

An illustration of two women sitting at a table, engaged in conversation. The woman on the left is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, glasses, and a necklace with a heart pendant. She has dark curly hair. The woman on the right has long brown hair and is wearing a light-colored top. The background is a soft, painterly style with warm tones.

Sarah Simpson

How to Start a Difficult Conversation

The Communication Skills Needed

SARAH SIMPSON

HOW TO START A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS NEEDED

How to Start a Difficult Conversation: The Communication Skills Needed

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1 INTRODUCTION

This book is firmly placed in the ‘practical skills’ category. We can all read about the theory of having a difficult conversation, but, many of us are simply looking for those day-to-day skills, which make our lives and those around us that bit more, honest, open, truthful and authentic.

I do, of course, fully appreciate that having a difficult conversation is challenging, and I am not for one moment saying that you will become an expert at the end of the last chapter. But, what you will have gained is an insight, practice and confidence in the key skills you will need, to have that difficult yet essential conversation.

2 WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

If I were to ask everyone reading this book to define a 'difficult conversation' I would get a huge array of responses. But, in general I would get responses that include:

- They're just hard
- I don't like telling people what to do
- People should just know what is right and wrong
- I don't like telling people off
- People won't like me
- It will have a negative effect on the team
- I usually leave it to someone else

Do any of these sound familiar?

ACAS (The Advisory, Conciliation & Arbitration Service) defines a difficult conversation as;

A difficult or challenging conversation is a conversation where you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way in order to; address poor performance or conduct, deal with personal problems, investigate complaints/deal with grievances, or comfort or reassure someone

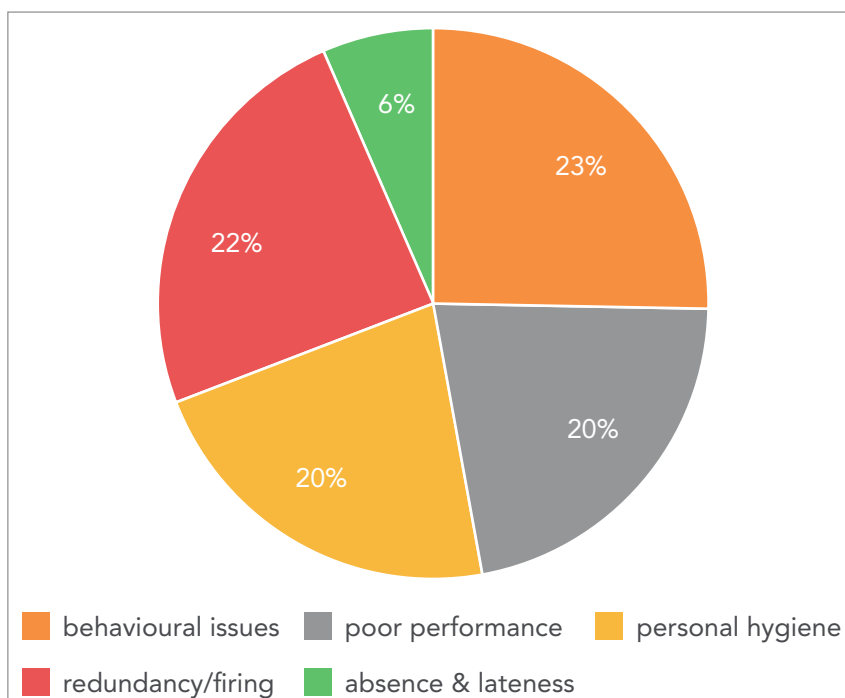
If you have ever put off having a difficult conversation, you are most definitely not alone. In 'employees fear crucial conversations', 34% of those questioned stated they had put off having a difficult conversation for at least a month and **25% had put it off for over a year!**

2.1 CONVERSATION STATISTICS

Studies in 2012 & 2013 (The Learning Habits of Leaders and Managers & Defining Success), found that:

- 50% of managers cited difficult conversations as the biggest challenge they face in their role
- The cost of not having that conversation was that 35% of employees voluntarily leave their jobs because of internal politics and conflict

So, what were the top 5 most stated difficult conversation topics facing managers?



