone to the workplace. Encouraging teams to feel safe to take risks, speak up about their slip ups without fearing judgement, and freely discuss what they've learnt from their mistakes. When we create a safe environment, team members don't have to worry about getting in trouble for little mistakes or start being criticised for imperfections. Focusing on progress rather than perfection takes away the shame and judgment that usually come with constructive feedback.

Leaders who guide these chats get better results when they get support from the system and know their role and limits in the bigger picture. Good, clear communication is key to delivering bad news in a way that builds trust and rapport.



Delivering your message

When saying your piece, it's important to keep things consistent. Ensuring everything is laid out clearly. Focus on keeping it clear and sticking to the facts, and don't let personal opinions cloud your judgment. Make sure the conversation is left open for the team to voice their opinions too, creating that psychological safety for all involved. Keep things transparent and make sure you have solid reasons for giving the bad news. Finally, make sure you stay ethical, treat them kindly and recognise them for their hard work (Bies, 2013).

Four good feedback practices



1. Choose your attitude

At the base of the Difficult Conversation pyramid is the practice of choosing your attitude. The pyramid forms an “up hierarchy”, in that the practices in the upper levels of the pyramid can only effectively be implemented if the lower levels have been worked on first. It is self-awareness that allows us to understand which of our instinctive Underlying Qualities are fundamental to our being.

Our self-awareness can also help us see which Qualities are most appropriate for us to express, based on who we are with and the given context. Really great professionals, before they start a conversation at work, are able to mindfully and consciously choose their attitude. Ultimately this choice will help both parties feel a sense of connectedness and open up the possibility of a much deeper and authentic relationship.

2. Empathise

The second tier of the pyramid is the practice of displaying empathy. Really great professionals connect well through deeply listening and demonstrating empathy. Attempting to move forward and giving feedback about a particular solution or approach, before the other person feels you truly understand their world, rarely works. Of course, demonstrating empathy is necessary but by no means sufficient to work through a difficult conversation.

3. Show you understand before you give feedback

Many of us have an instinctive aversion to being seen to strongly give feedback for fear of being seen as pushy or rude. However, holding back on passionately sharing feedback is also a key mistake that often stems from not having fully empathised in the previous step of the pyramid. Indeed, if empathy has not been demonstrated then any feedback may be seen as unwelcome, undue influence.

However, if we have consciously chosen our attitude, we are clear on our purpose, and we have shown a good understanding of the other’s world, then the ground has been laid for highly effective feedback to land. In fact, many of us secretly yearn to be given more high-quality feedback. But, trying to land feedback before you’ve deeply connected with the other and shown you understand their world is doomed to failure. Conversely, sharing feedback when you are in a state of rapport and have shown an understanding of their world is an entirely different matter.

Feedback can of course also take the form of educating the other person. Sometimes we assume others are already educated in all aspects of what we have to say, but this needs to be validated. If our feedback educates others without us displaying bias or coming from a place of ego or “I know best”, this will be thoroughly appreciated. Even better, if our feedback is educating from the position of us being a well-intended industry thought leader, then our feedback will have maximum influence.

4. Plan for the future

One of the biggest risks with feedback is that we diagnose and propose our solution through feedback intended to be 'persuading'. This approach can completely miss the benefits of co-creating a plan going forward. It risks the other person feeling that they are being "told" what the solution is, based on our feedback and we may disenfranchise the other.

We have much more influence if we are on the same side as the other person and we are looking to plan the desired results we need together.

The goal of planning for the future is to provide feedback and new ideas that the other person immediately wants to turn to action.

Practical tips make being effective all the easier

1. Opt for a neutral setting like a café or meeting room
2. Get straight to the point at the start of the meeting
3. Provide a detailed explanation of the bad news
4. Show empathy for any emotions that arise
5. Discuss the next steps clearly
6. Summarise the discussion and offer follow up in writing

So, to sum everything up...

1. Making a Safe Space

Picture a workplace where everyone understands and supports each other. Suddenly, those tricky topics become opportunities for strengthening relationships and transforming them into catalysts for deepening team bonds and collaboration.

2. Self-awareness

Understanding your own emotions, triggers, and communication style is key. It's like having a cheat sheet for maintaining composure during tense interactions. When you're aware of what makes you tick, you're better equipped to respond thoughtfully, and it allows for more deliberate and effective responses.

3. Understanding Team Dynamics

Remember, your team isn't just a bunch of names on a list; they're real people with their own emotions. Acknowledge their viewpoints, emotional wellbeing, and communication preferences. Elevating your emotional intelligence to enhance your leadership toolkit.

4. The Art of Difficult Conversations

When the tension does erupt in the office (we've all been there), approach it with a mindset geared toward resolution and growth. Active listening, open-mindedness, and a willingness to find common ground are your trusty tools.

5. Keep the Balance

It's like walking on a tightrope. Reflect inwardly while staying attuned to the dynamics around you. When achieved, this delicate balance can lead to a more productive team and a harmonious office atmosphere.

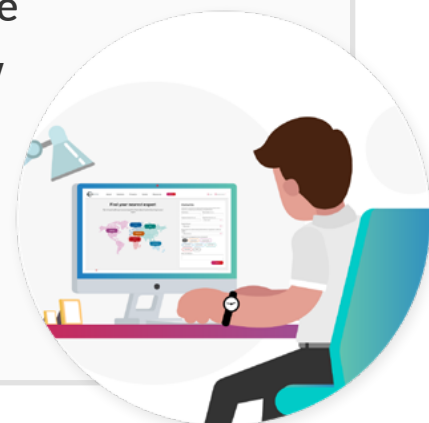
Tackling difficult conversations at work is vital for any team to thrive. You might be worried about ruffling some feathers, but it's important to make an effort to communicate openly as a team. When we face tough situations, we often put up our guards and overthink the situation. Most of the time, once we've had the difficult conversation, we leave with a sense of relief and positive takeaways.

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