

How courageous conversations can resolve workplace conflicts

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Why do so many managers shy away from having tough conversations with employees? Knowing what to say at the right time can help nip conflicts and other issues in the bud, explains Tania Coke from workplace mediation specialists Consensio.

When I have a problem with a colleague, I know that the sensible thing to do is to get together as soon as possible and talk it through.

That way, we can share perspectives on what has happened, clarify any misunderstandings and decide what to do before the situation gets worse.

But we're not always sensible in these situations. We all struggle to have these conversations, and to have them successfully.

At Consensio, we decided to pool our experiences and produce a practical guide to having "courageous conversations" at work.

What are the barriers?

First, we tried to understand what prevents us from having courageous conversations. We found three main barriers:

Lack of confidence: When we feel hurt by someone, speaking to them is often the last thing we want to do. There are many things we may fear which knock our confidence. These include: getting hurt; hurting the other person; not being understood; losing control; and/or making things worse. As a result, we procrastinate or withdraw, and hope that the problem will go away.

Lack of skill: We also often lack the skills that enable us to carry out the conversation successfully. These include self-awareness, self-control and effective communication strategies. The good news is that through conflict management training and skills practice, we can learn to listen with empathy and communicate effectively even in the most difficult situation.

Lack of time: The final barrier to courageous conversations is that they take time. It takes time to build the skills and confidence to do them well. It takes time to reflect and prepare for a courageous conversation.

And it takes time to have the conversation itself. Given the slightest excuse, the conversation gets postponed, abandoned or botched.

How to have a courageous conversation

What can we do to have more courageous conversations, and to have them successfully?

Before the conversation: Whenever a situation flares up, we first need to acknowledge that something is troubling us. We can then ask ourselves questions such as: What am I feeling and why? What am I frightened of and why? This can help us manage the fear and stress that the situation has aroused.

We then need to make a decision about whether to have the courageous conversation or not. It can help to consider what we stand to gain or lose by having the conversation and how other people will be affected by our decision.

If we decide to go ahead, we can prepare for the conversation through questions such as: What do I want to express and how can I best do this? What do I want to understand from the other person and how should I ask them?

Finally, we need to set up the conversation. Here again, there are many factors to consider, such as: How should I raise the topic with the other person? Where should we have the conversation and when?

During the conversation: There are a number of handy hints for conducting a courageous conversation as smoothly and productively as possible.

These include: Remember that the way you speak and act at the outset will set the tone for the rest of the conversation. Try to express yourself without casting blame. As well as the words you use, be aware of your facial expressions and body language.

Share your goal in having the conversation and ask about theirs. Let them know you are having the conversation in order to make things better, not worse. If your attitude is one of openness and curiosity towards the other person, this will be reflected through the way you speak and act.

Finally, be prepared to forgive both yourself and the other person if things don't go as smoothly as you hoped.

After the conversation: There are things we can do to ease the discomfort that may follow a courageous conversation and extend the opportunities for learning and change.

For instance, we can get in touch with the other person to thank them for the conversation. It is also a good idea to reflect on what you have learnt, and what you can do to manage conflict better in the future.

Courageous conversations are important. They are a way to humanise the workplace, and they help to build a culture which values people as people, not just as human resources. The responsibility for having these conversations lies with all of us.