I wonder how many of these issues are familiar to you, or how many of these issues you associate with a given member of staff?

The point here is that having a difficult conversation is challenging, but not having it is only storing up a more challenging conversation further down the line when positions have become entrenched, people have become isolated or formed cliques and the conflict curve is more advanced.

2.2 WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU DON'T ACT?

As well as the potential consequences above, by not acting you could:

- Stop the employee from putting things right
- Stop the employee from improving
- Mislead the employee into thinking everything is ok
- Alienate other members of staff who don't see you acting
- Lower the moral of the team
- Damage your productivity and / or efficiency
- Damage your professional reputation

2.3 CONVINCING OUR SELF!

I would like you to read the following scenarios and see if they sound familiar.

Scenario 1

You are on your way to work and are playing out a conversation in your head. You play the part of yourself as well as the other party. During this conversation you decide what each person will say, what their body language is, what emotions are shown and the outcome. You then arrive at work and no longer feel that you need to actually have this conversation as it has already been had!

Scenario 2

You have multiple conversations with an individual, but never actually have that one conversation you know you should!

When I run workshops, everyone without fail, admits to doing both of these things, at some stage in their career.

Therefore, with this in mind, I would like you to think about which conversations / people would fit into each of these scenarios, and use this as we go through each practical stage of having a difficult conversation. In this way you can set activities in your own unique environment.

My difficult conversation / person is

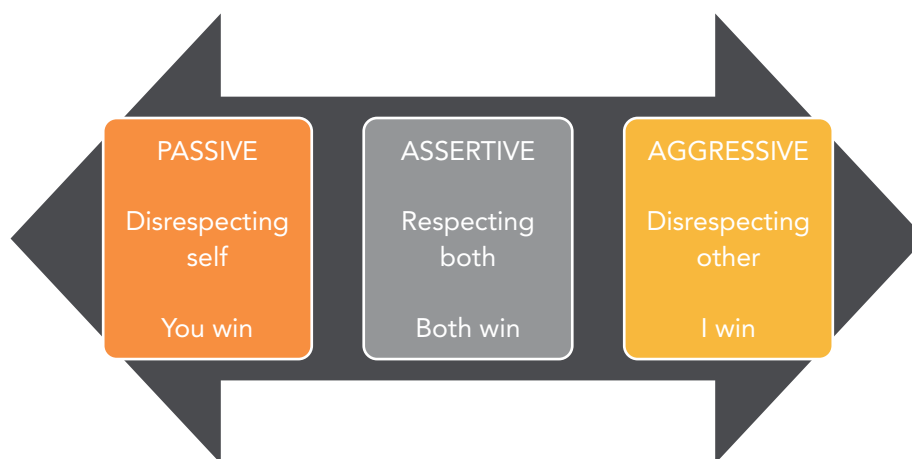
3 ASSERTIVENESS

We can define assertiveness as;

The quality of being self-assured and confident without being aggressive.

Someone who states their opinions and needs clearly, so that people take notice.

Below you can see a quick reminder of the other two ends of the continuum, namely passive and aggressive.



3.1 HOW ASSERTIVE ARE YOU?

I think for many people, the answer is often situational. For example, you may be more assertive at work than home, or vice versa.

Therefore, for the purposes of this exercise, I would suggest you use the environment in which your example of the difficult conversation / person, which was identified in chapter 2.3 is set in.

