



Changing Corporate Culture Through Tough Conversations

The ability to have the right conversations at the right time is the hallmark of an effective corporate culture – head-down, over-use of email, and cubicle-camping are deadly in today’s pace of change.

Tough conversations are a common practice for a good leader, and an opportunity to build greater trust through candor – the ability to be frank, open, sincere, and free from bias. The following principles of candor are simple, proven and powerful. They work in any situation – business or personal – where you need to offer tough feedback – or just tell a simple truth. They work particularly well for feedback with someone in a position of higher authority or a peer. If you use them regularly you will become more authentic as a leader.

(1) Check your outcome: If your main outcome is venting or you feel angry or righteous, wait. If your goal is founded on your opinion, your inconvenience, or preferences versus a business impact on a bigger picture, it won’t come off well. DO NOT blindside. The temptation to blurt something out of context or from anger always backfires. Wait until your emotional frame of mind is calm.

(2) Be prepared: If you don’t risk “triangulating,” talk with peers to see if you can learn anything new, or get a different point of view. Pick someone who can be a neutral sounding board. Always have a solution in mind if you are pointing to a business problem. Be clear about the impact if the current situation continues – “if we don’t make this change this is what I predict will happen...” If it’s a big issue, write a script and take a few minutes while driving to work rehearsing it.

(3) Separate the facts from your opinions or judgments: “I learned ... I observed ... “I heard” are fact-based words. “I feel ... I think ... I am concerned” are opinions or judgments.

(4) Choose your timing: Ask if the timing is right. “Do you have a few minutes now or should we set an appointment for later?” (they’ll often ask “how much time” – if this is a biggie and they say they have a meeting in 15 minutes, tell them “this can keep, let’s set up a time later.”

(5) Ask if they want it and assume they already know: “I had an insight last week about the Mercury Project. Do you want to hear it?” “I have some sensitive feedback and want to be sure before I share it, that you really want to hear it.” (be sure to check if timing is right). Nobody likes to be caught off guard – it makes them look stupid. That’s more humiliating than the feedback itself. And, executives are smart. There’s a good chance whatever you have to say, they have already thought of in their own “shower moment” and dismissed it for any number of reasons. Consider phrases like “You probably have already considered some of what I’m about to say...” OR “I’m sure this won’t come as a total surprise to you”

(6) Use humor (if the person has a sense of humor): “I had one of those great shower insights last week ... and voila! An idea came from it.”



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(7) Assume Positive Intent: Put yourself in their shoes. What is the positive intention they want to accomplish? What are their concerns, interests, point of view? Align with that first. "I know you are very passionate about Mercury Project and a lot is riding on that project for you and the company to get this right." If you can't answer that question, dig deeper or at least make a guess. "I believe what must be important to you is..."

(8) Be direct: Don't chit-chat, sugar-coat, or take a city bus to get to the point. Write down your central concern or message, and then practice it if necessary until you feel you can say it straight up.

(9) End with a question: "Does this ring true for you?" "What are your thoughts?" *Stay quiet* until they speak, even if it takes awhile. If they say "no" then say "OK, I just felt it was important to speak up in case it did. Thanks for listening."

(10) Be unattached: Your job is to be the messenger, not to seek approval or be responsible for how people will act on feedback. If you followed the previous 9 principles you did your job well. The rest is up to them. Often, even if the person doesn't say anything, or worse openly says no, you have planted a seed. It may grow.

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