

Stalled from the Start –getting your difficult discussion off to a better beginning...



by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching clinic on Dealing with Difficult Discussions © Bill Cropper 2003-16

In my *Difficult Discussions* clinics, we spend a lot of time looking at common conversational errors we make as we try to bring up troublesome topics. We raise issues in a blaming way, say things that spark defensiveness, or put people on the back-foot by trying to impose our version of the story without even hearing theirs first.

Many of the hurdles we stumble over stall us right from the start and we don't even see how we put them there all by ourselves to begin with! Once they're pointed out, most people find they can make a few adjustments to what they say, or how they say it which can help make for better beginnings. At least that's a start!

Let's take Leigh, a new principal, as an example. He notices that Louise, a long-term teacher at the school, is the only one not handing in her lesson plans on time. It's part of school assessment and while everyone else is on time, Louise's plans always seem to be late or missing entirely. Leigh feels this shows Louise isn't committed and doesn't support him. He needs to speak with her. Here's how he started...



Leigh: "Louise, I just want to say that when you don't hand things into me on time, I feel that you don't support me...Or is it that you feel this whole activity is not worthwhile?"

Louise: "What makes you think I don't support you? I come out to the school on weekends and help with a whole lot of stuff around here – including organising the school play in my own time!"

Leigh: "All I'm trying to do is find out why your lesson plans are never in on time when everyone else's are. Is it that you don't support me or do you think that the whole activity is worthless?"

Louise: "My lesson plans not being in on time has nothing to do with me supporting you or not."

Leigh: "Well, I'm sorry but I think it does. It's me who has to front the school assessment and if all lesson plans are not in order, I'm the one who has to take the responsibility. So I think not caring about getting them done says you're not supporting me – and you're not thinking about the school either!"

Starting a difficult conversation well is crucial. For both parties, it's probably one of the most stressful moments. If you're initiating the conversation, it's also the most critical thing to get right because it can make all the difference to where your discussion goes from there and how it ends up! What we say to start pretty much determines the direction and tone it takes from there. If you set the wrong tone or say the wrong thing, everything turns disaster-like and then it's hard to turn things around.

Let's see what there is to learn from Leigh's start, and what adjustments he can make to get a better beginning.

HURDLE #1: Don't be so certain you're right

Leigh's gone into the conversation with his mind already made up. He's got a story about Louise that she not only isn't supporting him (and probably undermining him too) but she also doesn't care about the school. Don't assume intentions or make up motives on behalf of the other person.

The adjustment? Remind yourself that you don't know the whole story or why they've done something. Be interested to find out their story and curious about what they intended. Use the "I'm wondering" formula. For example, Leigh could have asked: *"Louise, I'm wondering how come you seem to be having trouble getting your lesson plans in?"*

HURDLE #2: Don't start with a Blaming YOU

Our first aim in a difficult discussion should be to understand. Instead, many of us begin with a "blaming YOU statement" – then they get defensive. Leigh hits Louise with 3 direct blame statements signalled by you: *"You don't hand things into me on time"; "You don't support me" and "You feel the activity is not worthwhile"*. It's a blaming broadside guaranteed to get her defensive.

The adjustment? Get "YOU" out of the start of your difficult discussion. It's a blame-marker. Substitute "I" instead (eg. Not *"You don't hand things in on time"* – try *"I need those lesson plans in on time"*. Or try to describe the situation neutrally without using a 'You' blame statement, followed by the impact. For example: *"When things don't get handed in on time, I don't feel supported and start to wonder whether people feel the activity is not worthwhile..."*

HURDLE #3: Don't start with your side of the story

There are always two sides and often more. Starting with yours' first only draws a defensive reaction. It says to the other person you're on the right-foot and they're on the wrong-foot. If they agreed with your story, you wouldn't be having this difficult conversation in the first place.