How Assertive are you? Indicate how comfortable you feel in each of the following situations

- 1 = you feel uncomfortable
- 2 = you feel reasonably comfortable
- 3 = you feel very comfortable

1	Speaking up and asking questions at a meeting.	
2	Commenting about being interrupted at the time it happens.	
3	Stating your views to an authority figure.	
4	Entering and leaving a room full of people.	
5	Speaking in front of a group.	
6	Maintaining eye contact when in conversation.	
7	Being competent and using your authority without labelling yourself impolite, bossy, aggressive etc.	
8	Asking for the service you expect when you haven't received it (e.g. in a shop or restaurant).	
9	Being expected to apologise for something and not doing so since you feel you are right	
10	Requesting the return of borrowed items without apology.	
11	Receiving a compliment and saying something to acknowledge that you agree with it.	
12	Receiving a refusal to a request.	
13	Not getting approval from a significant (to you) other person.	
14	Discussing another person's criticism of you openly with them.	
15	Telling someone they are doing something that is bothering you.	
16	Refusing to do a favour when you don't want to do it.	
17	Turning down a request for a meeting.	
18	Telling a person when you think they are trying to manipulate you.	
19	Expressing anger when you are angry.	
20	Arguing with another person.	
21	Responding with humour when someone tries to put you down.	
22	Talking with humour about the mistakes you have made.	
Total		

Scoring

Over 55 points you are very assertive.

46-55 points you are reasonably assertive

36-45 points you show an average level of assertiveness

26-35 points you need to develop your assertiveness

< 26 points your lack of assertion may be causing you (dis)stress

Now ask yourself:

- Was this score what you expected?
- In which situations do you find being assertive particularly difficult?
- Is there anything that could help you in these more challenging situations?

NB

The point at which we adopt behaviours that are aggressive or submissive is referred to as "**the crumple button**". We may be trying really hard to act assertively but something (words, tone, attitude, situation, person etc.) presses this button and we slip into another mode. Knowing what presses this button can help us to change our behaviour for the better.

Potential 'button' pushers for me are (Remember, these could be; words, tone, attitude, situation, person etc.)

3.2 THE ASSERTIVENESS FORMULA

When having a difficult conversation, you can sometimes become side tracked away from the desired result. This is where a 'formula' or 'step by step' approach can help.

1. When you,it (this must be 'real and observable')
2. What I need is for you to
3. The benefits to you would be.....

4. The benefits to me would be.....
5. The benefits to the wider team / group / client, would be.....
6. What do you think about that? Be prepared for potential comments or justifications
7. So what is your plan to..... (ensure they can do what you need them to do to fulfil step 2)
8. We will review this in.....

Please do not; start the conversation with an apology, or tell them that someone else has asked you to speak to them. It is essential that you **OWN THE CONVERSATION**.

3.3 THE ASSERTIVENESS FORMULA IN PRACTICE – AN EXAMPLE

Below is an example of this formula in practice, using the scenario of lateness, which we saw in chapter 2.1, was one of the top 5 difficult conversation categories faced by managers.

1. **When you** come in late, it sets a bad example, people have to wait and colleagues are becoming increasingly frustrated.
2. **What I need is** for you to come in on time.
3. **The benefits to you** would be; your colleagues not having to cover for you and / or get frustrated, work schedules can be maintained
4. **The benefits to me** would be knowing who is in and when, not having to deal with colleagues frustration and client complaints
5. (covered in 4 above)
6. **What do you think** about that? (you may get responses such as, “yes but”, or, “I can’t because”)
7. So, **what is your plan** to get in on time?
8. **We will review** this in x timeframe (this will be dependent upon the previous conversation)

3.4 THE ACTIVENESS FORMULA ACTIVITY.

Taking your own scenarios, identified in chapter 2.3, complete the following assertive formula template. I have given a reminder of each of the steps to help you.

Activity – assertiveness formula

1. When you,it (this must be 'real and observable')

2. What I need is for you to

3. The benefits to you would be.....

4. The benefits to me would be.....

5. The benefits to the wider team / group / clients, would be.....

6. What do you think about that? Be prepared for potential comments or justifications

7. So what is your plan to..... (ensure they can do what you need them to do to fulfil step 2)

8. We will review this in.....

4 CONVERSATION 'GUIDES' (FROM FEEDBACK)

The following are not difficult conversation guides per se, but are feedback models, which I and my workshop attendees often find useful in guiding (difficult) conversations. So, to this end I have included them, as they most definitely have value.

