

# Fact-File 35: Keeping Conversations with difficult Performers positive...



Extracts from our **Guide on Positive Performance Conversations**

## Discussions we Dread

Dealing with poor performance, as most leaders will tell you, is one of the most commonly-avoided and widely-feared species of difficult discussions.

- ❑ There's a widespread, well-known reluctance amongst managers to raise hard issues or give difficult feedback.
- ❑ Even the most hardened leaders can come up with a multitude of excuses to avoid or delay a difficult performance conversation.
- ❑ Most would rather walk on hot coals than have to conduct a conversation with a low or difficult performer.



Organisations spend millions on performance management systems, but in the end, many managers still side-step, defer, delay or totally avoid conversations with difficult performers. No matter what side of the conversation you're on, it's likely to provoke anxiety, even outright panic.

## Getting off to a Bad Start

Let's face it: lots of us aren't all that crash-hot when it comes to performance conversations, whether it's with difficult or good performers. We:

- ❑ Say the wrong things (even the right things) in the wrong way – that raises defensiveness and derails the discussion.
- ❑ Get staff off-side by putting things in negative ways rather than focusing on the positive.
- ❑ Confuse or irritate with vague assessments or platitudinous advice about how to improve.
- ❑ Make it unsafe for them to engage, because they feel blamed, ticked-off, judged or troubled by how the conversation's going.
- ❑ Monopolise the conversation and make it one-sided. Like any good conversation, it should be two-way – *but you already knew that*.

To make things worse, most of us have put off having this conversation for far too long. *At what stage do most managers typically intervene when there's a poor performance issue?* You'd like to think the answer was early on, to nip a downward performance trend in the bud. Or at least you'd expect some action when a pattern became noticeable. But in a recent survey:

- ❑ Less than 10% of managers actually tackle a performance issue early-on or as soon as it

arises by having an informal conversation to correct or coach.

- ❑ 50% wait for a known pattern to develop and sometimes they said this can equate to months and even years!
- ❑ But this is the really scary bit: 40% of managers wait till they feel like firing the person before having the conversation.

You have to tackle poor performers eventually – and it's better to do it earlier than later. Here's the main reason you can't let poor performance go: it's not fair to others who are performing well or doing the right thing. When they see you turn a blind-eye, they feel it's inconsistent. They lose respect for you and sometimes, they'll even slacken-off too in silent protest.

## Fear of Defensiveness

Why do so many steer clear or stall when it comes to difficult performance conversations? It's *not* being able to identify performance issues or not-knowing about them, that's an obstacle...

- ❑ The number one fear we have with difficult performance conversations is fear of raising defensiveness. It's an unnerving, unavoidable side-effect of all difficult discussions.
- ❑ It raises ire, indignation, acrimony, blame, belligerence, denial, despondency, throwing us off-balance emotionally.

Giving hard feedback to people whose reaction is likely to be emotionally volatile and where the conversational course you chart is unpredictable, is certainly no walk-in-the-park. More, as we say, like 'mucking about in a mine-field'.

- ❑ The other major obstacle that puts off a lot of people is not feeling confident to manage defensiveness once we do raise it.
- ❑ Leaders often feel under-prepared when they do have a difficult performance conversation, and more than likely say stuff that makes things worse and raises more defensiveness.
- ❑ The conversation gets clumsy, uncomfortable for both parties, loses focus and momentum or turns ugly. So it becomes easier to just avoid re-occurring confrontations like this altogether than address performance issues.

When it comes down to it, there's no real mystery why both managers steer clear of hard talks and staff don't like being on the receiving end either!

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## Mistakes we Make

We make so many handling-mistakes during difficult performance talks, that it's impossible to list them all. Here's a few of the big ones:

- ❑ **Mind made-up:** many managers deliver pre-formed judgments on people's performance deficiencies. They see this as being positively assertive. The person on the other end sees it as controlling, coercive. They're unlikely to open up and far more likely to get defensive.
- ❑ **Bullet-proof briefs:** Not under-wear. Like any good lawyer, most managers feel they have to prepare a bullet-proof brief with dates, times and facts to prove them guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt. It's what most staff fear – 'being carpeted'. A performance conversation isn't a courtroom conviction.
- ❑ **Start with condemnation:** All too often, from an employee's point of view, when a manager starts a performance discussion, it sounds like finger-pointing, fault-finding, coercive or disciplinary. Confronted with the charge list and slim chance of a fair-hearing, staff feel accused so they defend dispute the details.
- ❑ **Judgement and Criticism:** What you have to say often comes across in a harsh, "let me tell you what's wrong with you" tone. Poorly crafted, clumsily-delivered messages trigger more defensiveness, as you sneak in (often unwittingly) your own conclusions that come out in phrases like "careless about", "lacking in..." or "incapable of..."
- ❑ **Focus on negatives:** Invariably, managers put things in negative ways – what they *don't* want, what staff *can't* do or what they *lack*. It



reinforces the negative in our brains and leaves us with little idea of what positive performance looks like.

