



Tough Work Conversations Can Send People Running for Cover

By Kathy Gurchiek

October 17, 2019

The specter of having a difficult conversation about work with a boss or colleague can cause sleepless nights and feelings of dread. In some cases, people would rather quit their jobs than have "the talk."

"The most common scary conversations are the ones around performance," said Justin Hale, trainer at VitalSmarts. But broken promises, unmet expectations and obnoxious behavior are nearly as difficult to tackle as tough conversations.

An online poll of 540 people found that half of them avoided the other party—in a few cases for more than two years—rather than broach a crucial conversation in the workplace. The findings are from a survey Hale and Joseph Grenny, author of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), conducted in September. Other head-in-the-sand tactics included:

- Considering quitting or taking a different job (37 percent).
- Dancing around the topic when speaking with the other party (37 percent).
- Resigning (11 percent).

Some called in sick (5.9 percent) to delay the conversation or transferred the other person to work elsewhere within the company (1.85 percent).

That Feeling of Dread

When it comes to having a crucial conversation with the boss, emotions are even stronger.

"People get extra scared when they're talking to a boss or someone more senior than them [because] of the fear of retribution," Hale pointed out.

Proximity to the person you're having problems with causes significant dread. Difficult conversations with a teammate ranked second highest, after those with a boss and ahead of conversations with senior leaders, direct reports, customers and HR.

It can seem easier to put off the talk if the other party may be confrontational.

Hale recalled an extreme case involving a manager who oversaw a nurse considered dangerously incompetent. Rather than confront the

nurse, the manager routinely sent a second nurse to check on the patient after the first nurse left the patient's room.

People typically think the negative consequences of addressing a touchy subject outweigh any good that may result. The workplace culture may not reward people for speaking up, Hale said, and people may fret about the outcome. The other party may be obnoxious but talented, for example, and the manager fears the conversation will cause that hard-to-replace employee to leave.

Or the person knows the conversation is necessary but doesn't want to be seen as the bad guy.

"They're worried about hurting people's feelings—'Will it really be that bad if I don't bring [the problem] up?' It's uncomfortable. Even managers get worried about having those conversations."

The supervisor also may not have been schooled in how to adroitly address difficult issues.

"Most of the people are scared," Hale said, "because they don't know how to hold the conversation. It's a competency gap that causes a confidence gap."

Here are some steps managers can take to have crucial conversations (https://www.talkworkculture.com/?_ga=2.64049068.2067481774.1571273993-1520548982.1544714822).

Talk with the person in private. Difficult conversations should not be handled by e-mail, texts or voice mail. Hale advised setting a cordial, professional tone at the beginning of the meeting by explaining your good intentions. That does not mean buttering up the other person, he added.

"Say, 'I want to give you quick feedback [about what] might be causing you some issues in team meetings,' " and then share some helpful tips. "Most people want [the news] straight up. Act like an adult and set a meeting." Avoiding those talks because having them will be uncomfortable is "the ultimate side of selfishness."

In fact, nearly 4 in 10 working Americans say their manager fails to frequently engage in honest conversations about work topics, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). One in 5 Americans are uncomfortable having such conversations with their manager, which may suggest that many people managers fail to create an environment of trust and psychological safety.

The findings are from SHRM's report "The High Cost of a Toxic Workplace Culture: How Culture Impacts the Workforce—and the Bottom Line (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/toxic-workplace-culture-report.aspx)," using data drawn from interviews conducted in July 2019 with 1,014 adults in the U.S.

Hale offered the following tips for conducting difficult conversations:

Assume the best of others. Perhaps the person you need to talk to is unaware of his or her actions that have prompted the meeting. Enter the conversation as a curious friend rather than as an angry co-worker.

Use tentative language. When describing the problem, start by saying, "I'm not sure you're intending this ... " or "I'm not even sure you're aware... "

"That's not being mousy," Hale said. It's a perfect blend of confidence and humility, he noted, because you will not come across as all-

knowing. And stay away from hot-button words such as "liar," "lazy" and "loser" and hyperbole such as "always" and "never."

People often use such language because they feel justified in the belief that the other person is not a team player.

"In reality, using those words doesn't do anything for the conversation or in helping the person change."

Share facts, not conclusions. Not only may your conclusions be wrong, but they may also cause the other person to be defensive.

"It's OK to have opinions; it's OK to have conclusions," Hale said. "[But] you want to start with 'This is what I saw, this is what I noticed.' That is always going to be the better place to start."

Share what can be measured—such as behavior observed during meetings or interactions—to get the conversation on common ground, and build from there.

Ask for the other person's viewpoint, and treat him or her equally and with respect. The person may see the problem differently. Trying to understand the other person's perspective sets the conversation up as one about healthy behavior.

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

Email Address

Feedback

**CONTACT US (WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX) | 800.283.SHRM
(7476)**

© 2019 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

Disclaimer (www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)