4.1 BEER

Behaviour	What are you trying to redirect / re-enforce? What is your evidence?
Effect	What effect did the behaviour or action have?
Expectations / explanation	Discussion on what should happen as a result
Results	What the expected result of changing / sharing the action or behaviour? When will you review?

4.2 BOOST

Balanced	Include both 'good' and 'bad' points
Objective / owned	Make sure your feedback is factual and based on actions, not any prior emotional response you may have towards the person
Observed	Only give examples of what you have seen the person see and do, don't bring in your preconceptions or previous experience
Specific	Always use specific examples to illustrate a comment. Exactly why or how was the action done well or badly? Avoid broad statements
Timely	Feedback should be given as close to the event as possible to ensure accuracy and effectiveness

4.3 CEDAR *

Clarify	Start the discussion by explaining the importance and impact of the feedback
Explain	Illustrate this with specifics
Discuss	Ask for their view of the situation Jointly explore the reasons why it went well/not well
Agree	Ask the individual what actions he/she might take in the future Do not give your own suggestions too early
Review	Ask for and set a date for review Offer support

* You may see a version of CEDAR as; Context, Examples, Diagnosis, Actions & Review

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5 SAYING “NO”

We saw in chapter 2, the main subjects that managers say for the basis for their difficult conversations. But, outside these when I ask people what they find most hard in day-to-day conversations, they more than not say ‘saying no’. Therefore, I felt that it was an important skill to cover.

There could be many reasons for not saying “no” to people and this includes:

- Wanting to please them
- Wanting to be seen to be ‘in control’ and ‘able to do it all’
- Thinking we will be thought of as being ‘obstructive’ or ‘not able to cope’, if we say no
- Being unable or uncomfortable in saying “no”

Do any of these sound familiar?

But remember:

- **You have a right to say “no”**
- Saying “no” in a submissive fashion, undermines your approach and can give people the impression that you will ‘give in’ sooner rather than later

5.1 4-STEP APPROACH

A 4-step approach to saying “no”:

- **U** – Understand (their position)
- **N** – Say “no” (assertively – polite but firm)
- **E** – Explain your reasoning. For example, you are already working on tasks that have been identified as priorities
- **R** – Recommend an alternative

5.2 4-STEP EXAMPLE

Scenario

You have spent a very long time writing your department’s business plan and have now been asked to help someone else and you JUST don’t have the time, but you also don’t want to look unhelpful or selfish.

Let’s see how this scenario and conversation might ‘fit into’ the UNER formula above.

U	Understand (their position)	<p>I understand it’s a large piece of work to complete</p> <p>I understand that this is not something you have done before</p> <p>I understand the timescales you are working to</p>
N	Say “no” (assertively – polite but firm)	<p>“No”, I am unable to help you write your business plan.</p> <p>(it is important that you actually use the word “no”)</p>
E	Explain your reasoning	<p>I am very busy at the moment and am unable to give you the time this would need</p> <p>I have 2 other projects that have been given priority above all my other work</p>
R	Recommend an alternative	<p>I am more than happy to let you have a copy of my business plan and sources of information if that would be useful</p>

5.3 4-STEP ACTIVITY

Please use your own example of when you have had to / may need to say “no”, using the template below. The more you do this the easier it will become, I promise!

Relationships are maintained by the ‘recommend an alternative step, as well as ‘understanding their position’.

Scenario

U	Understand (their position)	
N	Say “no” (assertively – polite but firm)	
E	Explain your reasoning	
R	Recommend an alternative	

5.4 IF YOU HAVE TO SAY “YES”

In the last sections you were probably thinking:

- “That’s all very well, but I can’t always say no”
- “I’d never say no to x person”
- “It wouldn’t be acceptable to say no then”

Given that I stated in the introduction that this book is designed to give you practical everyday skills, it is important to recognise that there will indeed be situations in which saying “no” is not feasible.

