

Courageous Workplace Conversations: A practical guide

For better workplace relationships



Introduction

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.

Apparently, I am not always very sensible. And, it turns out, nor are my colleagues in the Consensio team. We all struggle to have these conversations, and to have them successfully. However, when we avoid these conversations, tension and resentment rises, and it is stressful for everyone involved.

The aim of this guide is to promote the kind of “courageous conversation” described above, as an alternative to doing nothing, or waiting until the relationship falls apart and then seeking more formal measures.

Drawing on the combined experience and expertise of the Consensio team, this guide sheds light on why courageous conversations are so difficult to have, and provides a 3-part guide to having these conversations effectively.

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The Barriers to Courageous Conversations

Why are courageous conversations so difficult? What is it that holds us back from getting together to talk things through?

The 3 Main Barriers to Courageous Conversations

1. Lack of confidence
2. Lack of skills
3. Lack of time

1. 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 and this knocks our confidence. What we often fear includes: getting hurt; hurting them; not being understood; losing control; and/or making things worse.

So fear looms large in our unconscious reckoning. We procrastinate or we withdraw, hoping that the problem will go away. However, these conversations can be a golden opportunity to increase our self-awareness and understanding of others, and gain mastery over our emotions and behaviour.

Courageous conversations can help us achieve more satisfying relationships and a more fulfilling experience of work and life in general. When we conquer our fear, conflict can be a huge opportunity.

“*Fear is not a reason not to have the conversation, but it is a reason to think very carefully about how you’ll say things.*

Carolyn

Reflective questions

Before you allow lack of confidence and fear to take over, ask yourself: Why am I scared of this conversation? What is my fear based on? What will happen if I don’t have this conversation?



“When we feel we’ve been wronged, a defence mechanism kicks in. Instead of wanting to understand the other person, we find ourselves thinking ‘I’m going to show her,’ or ‘I’m going to tell him...’”

Anna

2. Lack of skills

As well as lack of confidence, we often lack the skills that enable us to carry out the conversation successfully. These skills include self-awareness, self-control and effective communication strategies.

There is a scientific explanation for these undesirable patterns of behaviour. When we go into conflict mode, we typically default to a more primitive state. This is because the stress caused by conflict results in ‘fight, flight or freeze’ mode. When we are in this mode, our bodies and brains react in ways that are not conducive to having a constructive conversation. We start to sweat, our heart pounds, our stomach gets into knots. We don’t think rationally. We want to fight (by attacking) or flee (by running away from the conflict), or we simply freeze (like a deer in headlights).

Even though the ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response evolved as a survival instinct, the good news is that we can all learn new skills to listen with empathy and communicate more effectively, even in a conflict situation.

Reflective questions

Think about a time when you were in conflict with someone. What physical changes did you feel in your body? What was going on in your head? Looking back, what would have helped you in this situation?

3. 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 – an impending deadline, for example – the conversation gets postponed, abandoned or botched. We are just too busy to have these conversations. Or so we think.

“You’re not going to be able to shoehorn a conversation between an emergency crisis and 25 other meetings. You have to invest time. You need time to reflect by yourself. The conversation itself needs to happen offline.”

Kisane

Reflective questions

Think about how much time you spend communicating with work colleagues via email or text compared to face-to-face communication. What misunderstandings might this cause? What can you gain from having more face-to-face conversations?

3-Step Guide to Having a Courageous Conversation

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

Ultimately, the only way for more courageous conversations to happen, is if people like you and I pluck up the courage to have them. We have compiled a 3-step guide below, together with a collection of tips drawn from the combined experience of some of my Consensio colleagues.

On paper, some of these suggestions may sound easy. The difficulty is in having the presence of mind to apply them in the heat of the moment, when emotions are high and confidence low.

Because there are no black and white rules to having courageous conversations, there may be some messages in this guide that won’t suit your particular situation. Rather than a template, this guide will help expand your repertoire of possibilities, so that when the next opportunity arises, you will make the best choices in response to the unique situation that confronts you.

