

## 3 Ways To Handle A Communication Breakdown At Work

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28 January 2022

It's been easier to avoid challenging working relationships over the last two years because many workers have not been in the office. But as the return to the office accelerates, many will inevitably have to communicate face-to-face again with 'difficult' colleagues – the boss who won't budge an inch, or the colleague who storms off at the first sign of challenge.

When relationships deteriorate, it can be hard to know what to do as there is often a fear of making things worse. Here are three ways to approach a challenging situation that can help break the deadlock or soothe hurt feelings.

### **When tempers are frayed – Press pause**

In the heat of the moment, we may say things during a conversation that trigger negativity and strong emotions. Meanings or intentions can be misinterpreted, fueling further escalation. When the red mist descends, it can be difficult to keep an open mind or listen well, and two-way communication breaks down.

When a situation reaches boiling point, pausing the conversation can be effective. Consciously take a few seconds to pause, take a few deep breaths, relax tense muscles, and adjust your body posture. This helps to calm the brain's fight-flight-freeze (FFF) response and gives an opportunity to regulate, and choose to continue more calmly and with control.

Some situations require pausing *and* taking a break from the conversation. If people involved are stressed or anxious, suggest that the conversation is continued at a later stage. Taking time away allows everyone space for reflection, and the opportunity to consider the bigger picture and gain perspective. It is important to pick up the discussion again, and not leave it too long, as unresolved issues tend to fester and grow.

### **When you hit a brick wall – Press replay**

Stalemate can be frustrating for everyone. Sometimes, despite discussing a problem for a while, a solution cannot be found, and consensus cannot be reached. When people become entrenched in their views, and unwilling to give ground or discuss other options, it is difficult to break the deadlock.

A helpful technique is to 'play back' the conversation. There are two ways to do this. Reflecting back can be done in the moment, by picking up on something that has just been said and effectively replaying it. Another way is to summarize, drawing together the main points raised throughout a discussion. For instance, saying, "So, the most important thing to you is...".

'Play back' is useful as it moves away from reiterating the same points, and shows a desire to understand or clarify, rather than judge. It can help parties to get a better understanding of their own and others' perspectives. When someone hears what they've just said replayed back, it can lead to a shift, e.g., "No, that's not the only option, just the one I prefer," or reveal a misunderstanding, "Actually no, the most important thing to me is...", opening the door to a new avenue of discussion.

### **When feelings have been hurt – Show compassion**

Good working relationships are built on trust, understanding, and respect. When relationships break down, it can cause distress for everyone involved. Maybe something has been said that has caused pain, a manager's actions have broken the contract of trust with their colleague, or a worker feels undervalued.

Validation and empathy can help to rebuild trust, understanding, and respect. This can be done by acknowledging a colleague's feelings, without necessarily agreeing with their point of view. For example, "I recognize how upset you were when that happened" or "I see how difficult this has been for you" validates the genuine emotions the other person is experiencing. This will make the other person feel heard. Empathy can also be demonstrated by listening without interruption or challenge and asking questions to better understand the other person's point of view.

Validating emotions acknowledges the impact that a situation is having and signals support, care, and respect. Most people want to be heard and feel that they are 'seen.' When one person shows empathy, another will often follow suit, deescalating the situation further and helping both parties reconnect.

So, if avoiding the 'jerk in the office' is no longer an option, press pause or replay and heal wounds with a little TLC.