



Performance Conversations: Telling it Straight...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching master class on Positive Performance Conversations

© Bill Cropper 2011-16

Why can't I just tell them straight-out?

I've noticed in the *Positive Performance Conversations* clinics I run that many of us secretly harbour the thought: *"Why can't I just say what I think and speak my mind without worrying about how the other person might mistake it, get offended or grow defensive? Why do I have to bend over backwards, dressing it up in polite, time-wasting, fluffy or flowery verbiage?"*

Wouldn't it be great and so economical to just do this? Sometimes we can with people who know us. We just say what we have to say and it seems to work just fine. But even with friends, there are times as we know all too well, when this goes awry too. We tread on their daisies, step on their toes, press their buttons. And when it comes to troublesome topics, contentious confrontations and performance conversations, being too blunt and direct can really derail your whole discussion.

Is straight-talk bad? It's a question that invariably comes up in my clinics. My answer? *"That depends on what you think straight-talk is."* Often when people feel they're being open and honest, they misinterpret this as: *"Good. Now I can really tell them what I think about this and not have to pull any punches."* We often come across people who see themselves as being 'straight-talkers'. They say they're 'upfront', 'direct', 'open', 'honest' 'business-like' ('brutal' may be optional) – that they don't 'beat around the bush'. They 'tell it like it is'. They think they come across as direct. But those on the receiving end of such straight-talk can find them stern, abrasive, over-bearing, offensive, curt or lacking in tact or sensitivity.

Managers who take a hard-line in hard performance conversations sometimes say giving difficult feedback or tackling poor performers doesn't concern them that much. If the other person gets defensive, that's just too bad. They need to 'harden-up'. We expect the other person to 'take it on the chin – without flinching'. The idea they may need to soften-up a little and be a bit more mindful about the messages they give, simply doesn't cross their minds. These people don't feel the need to be tentative, conditional or concerned about the impact what they say and how they say it, has on others. Sometimes they're oblivious. Other times, they're ruthless – and take no prisoners. It's a costly strategy if you want constructive outcomes.

Sometimes our so-called 'straight-talk' backs people into a corner. To continue our boxing metaphor, we get them 'up against the ropes' with what they regard as unfair judgements, harsh criticisms, personal attacks or even just confronting truths. We may think this straight and to the point but it's not well received when we spatter a performance conversation with 'below-the-belt' jabs like *"This is inadequate, unacceptable, unprofessional, not good enough...etc."* Passing judgments like these on someone, then

voicing them during a performance conversation may sound direct to you but it only raises defensiveness – and when people get defensive they stop listening or only listen to fend off more attacks.

You may still think being tactful is tantamount to being soft. But if you want to resolve a performance issue, get people back on track and preserve the relationship, you need to see what you say from the other's person's perspective too, not just your own. So tone down your language. Don't use colourful, judgmental terms. Stick to the facts and ensure you use neutral language to describe those performance gaps.



And that's the coaching focus of The Change Forum's **Positive Performance Conversations** program. Whether you're dealing with performers who are great, good or troubling, the principles and tools we share in our clinic and the 100-page self-coaching Guide that accompanies it, can help you prepare for meaningful conversations about performance and handle them mindfully, delivering even touchy or sensitive feedback in positive, encouraging ways.

We also help staff become better prepared for handling performance conversations. **Making Performance Conversations Work for You** encourages staff to become more conversationally aware, less inclined to react defensively, more willing to engage positively with constructive performance feedback and to participate thoughtfully in developing solutions for future performance. This clinic is delivered in-house as either a full-day or half-day session, with a tailored self-coaching Toolkit to support staff in preparing for their next performance conversation.

See our on-line **Course Calendar** for public clinic dates in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more leaders or staff, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line **Enquiry** form or call **Bill Cropper** direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

More on *Positive Performance Conversations* on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

- **Articles and tips** on Performance Conversations to read or download
- Back-issues of our **CC E-News** e-zine or free **FactFiles** to read and share
- Review our on-line **Course Calendar** for up-coming scheduled events in your area
- Consult our full **Directory of Programs** for outlines of other programs available publicly and in-house
- **Contact us** anytime to **enquire** about individual **coaching**, in-house clinics or our general **consulting services**

BILL CROPPER – Director, The Change Forum

Tel: +61-(0)7-4068 7591

Mob: +61-(0)429-687 513

Email: billc@thechangeforum.com  