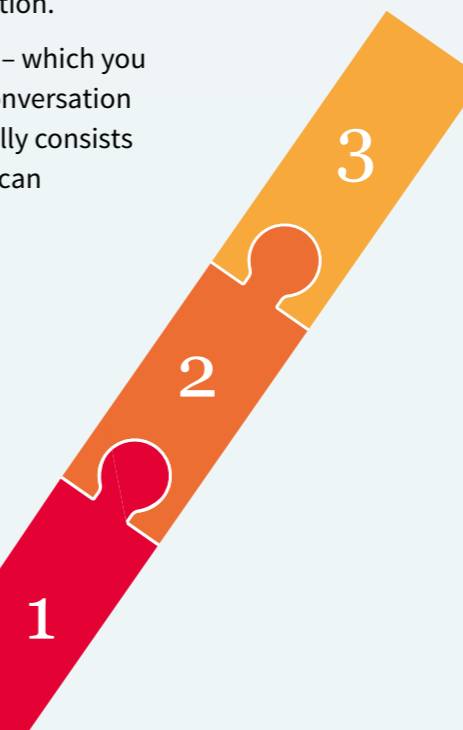
Step 1 – Before the conversation

Suppose you have an argument with a work colleague. Or suppose you simply have the feeling that something is not quite right between you and a client. In either case, and in all cases in between, this is a good time to stop, reflect on what is happening, and consider the possibility of a courageous conversation.

This thought process – which you might think of as a conversation with yourself – typically consists of four stages, which can happen in any order.

“As soon as you feel discomfort in a relationship, it’s worth considering a courageous conversation – even if the other person doesn’t seem to think there’s a problem. This is about taking ownership of your own issues.”

Carolyn



1) Check in with yourself

To initiate this thought process, we first need to acknowledge that something is troubling us.

One way to become aware that something is wrong is to pay attention to what is happening to us physically, to our body. For me, the first clue is often a pounding heart. For others, it may be a tightening of the throat or a reddening of the skin.

Once we have acknowledged that there is a problem, we can start to inquire into it through questions such as:

- What am I feeling and why?
- What am I frightened of and why?
- What will allow me to feel more calm?

This can help us to address the fears that often prevent us from having a courageous conversation.

2) Decide whether to have the courageous conversation

Armed with greater self-awareness, we can then carry out a more rational assessment of the need for a courageous conversation. Questions to consider at this stage include:

What do I stand to gain from having the conversation?

There are many potential ways to gain from a courageous conversation. Perhaps you see it as an opportunity to improve or preserve an important relationship. Perhaps you see it as chance to learn something new about yourself or the other person. Perhaps you see it as a chance to improve your skills and rise above the usual tit-for-tat.

What are the risks of having the conversation?

It's also important to assess the risks, as there may be reasons why it would be better not to have the conversation, or not to have it right now. You may feel you are not currently in a state to handle the potential stress. Or you may think the relationship is less important than getting something done.

What are the risks of not having the conversation?


Equally, you may decide that not having the conversation is a bigger risk than having one. Ask yourself what will happen if the conversation doesn't take place.

What are the implications for people around us?

There may also be consequences for other people, which will determine whether you want to have the conversation.

3) Rehearse the conversation

Suppose you have decided to have a courageous conversation. The next stage is to plan how you want the conversation to go. You can think of this under two headings: "rehearse yourself" and "rehearse the other person". It may be useful to write down what you want to say, knowing that you are free to change your mind later.

 *It's a question of finding the right non-judgemental language. If I hear 'I/me' it sounds selfish. If I hear 'you' it makes me feel judged. It should be about 'we/us'.*

Kisane

Rehearse yourself

At this stage, the key questions are:

- What do I want to express to the other person?
- How can I best express it in a respectful way?
- How can I introduce the conversation in a way that the other person can hear me and not become defensive?

Working out what you want to say is important, but knowing how to say it is even more so.

- What do I want to understand from the other person?
- What do I need from the conversation?
- How can I best ask it?

As well as planning what you want to convey, think about what you want to ask. Some things you may not want to hear, but the benefits of asking may well outweigh the discomfort. Questions can help set the tone for a two-way conversation, and yield answers which open your mind to a new understanding of yourself and the other person. In addition, it's useful to have a goal in mind ahead of the conversation, and to think about how you can best express it.