So whisk-away the wig, down the gown, stop judging... Just be curious.

Condemnation triggers defensiveness. Both parties conclude this issue is beyond hope of getting a fair hearing. The case gets closed or suspended – pending a further hearing and you're both back to square one. *Another day in court!*

## Staying on the Positive Side

Making poor performance conversations positive, judgment-free and constructive, means crafting messages that are *sayable* and *hearable*.

- ❑ '*Sayable*' means I say what I need to say in an honest, straightforward way without trying to cushion or dilute the message, but also without being blunt, blaming or abrasive.
- ❑ '*Hearable*' means putting the message in a way that doesn't raise too much undue defensiveness. It's likely they will experience some defensiveness but if how you say it escalates this, they stop hearing and paying attention, and start defending.

*Positive performance conversations* work on a simple principle: **focus more on the future positive performance you want** and put it positively, don't dwell on past misdeeds expressed negatively.

- ❑ Focusing less on what's wrong and more on what's expected creates a different emotional climate that enables you to give difficult feedback in more constructive ways.
- ❑ It also helps on the receiving end, keeping dignity intact and defensiveness down so they hear what you have to say more easily
- ❑ People learn what's expected of them with positive descriptions of the performance as opposed to what's wrong with them.

Bypassing deficits and spending more time describing negative behaviour in positive terms, allows people to respond more positively and focus on solution-finding and new commitments – the goal of giving feedback in the first place.

As you'd expect, there's an emotional dimension to giving negative feedback positively. In a recent study, one set of people got negative performance feedback, but it was relayed with positive emotional signals like good-natured nods and warm smiles. The other group got positive performance feedback, delivered with critical emotional signals like grim frowns and narrowed eyes. You can guess what the result was. The people who received positive feedback with negative emotional signals felt worse about their performance than those who got the negative feedback in a positive way. Looks like how we emotionally deliver performance feedback isn't just as important as the message, it's more important.

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## 5 Conversational Footings...

In building terms, *footings* are the foundations a framework is built on. Without firm footings, any framework is likely to be unstable.

In positive performance conversations, making sure you have good footings in place before you start is equally essential. Here's the 5 Footings we cover in our performance coaching clinic:

### ► Footing 1: Handle your Hijacks.

When defensive feelings flare, they're likely to take us over and disrupt the entire conversation. Whether it's theirs or ours, if emotions take control and run riot over reason, we're hijacked! The first footing is about staying emotionally balanced – learning how to regulate and control our emotions as well as engage positively with the other person's too.

### ► Footing 2: Put Safety First.

What we're talking about here is conversational safety. People get defensive in performance conversations if they feel attacked or maligned. This triggers their fight-flight response. Feeling unsafe, they either retreat into sullen silence, or retaliate, get blunt, abrasive or blaming. We need to be alert to people starting to feel unsafe and be able to stem defensiveness by restoring a sense of safety.

### ► Footing 3: Check your Story

Often unwittingly, we make up stories about the other person in a performance conversation that either fan flames or keep us cool, calm and collected. These stories have a big influence on what we say and do, and how we handle things. They can throw us off-balance, hijack us emotionally and lead us to lose the plot, mishandling the entire conversation. We need to check our stories and control them.

### ► Footing 4: Stay Connected

To successfully navigate a tricky performance conversation, you have to connect with the other person and then stay connected. If either of us disconnect, your chances of a good outcome are drastically reduced. This means being able to notice signs that you or they are disconnecting and then finding the right conversational strategy to get back in connection and refocus the conversation.

### ► Footing 5: Describe the Gap positively.

This last footing is the *keystone* (to mix up my building metaphors) of performance discussions. We think we're clear on the performance gap we describe. Yet when it comes to putting it into words, we're often vague, judgmental or way too general, instead of concrete, specific and factual. Even if we are specific, we tend to describe gaps in negative ways rather than bypass deficiencies, and put them in terms of the positive performance we want to see.

