

The tough CONVERSATION

“When you look up commitment in the dictionary, nowhere does it make reference to, ‘I will do my best’.”

John O. Burdett

We’ve all been there: an otherwise successful subordinate whose performance is inconsistent; a direct report whose behaviour bumps up against the organization’s values; someone on your team who, although an excellent individual contributor, is not a teamplayer.

Leadership is about a lot of things. It’s about being open to the unexpected. It’s about protecting the core. It’s about nurturing agility. It’s about change. It’s about creating the space for innovation to take hold. No less, it’s about making hard decisions. It’s about facing up to those all-too-easily put off, difficult conversations; conversations that, if not managed effectively, can bruise a talented employee who happens to have wondered off-track, or inflame an already a difficult situation.

In ducking the tough conversations we are not simply pushing them to one side. Doing nothing is a form of action. Inaction extends permission. Holding back conveys the unmistakable message, “It’s okay to continue doing what you are doing.”



Leaders **must** lead! Not to act is to abdicate virtually everything it means to be a leader. And do not assume that performance reticence lies exclusively with inexperienced middle-managers. Because the relationships are often long-founded and personal, top leaders are, if anything, the group most reluctant to face up to the tough conversation.

Essential as these conversations are in good times, when you are fighting for your organizational life, confronting performance shortfalls and/or problematic behaviour takes on added importance. In times like these, how we manage the beliefs and assumptions that shape the informal organization, how we manage the stories that fuel the “grapevine” determines, in no small measure, what is possible. When one manager raises the bar, when he/she takes a tough performance stance, that “message” reverberates across the organization. When leaders act in concert the “message” becomes an anthem that even the most skeptical employee will find impossible to ignore. Survival isn’t about what the top team wants to do; it’s about what those in the middle of the organization are prepared to do. It’s about how they define “success.”

We want people to like us. Conflict is uncomfortable. I know I **should** have the conversation, but things seem to be getting a little better. While it's true that little has improved, perhaps I'm expecting too much from him. Sometimes key targets are missed, but she is extremely popular with everyone else on the team. Conversely, if the outer veneer of ambivalence is stripped away, managers are deeply aware that if they do nothing, the status quo will prevail. They hold back, for the most part, because they don't know **how** to have the tough conversation.

What follows are ideas and suggestion around the two central pillars in the tough conversation. Part one looks at setting the context. Part two explores **how** to have the conversation.

Part one: the context

The definition of context is, “the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event.” The tough conversation we are describing doesn't exist in a vacuum. We stumble when pieces of the puzzle are missing; when leadership is absent; when the conversation comes as a surprise; when a sense of entitlement swamps the “unrelenting drive to deliver” embedded in the word “commitment.” When you look up **commitment** in the dictionary, **nowhere** does it make reference to, “I will do my best.”

If “context” is found in the emotional intent that lies behind the language we use, it is no less about how the act of leadership unfolds. Leadership is a privilege. It's an act of service. When everything else is stripped away, it's about bringing the best out in others. It's also a discipline; a code of behaviour that has to be practised each and every day. A leader exercises that discipline; breathes life into the context; establishes a performance-driven culture when he/she:



- › Understands that leadership has little or nothing to do with the words on the organization chart and has everything to do with who people **choose** to follow
- › Recognizes that the team is the basic building block of performance success
- › Brings clarity to the direction being charted
- › Makes the discipline of delivery an unremitting “mantra”; a palpable beat that plays in the background of every meeting, every conversation, and every presentation
- › Builds an environment of trust based on the simple rubric – people want to be successful, they want to get it right, they want to be fully engaged by the work they do
- › Personally lives (goes out of his/her way to emphasize) the organization's values
- › Ensures that everyone on the team understands his/her role and the responsibilities/ accountabilities framed by that role
- › Gains **commitment** to the key outcomes (ideally, a scorecard for the role) from everyone on the team and holds those same individuals **accountable**

- › Brings the competencies for the role to each and every performance conversation.
- › Works to ensure that the performance management process/reward system gives equal weight to the “what” (goals) and the “how” (values/competencies). What you measure is what people focus on. What you reward is what you get.
- › Displays a willingness to be vulnerable and in doing so encourages “candour”
- › Makes coaching and mentoring a way of life and is personally open to be coached
- › Acts fast if/when unwarranted behaviour or performance slippage becomes apparent
- › Develops a reputation for being both consistent and fair
- › Seeks to catch people doing it right

Like streams running into a river, each of the above converge to shape a business environment where the tough conversation, far from being an emotional aberration, is simply a natural part of how people work together.