Rehearse the other person

Depending on how well you know the other person, you can also prepare by trying to imagine things from their perspective.

How might the other person feel?

Even if you turn out to be very wrong, the act of imagining yourself into the other person's position can itself help to transform a broken relationship. If you think something is wrong, it is likely that the other person does too. And if you are upset by something that has happened, it is likely that the other person is too.

How might the other person respond to what I say or do?

You may be able to guess how they will react to what you say, and use this to prepare better for the conversation. One way to guess is to imagine how you yourself would react in the same situation, with the important caveat that you may be wrong.

What might they want to express to me or ask me?

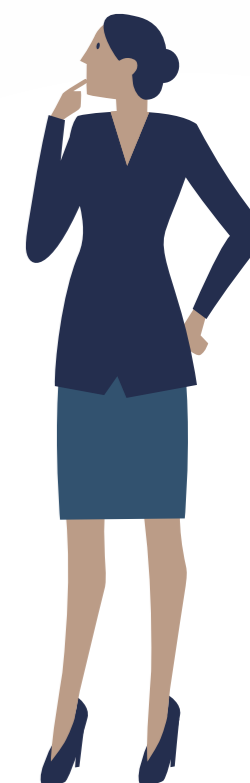
Finally, you can anticipate what they might say to you, or ask of you, and prepare mentally how you might receive it and respond.

4) Set up the conversation

There are also practical decisions to be made in terms of how to set up the conversation.

When should we have the conversation?

If possible, don't rush these conversations. After all, you want to get the best possible outcome, and for this, being in the right frame of mind is key. It can be good to take a step back in order to gain perspective. This can be done through the kind of preparation described above. Another way to gain perspective is to change your environment or take some exercise, in order to get yourself in the ideal state for the conversation.



“*It can help to get out of the building. I'm a great believer in the walk and talk. Then you don't have to eyeball the other person. It can create a sense of escape – not feeling trapped in a seat.*

Kisane

By not rushing into it, you allow time for the other person to prepare too. And importantly, if you are both calm and not in fight, flight or freeze mode, you are more likely to listen to each other and think and act rationally.

Where should we have the conversation?

Physical environment has a huge impact on how we communicate. I remember hearing a story from a man who worked with troubled teenagers in Egypt. Whenever he had a problem with one of the young people, he took them for a walk in the desert. By the time they got back, the problem seemed to have disappeared. It may not be possible to have every courageous conversation in the desert, but the park around the corner will set a very different tone compared with a dingy meeting room. So whenever possible, try to have this conversation in an informal environment, where you will both be more relaxed.

How can I make it happen?

You may choose to contact the other person and arrange a time and a place to get together. Or be spontaneous and wait for the right moment to arrive. It's also possible that the conversation ends up happening under circumstances far from ideal.

Whether pre-planned or spontaneous, you will need to invite the other person into the conversation. The way you frame this invitation will impact how the conversation unfolds. See some sample wording to start the conversations on the following page.

You can also signal that you are looking for a two-way conversation and tell them why you want to have the conversation.

“*It's all about how we position it. For example, you could say: "I need to say something to you that might be difficult to hear, but I want to say it because I want to have a good relationship with you.*

Alex

“*Let them know that you'd like to hear how they see it and explain your perspective.*

Danielle

Examples of How to Introduce a Courageous Conversation:

I wanted to speak with you because I sense some tension between us and I wanted to ask whether you feel this too.

I value our working relationship and I enjoy the work we do together. In the last few weeks, I have felt that we haven't gotten along like we used to. Do you have time for a coffee now so that we can sit together and talk about how things are going?

I am not sure if you are aware of this, but I was upset by the email you sent to me last week. I would really like to understand where you were coming from and also explain to you how it made me feel.

I have noticed that you are copying our supervisor into emails you send me. I wanted to speak with you about how that came about. Please can we talk about it.

Do you have time to speak about the team meeting that ended up in an argument between you and I? I have been feeling upset about this and I can imagine that it was hard for you too.