So, with this in mind, let’s look at what happens when we have to say yes, but don’t want to burden ourselves with unrealistic job demands or requests.

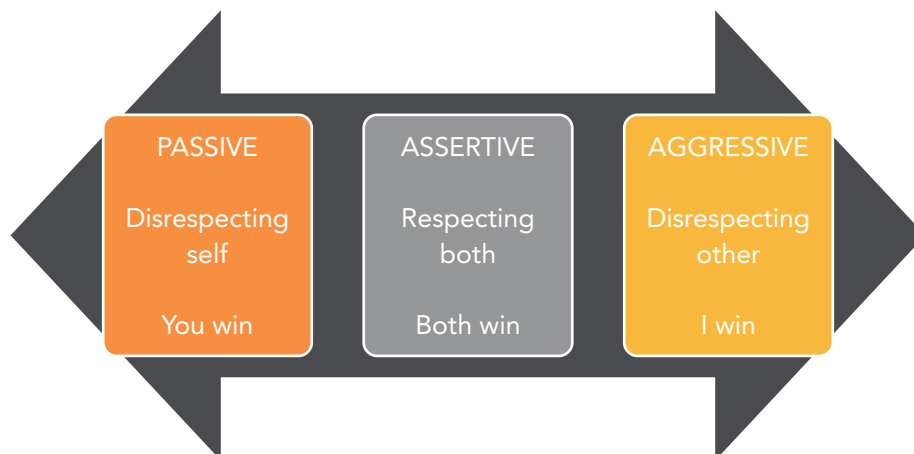
As with everything, there are various approaches you can take and each will be situationally dependent:

- Tell them you can approve their request this time, but ask how the two of you might plan better for the next time

- Remind them they owe you. Can you 'call in a favour' next time?
- Take control by giving them a timescale. For example "*I expect I'll be able to do that for you by the end of the week.*"
- Put a strong condition on your agreement. "*If it would only take an hour, I'd be able to help, but I can't give you more than that.*"
- Ask them where they think this new task should fall on the list of your current priorities
- Explain that you might be able to do everything, but not to your usual standard

6 DEALING WITH AGGRESSION

In chapter 3 we looked at assertiveness and the continuum below.



When we are confronted with aggressive behaviour, we **have a choice** over how we react.

Often this can be to match that aggression, or become submissive.

What can you do?

- Breathe
- Say nothing initially
- Ask; **who, what, how, where & which**
- Do not ask “**why**” – this can appear to question a person’s motivation and can come across as aggressive

6.1 FOGGING TECHNIQUE

The reason I like this technique and why I use it, when dealing with aggression is:

- The concept is straightforward
- It’s relatively easy to learn
- It makes sense
- I’ve taught it to many people, including those on conflict management workshops and it is always well received
- It works!

6.2 FOGGING – WHY DOES IT WORK?

The fogging technique works for the following reasons:

- Aggressive people are often expecting disagreement
- This approach slows them down
- It provides an expected response”yes”
- You state you can see what they seem to think or feel
- You do not state what you think or feel
- This approach can reduce explosive situations and tension

6.3 FOGGING EXAMPLES

Scenario

Someone says to you;

“I think that the way you did that was really stupid”

This is quite clearly aggressive, and they are most likely expecting an aggressive, or even submissive response, which starts with a denial, and more often than not, the word “no”

But, if we have a look at 6.2 above, you will see that the power in the technique comes from starting your response with the word “yes”. In addition you do not lose your self-credibility, as you are not denying your point of view, you are merely slowing their aggression down.

Non-fogging response examples might include;

“**No** it wasn’t, you’re stupid”

“**No** it wasn’t, it worked perfectly”

Fogging examples might include;

“**Yes**, I can see that you think it was stupid”

“**Yes**, this is the way I always respond to this situation”

6.4 FOGGING PRACTICE

Can you think of a scenario in which you could respond to aggression with the fogging technique and what this might look and sound like?