The caution here is that each leadership “tributary” is important; each, if not enacted, can poison the wider waterway (context). By way of example: if little trust is displayed, the leader will not be trusted; if the goals are ambiguous, accountability is an irrelevant concept; if candour is missing, games playing and hidden agenda can be assumed; if coaching is a sometime event, growth and challenge have little currency; and if the leader’s role in life is largely to comment on what **isn’t** working, the assumption that there will be a receptive ear to yet one more criticism is a form of optimism that shares much with a mindset that prompts people to buy a lottery ticket.

Here, a word about “the team.” Little, if anything, influences the individual’s behaviour as strongly as does the attitude, norms and performance ethos of others on the team. A great team carries no passengers. The peer pressure exerted by a high-performance team has far more impact than **any** form of censure (including potential termination) provided by the formal leader. Strong and sustained individual performance is the outcome of a strong team. Overcoming unanticipated hurdles depends on the support of a strong team. Learning and growth is enriched by a strong team.

The principles at work here are (1) great teams both drive and support great individual performance and (2) the performance of a marginal team will inevitably and inextricably be shaped (often sooner rather than later) by the weakest link. Great teams are self-regulating. Struggling teams seek to embrace the lowest common denominator.



There is one more issue to cover off: building on success. No matter what the endeavor, champions climb onto the podium because they have an intimate relationship with what it is that makes them strong. No leader made it to the top because he/she displayed a passion to constantly address weaknesses. It makes perfect sense to build on strengths, mould the role to fit capability, and delegate to others what we don’t do well.

None of this means that a philosophy of building on success makes a performance limitation, misalignment with the organization's values, and/or an Achilles heel any less of a problem. That your car has three inflated tires doesn't mean you can ignore the one with a nail sticking out. The fact that the head of international markets is a one-of-a-kind strategist in no way excuses rude, intolerant or abusive behaviour. The dilemma: any leadership behaviour that inhibits the success of others is an Achilles heel!



Part two. The conversation

So far, so good, but what if the context doesn't provide a helpful backdrop? What if the type of leadership enacted overall is dominated by micromanagement, a need for control and a "gotcha" mentality? What if I have just taken over a dysfunctional team? What if my boss talks a good game, but doesn't personally follow through? The answer: work with what you've got. Where the organization's culture doesn't provide the stories and symbolic events supportive of how things **should** happen, the tough conversation becomes even more important.

In the midst of confusion, leadership is (1) bringing a laser-like focus to the outcomes demanded; (2) celebrating/building on success; and (3) being totally consistent in outlining and managing the **consequences** of failure.

In my experience there are four distinct stages to successfully landing the tough conversation.

- Layout the issue
- Listen to what the employee has to say
- Pass ownership to the employee
- Move into the end game

Layout the issue:

- › Respond quickly. Be consistent. Express the issue in simple and unambiguous terms. As you lay out the issue don't apologize, appear tentative, say you're sorry about the situation or suggest you are there "to help." Helping doesn't help. It merely delays the inevitable. Don't make the issue under discussion **your** problem. That doesn't mean you lack empathy and caring. You care. You care enough to be tough-minded. You care enough to be candid. You care enough to make sure there is no confusion about who owns the problem. You care enough to lay out the consequences of failure.
- › The delivery of the message is as important as the content. Be conscious of your tone of voice. Never appear to be angry or hurried. Look the employee in the eye. Believe that the change demanded will happen. What you believe, is what the employee will perceive.
- › Reinforce **why** the issue is important e.g., values, commitment, impact on the team, sales lost. Restate the agreed goals. Emphasize the nature and meaning of "commitment."
- › Provide evidence to support your point of view. Be specific. Make the "evidence" recent. Unless it was discussed at the time, going back several months starts to make **you** part of the problem. Although a suggestion in much of the literature, avoid "here is how **I** feel about the issue." Talking about how you "feel" makes it personal. It's not about you, it's about performance. Moreover, the "feelings" conversation can start to push the conversation down a slippery slope – away from outcomes and towards personality and character. Use "I" language wherever possible. "This is what **I** have witnessed." "This is how your behaviour comes across to **me**." The use of "we" introduces a degree of uncertainty into the conversation. The employee's internal conversation starts to sound like, "I know not **all** the others feel that way." The more specific the evidence, the easier it is to focus on the needed outcomes going forward. At the same time, avoid presenting "the evidence" as if you are omnipotent. Be tough-minded, make your point, but create enough space for the employee to have his/her say. "What I have witnessed" is far more palatable than "Here is what you do." And don't forget, what we seek to change (are qualified to address!) is the employee's observable behaviour, not his/her character.