I wanted to talk to you about something that happened at work this week. I am feeling nervous about bringing it up. I hope we can talk about it together openly, and listen to each other's perspectives.

I appreciate all of your hard work on the project. I have some concerns about the update you shared in the team meeting. I want to speak with you one-to-one to hear your views and to share mine.



Step 2: During the conversation

Suppose your invitation has been accepted, what can you do or say to make the conversation as rewarding as possible? Bearing in mind the usual caveat that every case is unique, here are some points to bear in mind:

Role model

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. Emphasise that you want to hear their side of the story. As well as the words you use, be aware of your facial expressions and body language.

Share goals

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, rather than worse.

Express gratitude

Thank them for making time to speak with you and for sharing their views.

Acknowledge responsibility

Everyone has a part to play. Remind the other person that you also have a role to play in the conflict and that you want to speak to them to resolve the issue, not to cast blame.

“In my workplace mediation experience, colleagues are able to move on from many high conflict issues when there is an apology or acknowledgment of wrongdoing.”

Anna

Empathy

Acknowledge feelings – your own and those of the other person. This is critical to a courageous conversation. Speak about how you feel and ask the other person how they feel. Show empathy. You can do this by saying things like: “I could see that you were also upset by what I said,” or “I can hear this is difficult for you.”

Don't make it personal

When we feel criticised, we often feel the need to defend ourselves, and we tend to criticise back. Once the cycle has begun it can be hard to break.

“To help depersonalise conflict, you can think of it as an opportunity to solve a riddle. Two people have got stuck in a negative behaviour pattern. How can we unstick it so it becomes more fluid and positive?”

Alex

Little offerings

What can we offer to help move the conversation forward? What could I have done differently with the benefit of hindsight? Is there something I should apologise for?

Be open to disappointment

Just because you offer an olive branch, does not automatically mean you will get one back. Be prepared for that. And remember that we cannot control other people's behaviour.

Be open to the other person

If your attitude is one of openness and curiosity towards the other person, this will be reflected through the way you speak and act.

Be open to the possibility of change

When in conflict, it's easy to make assumptions about how things will turn out.

Be patient

Don't expect instant results. The conversation may still be a success if it sets something in motion which unfolds over the coming weeks or months.

Take a break

I have a recurring courageous conversation with my mother about my life choices, which crops up at regular intervals. I recently discovered a trick that works brilliantly for me. When my blood starts to boil, I tell her I'm off for a run. I return in a completely different state, often armed with insights and decisions that open up new possibilities for when the conversation next crops up – as it always does.

Forgiveness

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

“We need to believe that things might be different this time.”

Alex

Step 3: After the conversation

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

Self-acknowledgement

Don't underestimate what you and the other person have just been through. Be aware that having a courageous conversation can be emotionally and physically draining, as well as energising and rewarding.

Gratitude

Get in touch to say thank you for the conversation. This will help to break the tension further and it will show the other person that having these conversations is worthwhile.

“Alex will always get in touch after we've had a courageous conversation to thank me. It makes a big difference. The awkwardness after these conversations can be reduced by a quick text or call.”

Anna

Continue the conversation

Look for opportunities to follow up your conversation. There may be opportunities to build on progress.

Other stakeholders

There may be other people affected by the relationship. Think about their needs and whether you need to communicate anything to them in the light of your courageous conversation.

Share your experience

Your courageous conversation may be a learning opportunity not only for you, but for other people too. Look for opportunities to share your experiences.

Quick Reference Guide to Having a Courageous Conversation

Step 1: Before the Conversation

- Check in with yourself
- Decide whether to have the conversation
- Rehearse the conversation
- Set up the conversation



Step 2: During the Conversation

- Role model
- Share goals
- Express gratitude
- Empathy
- Acknowledge responsibility
- Don't make it personal
- Little offerings
- Be open to disappointment
- Be open to the other person
- Be open to the possibility of change
- Be patient
- Take a break
- Forgiveness

Step 3: After the conversation

- Self-acknowledgement
- Gratitude
- Continue the conversation
- Other stakeholders
- Share your experience

Common Concerns

1. What happens if my courageous conversation doesn't work?

Even if the conversation doesn't go well this time around, you can come back and try again at a later stage. Perhaps the other person wasn't in the right mindset for the conversation at this particular time. But they may be next time.