## ...And 5 Frameworks

While there's no one 'right way' to conduct a performance conversation, it helps to have some frameworks to follow, even if you depart from this and take a different path during the actual conversation.

The 5 Frameworks provide some structure and steps to help you construct and conduct a performance conversation.



### ► 1ST FRAMEWORK: Plan & Prepare

Planning and preparation always pays off and the 5 footings help you here.

- ◆ Why not map a series of steps to work through in this conversation. Identify the performance issues you want to raise and plan how to raise them.
- ◆ Assemble facts and think about the feedback you want to give – what to say and how to say it.
- ◆ But most importantly, reflect on what a good job looks like and be ready to describe it.

### ► 2ND FRAMEWORK: Connecting & Commencing

Starting well is crucial to reduce defensiveness and ensure better engagement and outcomes. You're running the show, so it's more than likely they'll expect you to start. This involves:

- ◆ Creating a safe climate, allaying anxieties and exchanging ideas on expectations and outcomes for the conversation.
- ◆ Rehearsing how you want to start and how to best raise any touchy topics. Be clear and name the issue neutrally, without any false praise or cushioning
- ◆ Having raised the issue, your next job is get them to tell you their version of events.

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## ► THE 3RD FRAMEWORK: Raising & Appraising

We named this framework to reflect an obvious two-step conversational move: you will *raise* an issue, and then *appraise it* with the person. *Appraising* means finding out about this issue together: what's happening, why and what a better performance might look like. As you work through this 3<sup>rd</sup> Framework:

- ◆ You may decide (if it's a formal appraisal) to start by reviewing what's been achieved – milestones or progress since you last spoke. *Though not always.* If it's a difficult issue just name it. Don't beat around the bush.
- ◆ If there's a list of issues longer than your arm, don't try to squeeze them all in. Work out for yourself what you think the priority ones are to focus on. You might ask them to do the same.
- ◆ As you raise priority issues, name them neutrally, put them positively then explore gaps or growth areas with the person, as well as the future performance required.
- ◆ When it comes to difficult performers, starting neutrally and naming the issue factually without inflammatory words, is *the* most important thing.

At the end of this framework, you'll probably have a list of main things you want to explore further, find solutions to and set improvement goals. This takes us on to our next framework.

## ► 4TH FRAMEWORK: Coaching & Consolidating

This is the part of the performance conversation where you turn from appraising to coaching, from performance problems to solutions. You may:

- ◆ Ask them which issues are most important to address and agree between you, a few priority ones rather than try to deal with too many and just skim over all of them.
- ◆ Choose a few improvement issues to address work-specific performance and a couple that may meet their personal development needs. Sometimes, an issue can combine both.
- ◆ Explore challenges, setbacks, skills and performance required to improve with this issue. Ask the person what solutions or ideas they have to get better at this.

Once you've agreed on solutions or different approaches, you can set goals and begin the process of creating a performance improvement plan together.

## ► THE 5TH FRAMEWORK: Finishing & Follow-Up

It's important to finish clearly, tightly and positively. This means identifying try-out actions and practice opportunities to help them achieve performance improvement goals you've identified together. It's important to remember to:

- ◆ Re-clarify what a good performance looks like and find milestones that may mark an improvement
- ◆ Consolidate performance plans in terms of actions, timeframes and responsibilities. This includes what they commit to do and what support you commit to help them.
- ◆ Set follow-up dates for further discussions or coaching. You also need to be very clear with people that if they encounter problems or obstacles in meeting what's been agreed, they need to get back to you.

## Real Performance Management...

Isn't just about measuring frameworks, recording mechanisms, or a routine matter of ticking boxes and filling in forms – though some of us obsess on this as if it's the real game, when it's not. It also isn't only about control or correction – though again many staff see it as just that, because that's the spirit in which it's often done.

It should also *not* be seen purely as a punitive, disciplinary procedure for poor-performers or a process to make sure you're covered in case of potential litigation, but again that's the motive of many.

We think real performance management resides in the continuous rounds of conversations leaders should be having with their people, as a natural part of the way you want to lead and they want to improve. ◆

The Change Forum conducts practical 1 & 2-day coaching clinics for leaders who want to improve the way they handle performance conversations - especially difficult ones. For more information on **Positive Performance Conversations** or our staff preparation clinic **Making Performance Conversations Work for You ...contact us on**

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