Listen to what the employee has to say:

- › Listen! Be fully present! Don't interrupt, other than to seek clarification (see point below). Don't signal your agreement/disagreement with the points made through overt body language. Don't respond to what is being suggested until you have heard the employee out. In pointing out where you disagree, avoid argument by revisiting your "evidence." If the facts you have drawn together appear to be inaccurate, adjourn and revisit the issue. If you do your homework this will not be necessary.



- › Don't get drawn into "defensive routines." These represent a communication black hole from which there is no escape. Classic amongst these are "It's not my fault, the real problem is" Don't get trapped into a conversation about someone not in the room. Challenge vague or ambiguous language. Ask questions along the lines of: "Explain what you mean." "Be more specific." Don't let the employee confuse the issue by introducing opinions presented as facts. Although this tactic is much loved by politicians, if the "opinion" isn't challenged it sits in the middle of the table as if it were a fact. "We will never be able to get new products to market faster than we do now" . . . is an opinion!

Pass ownership to the employee:

- › This is the most important part of the conversation. The challenge: to pass accountability to the employee. Having defined the issue and listened to the employee's response ask, "**What are you going to do about it?**"
- › In listening to the employee's suggested "solution," gauge if his/her view of the issue represents a '**doesn't know how to do**' or '**won't do**' dilemma. A '**won't do**' predicament calls for a clear message: a reiteration of the behaviour demanded and clarity around the resulting consequences if the change being presented isn't enacted. Concerns around not living the organization's values, more often than not, represent a '**won't do**' issue. Even if the individual in question consistently delivers results, if he/she fails to live the values, you are faced with a "power struggle" you cannot afford to lose. Confront '**won't do**' issues head on! Coaching, mentoring and, for that matter, support from the rest of the team all build on a presumption that the employee wants to change. Where that **will to change** is missing, managing consequences becomes not just your best, but your only meaningful option.
- › If you believe that the employee has the capability (and motivation) needed to address the issue, determine if all of the skills demanded are fully present. If they are, start from the assumption that the employee knows what to do. Most of the time they do! Ask questions that draw out next steps. Don't make suggestions. Don't "tell" the employee what to do. Avoid questions that telegraph the "answer" you are looking for. Use silence to provoke new thinking. If the employee has exhausted all of his/her own resources, then and only then, move to problem-solving. Jointly explore possible options. Share your own experience. Push the employee to build on the ideas being presented. Seek consensus. Check for buy-in. Only as a last resort, "tell" the employee what you want him/her to do. If "telling" becomes necessary, reemphasize why the change is necessary and lay out **specifically** what he/she needs to do.



Move into the end game:

- › Establish goals. Define specifically what needs to happen and by when. Agree on "the how." Write it down. Emphasize (again) the nature and meaning of "a commitment."

- › Show belief in the employee's ability to "make it happen." Offer support. Emphasize the value to the employee in making the change e.g., financial rewards, growth, personal opportunity.
- › Establish milestones. Review progress against those milestones. Follow through. Encourage, affirm and go out of your way to "catch the employee doing it right." Celebrate success.
- › If the agreed outcomes are **not** delivered, work on the presumption that the employee is either in the wrong role or in the wrong organization. Not to act is to fan the flames of entitlement. Not to act is to demotivate your top performers. Not to act is to delegate the standards against which performance is judged to the employee. Not to act is to make a statement that as a leader you are either in the wrong role, or in the wrong organization.

We live in turbulent times. We need **everyone** to deliver. We need **every** leader to make managing performance an overriding, **daily** priority. And that means carrying out those so-easy-to-put-off tough conversations. Not to act is to act. Not to act is a form of permission. Not to act **is** to embrace mediocrity as a way of life.

In tough times, people look to a leader. The more uncertain things are, the more unstable the market place, the more an ability to inspire becomes central to how leaders are judged. Inspiration is rooted in optimism. It's about marshalling people behind a common cause. It's about nurturing curiosity and learning. It's about caring. And it's about confronting those who, by their actions, signal they are on a different path. When instability and concern start to strip hope out of possibility, leaders **must** lead!

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