In our experience, whatever the outcome of the conversation, you will gain useful information and insights to help you both to make decisions about how to move forward.

2. There isn't a one-off incident that I want to discuss, but hundreds of them. I could go back years with my examples!

When we are having difficulties with someone, it can be tempting to bring up countless examples of when we felt let down, hurt, angry, disappointed. Sometimes, we carry this burden around with us for many years. Only you can decide how far back you want to go. You need to think about how useful it is to bring up lots of examples versus focusing on just a few recent ones. What is more likely to achieve your goal and allow for a constructive conversation?

Hopefully, when you practice some of the techniques in this guide, you will deal with issues as quickly as possible in the future. One key message we would like to leave with you is that issues are much easier to resolve when we have the courage to speak up early, and not let concerns fester and grow.

3. I'm nervous about opening up in front of my colleague because trust has broken down.

Trust is important in all relationships, and it is often eroded in conflict situations. It's natural to feel concern about speaking honestly with someone you are having difficulties with.

Our research¹ into people's experiences of workplace mediation suggests that being open can have a significant impact. According to our research, people who openly expressed their feelings and needs, and listened to those of the other person, often found unexpected results which helped them to let go of their issues and move on.

Conclusion

Courageous conversations matter. Not just because they help ease painful and costly conflicts, but because they are opportunities to learn about ourselves and one another. 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 making them happen lies with all of us.**

¹ "Preparing to Mediate: A Guide for First Time Mediation Users." Consensio publication. (2014). Available: www.consensiopartners.co.uk/resources/consensio-thought-leadership

About Consensio

Consensio is one of the UK's leading providers of conflict management and workplace mediation services. We believe that conflict is best resolved through dialogue.

Our clients span the private, public and third sectors and include: the **BBC, British Gas, Bupa, Cancer Research UK, Channel 4 Television, Independent Office for Police Conduct, Lloyd's of London, London Gatwick Airport, Nespresso, Net-A-Porter, NHS Trusts, Ogilvy, Rank Group, Sony, Standard Life, Unicef, University of Cambridge, Virgin Trains, Westminster City Council, The White Company** and **WWF**. In 2012, Consensio was awarded the Government contract to set up two regional mediation pilots. We partnered with the **UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)** on this project.



Acknowledgments

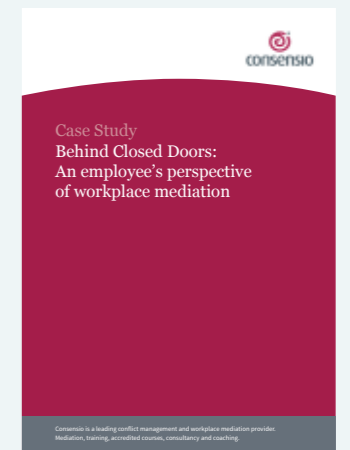
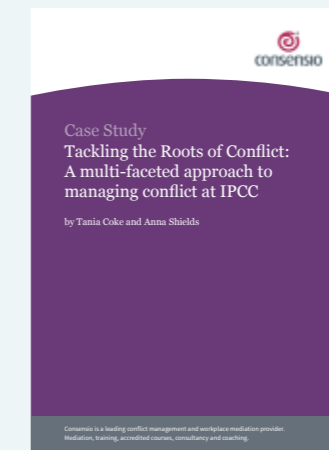
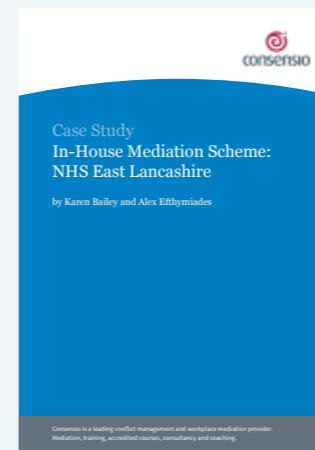
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