The adjustment? Always start with the facts and describe the issue neutrally in a single sentence or two, without sneaking in any of your bias. Then invite them to tell their story first. For instance Leigh could have said: *"I want to talk over what's happening with your lesson plans. I need you to get them to me on time and I'd like to explore what might be stopping that from happening."*

HURDLE #4: Don't move into an argument space with them

When Louise refutes Leigh's imputation that she doesn't support him (*"My lesson plans not being in on time has nothing to do with me supporting you or not."*) and Leigh comes back bluntly with *"Well, I'm sorry but I think it does"*, they're both in the argument space. Positions are becoming fixed. Louise probably feels Leigh is trying to assert his control and cancel out her perspective.

The adjustment? Many of us have been told to take control, especially in a performance conversation. Firmly disagreeing with them or insisting on your perspective as the right one definitely says who's in control but makes them feel unsafe and leaves little room to explore their perspective. Suspend judgment. Ask them questions to understand their side of the story first.

HURDLE #5: Don't escalate the argument by opening up new fronts

We've stewed on this difficult discussion topic for so long that we've inflated our list of complaints or negative flow-on effects, and with a little emotion behind it all, we now unleash these too. When Leigh blurts out *"you're not supporting me – and you're not thinking about the school either!"* he's escalated the argument and opened two new fronts.

The adjustment? Focus on a single issue and work through that. Don't inflame by adding further charges and allegations, which is rolling several discussions into one. That confuses issues and blurs focus. If there are related issues you want to raise, deal with them later, separately.

HURDLE #6: Don't emotionally load messages or personalise

If your tone of voice, facial expression or words are loaded with negative emotion or you're sarcastic, contemptuous, dismissive, attacking, blaming or uncivil, you don't respect the other person. In short, you've already held court inside your head and you're passing sentence. You have already signalled that this confrontation is going to end badly. Leigh feels let down, unsupported and undermined and he lets Louise know it. Scolding people like this distracts from the real point of resolving a performance issue.

The adjustment? Check your feelings before the conversation. Change the story you tell yourself that's causing them. Don't discount the issue. State clearly why this is important and what you think the impact is. But remove judgment words from what you say – keep it clean, factual and neutral and remind yourself you don't know the whole story.

HURDLE #7: Don't dive straight in and ignore the need to connect

Leigh is straight down to business. While naming the issue straight-up, up-front is fine, without beating around the bush, being vague or cushioning, it's also good to follow straight-on with some form of acknowledgement and connection.

The adjustment? Connect with them and anticipate their concerns. This helps to create a safer link to explore the issue. For example, Leigh might have said: *"I know you've had a lot on your plate lately and I appreciate the things (name one specifically if you can) you've been doing"*. Showing some understanding is not letting them off the hook; it's connecting with them so you can talk.

Starting Well

Starting a difficult discussion cleanly, without blame and without raising too much defensiveness takes thought, planning and preparation. You only have a couple of sentences to raise the issue in a neutral, blame-free way.

There's no denying that this stuff is difficult, and what works in one situation or with one person, may not work in another, with a different person. It helps if we keep in mind that difficult conversations are not just about winning or even resolving an issue – they're also about retaining good relationships. We all stumble over starting hurdles like these and though we may still run up against some, just think of tripping over a few less times – rather than running the perfect performance race.

Our 2-day ***Dealing with Difficult Discussions*** clinic, and 1-day fast-track alternative ***Tackling Tough Talks***, show you tools and formulae to help apply these kinds of tips in your conversations, to build better understanding and hopefully achieve more constructive and mutually agreeable resolutions.

More on *Dealing with Difficult Discussions*, *Tackling Tough Talks* and other conversational coaching and emotional intelligence programs on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

- Review our on-line **[Course Calendar](#)** for up-coming dates and events in your area
- Download free **[FactFiles](#)** or back-issues of our **[CC E-News](#)** e-zine for background reading and tips
- Download our **[Directory of Programs](#)** for outlines of the full range of programs we offer
- **[Contact us](#)** anytime to **[enquire](#)** about in-house programs 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  