6.5 COMBINING TECHNIQUES

Have a look at the following scenarios and give yourself some time to think about possible responses. Remember you can combine elements of all the techniques we have looked at so far; the assertiveness formula, saying no, saying yes and the fogging technique.

“We need you to help you on this project”

“I’m sorry I don’t have the time to do that” (states your position clearly and does not apologise for saying “no”)

“I’m, really disappointed”

“Yes, I can see you are disappointed” (fogging technique) “and I realise that this may not be what you wanted to hear” (acknowledges the other persons perspective and feelings). “However, I cannot agree to this request with all the other projects I have on” (so you are saying no to the request and not to the individual). “I do know that x person in Y department has experience in this”, or “I can let you have access to the Gantt charts I made for my last project that was similar, if that would help”? (offering an alternative)

A member of staff never listens to anyone else’s point of view

Short response

I have noticed that recently some of the team have appeared demotivated and frustrated. Do you know why that might be?

Can you suggest ways we could address this and what we might do to improve morale and team working?

Longer difficult conversation formula response

When you don't listen to your colleagues' points of view, it is demotivating and frustrating.

What I need is for you to listen to everyone's point of view equally.

The benefits to you would be more respect from your colleagues and a greater range of opinions.

The benefits to me would be a happier and more coherent team.

The benefits to the wider team would be that they all feel valued and listened to.

What do you think about that?

We will review this in 2 weeks after the next full team meeting.



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7 10 COMMON CONVERSATION MISTAKES

Below are 10 common difficult conversations mistakes. I'm sure we have all made some of these, but with the help of this book, these should lessen, as it becomes easier and more routine to have these discussions, especially as you are able to see the positive outcome that can result.

7.1 PUTTING IT OFF

If you remember in chapter 2.3 we looked at two scenarios in which we put off having a difficult conversation; playing the conversation out in our mind, or talking to someone without actually talking about the thing you need to.

When I ask people why they do this, there is the assumption, or probably more accurately, the hope that 'things will just resolve and get better by themselves'. This is not the case and the longer you leave it, the more challenging it becomes.

There is a great quote, which I heard at a talk, which states;

The standard you walk past, is the standard you expect

People **will** notice if do not have those conversations that are expected of you and your role. Credibility, values and professional respect and reputation are linked here.

Remember in chapter 2 we saw that 34% of those questioned (Employees Fear Crucial Conversations), stated they had put off having a difficult conversation for at least a month and **25% had put it off for over a year!**

7.2 BEING UNPREPARED

Act in haste, repent at leisure

Be clear on the outcome that you are looking for. The assertiveness formula in chapter 3 can help here, as well as the feedback conversation guides in chapter 4.

Gather as much factual information and evidence as you can. Remember this is not about emotions, this is about observed facts.

Be clear on the key point you want to make

Ask yourself what you know about this person. Is what they are doing / asking, out of character for them?

7.3 WRONG TIME, WRONG PLACE

Wrong time, wrong place, wrong people equals most of real human history"

– Idries Shah

"Right time, right place, right people equals success".

Setting a meeting at 5pm on a Friday night is unlikely to put everyone in the best frame of mind. Neither is choosing a location which has adverse emotional connotations for either party.

Be mindful to consider the following:

- Choose a location where you will not be disturbed
- Be mindful of the setup of the room. Furniture can create a barrier and having chairs directly facing each other could be construed as aggressive. Consider having chairs at a slight angle from each other
- Give the other party notice of the conversation
- Ensure you put aside enough time to thoroughly explore the issue in question

7.4 LACK OF CLARITY

It's a lack of clarity that creates chaos and frustration

– Steve Maraboli

Be specific, statement such as; I'm not happy, I don't like the way you do things, I can't help you out again, I've been asked to talk about your attitude, are all vague and do not help either party. Stay factual and keep emotions out of it.

Use the assertiveness conversation formula (chapter 3) and feedback guides (chapter 4) to be clear about the issue in question and what the expected outcome and timeframe is.

7.5 JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Never jump to conclusions because you never know where you might land

– Anonymous

Many times you will i) already have a relationship with the person you are talking to, or ii) have been told something about them from a third party.

Do not fall into the trap of:

- Presuming you know what they will say
- Presuming they will act the same way as they always have
- Take a third party's description of them as 'the truth'
- Assume there are no mitigating circumstances

Leave preconceptions and past experiences at the door. They have no place in a difficult conversation

7.6 BEING EMOTIVE

We have said several times throughout this book that difficult conversations should be based in fact and not emotions.

- Stay focused on the issue and not the person
- Remain calm
- Remain objective
- Concentrate on observed behaviours and facts
- Do not use heresy and personal opinion as the basis for your conversation
- Be aware of emotive body language and tone of voice

7.7 USING CLOSED QUESTIONS

Without a good question, a good answer has no place to go

– Clayton Christensen

Use open-ended, as opposed to closed questions in order to understand a situation and get to the bottom of exactly what is going on.

I have found the following actions and question prompts useful.

What do I want to do?	What question(s) might help
Encourage	"I want to understand" "I want to know"
Clarify	"Can you say more about" "Is that what normally happens"
Restate	"It sounds like you weren't expecting that"
Reflect (their feelings)	"I can image how that made you feel"
Validate	"I really appreciate that we can talk about this" "I'm glad we're working out a way forward"

7.8 THE BLAME GAME

"I'm right, you're wrong!"

Using language that could be perceived as; blaming, accusatory or 'pointing the finger', such as "you always", or "you never", is damaging to a successful difficult conversation.

You should remain neutral and calm, in term of; voice, words and body language.

7.9 NOT LISTENING

Listening is not merely hearing. Listening is reacting. Listening is being affected by what you hear. Listening is active.

– Michael Shurtleff

In other words listening is more than the pause that happens in between you talking again.

Reasons we don't listen include:

- We are thinking of the next question to ask
- We presume we know what the other person will say
- We are pre-occupied with our own thoughts and are not completely committed to the conversation
- We try to finish someone's sentences, or rush
- We selectively listen, either consciously or unconsciously
- We don't pick up on; tone, speed, emphasis, pitch and volume

To really listen requires an active process:

- Hear what they say and how they speak
- Acknowledge their conversation with verbal and non-verbal cues; nodding of the head, "uh-hu", "yes", "go on", etc.
- Repeat what they have said in your own words to ensure you really understand. For example "so, if I hear you correctly, what you are saying is..."

This process is particularly powerful when you have different primary languages, or people are upset.

L	• look & get interested
I	• involve yourself by responding
S	• stay on target
T	• test your understanding
E	• evaluate the message
N	• neutralise your feelings

7.10 NOT WORKING TOGETHER

"Our experience has taught us that with goodwill a negotiated solution can be found for even the most profound problems"

– Nelson Mandela

The aim of all the techniques we have covered is to end up with a **joint** solution. This is not about you imposing yourself and your will on someone, as the result would be a lack of commitment and even potentially a desire to see it fail, or actively sabotage it.

A jointly negotiated outcome in which everyone has a stake is much more likely to be agreed and therefore successful, with less chance of you having to re-visit it.

8 SUMMARY / CONCLUSIONS

Having a difficult conversation is challenging and feeling anxious or concerned about undertaking one is perfectly understandable. But, having it is essential in order to maintain team cohesion, performance, reputations and a positive working environment.

The key skills we have looked at were:

- Understanding what a difficult conversation is
- Being assertive
- Lessons from feedback models
- Saying no
- Dealing with aggression
- Active listening
- Understanding and avoiding conversation mistakes

Using your particular scenario(s), as well as the examples within this book, you will have seen how to structure a conversation in order that both parties are listened to and a negotiated way forward is reached.

Because no matter how hard a conversation is, I know that on the other side of that difficult conversation lies peace. Knowledge. An answer is delivered. Character is revealed. Truces are formed. Misunderstandings resolved.

– Shonda Rhimes