



Managing 'Difficult' Conversations

ASA England Programmes

Learning Outcomes

- Identify the characteristics of a difficult conversation
- Reflect on and further develop communication skills to assist with managing a difficult conversation
- Evaluate an action plan for managing a difficult conversation

What is a difficult conversation?



Think of a scenario or time when you have had to have a difficult conversation with someone:

- Who was it with?
- Why was it difficult?
- What did you do well?
- What could you have improved?
- What would you like to be able to do better if the situation arises again in the future?

What is a difficult conversation?



It is a conversation where you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way to:

- Address poor performance or conduct
- Deal with personal problems
- Investigate complaints/deal with grievances
- Comfort or reassure someone
- Tackle personality clashes
- Deal with potentially delicate situations

The conversation usually takes place one-to-one.

With Who?



The 'Now or Never' Moment



You can help make conversations less difficult by:

- having a quiet word at the first sign that something is wrong.
- taking time to develop relationships
- using coach and athlete representatives to voice group concerns if they arise

It is far better to nip problems in the bud, wherever possible, rather than waiting for them to become more entrenched or complicated.

Why is it difficult?

This sense of anxiety is a very natural response to a challenging situation and may be caused by feeling that you are not in complete control of:

- The facts.
- Your emotions.
- The other person's emotions.
- The level of support you will get.

To prepare for the conversation

- Establish the facts
- Reflect on what you know about the individual
- Get support
- Check your policies
- Plan the meeting.

Plan the meeting in advance

- Decide on a location
 - private
 - face to face
 - telephone
 - email
- Room layout
 - sitting opposite someone with a table in front shows formality
 - sitting next to someone can be less threatening
- Allow sufficient time
- Bring someone else into the room

Task

Think about a behaviour YOU want to change

Listener/Helper Role:

- Explain why the person should change
- Give 3 specific benefits
- Tell the person how to change
- Emphasize how important it is to change (may include negative consequences)
- Tell/persuade the person to do it

Task

Let's try it another way

Listener/Helper Role:

- Why would you want to make this change?
- If you decided to make this change, how might you go about it in order to succeed?
- What are the 3 best reasons for you to do this?
- How important is it for you to make this change on a scale from 0 - 10? (0 = not at all; 10 = very important)
- After listening to the client, give a short summary
- So what do you think you'll do?

Communication

Communication is the process of exchanging information.

"You can communicate best when you first listen."

Catherine Pulsifer

"The reason why so few people are agreeable in conversations is that each is thinking more about what he intends to say than about what others are saying, and we never listen when we are eager to speak."

Francois La Rochefoucauld

Please Listen

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving me advice,
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something
to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as
that may seem.

Listen!
All I ask is that you listen.
Don't talk or do - just hear me.

When you do something for me that I can and need
to do for myself,
you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact
that I feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I
can stop trying to convince you and get about this
business of understanding
what's behind this irrational feeling.
And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and
I don't need advice.

So please listen, and just hear me.
And if you want to talk,
wait a minute for your turn,
and I will listen to you.

Questioning

Open questions

- Normally start with who, where, what, why, when or how.
- These encourage the other person to talk freely, as little or no restriction is placed on their answer.
- They enable people to 'open up' on any topic, opinions or feelings.

Closed questions

- What time did it happen?
- How long did it take?
- Did you speak first?
- These questions can be effective in verifying specific information, re-focusing on the subject in hand or emphasising a vital point.

Probing/reflective questions

- Why did you say that?
- What, in particular, made you feel like that?
- Are you telling me that?
- Useful in seeking depth and detail.

Empathy: The critical skill

“The ability to share and understand the thoughts and feelings of another”

Empathy leads to:

- The individual feeling accepted and valued
- Empathy is a key predictor of success
- Provides the environment for change rather than causing change

What do you see?



Empathy in practice

Empathy is key!

Example:

Athlete: “I really get angry when my coach criticizes me without letting me explain. I get angry not because he criticizes me, but because he does it in such a degrading way.”

Low empathy response: “You don’t like being criticized.”

High empathy response: “You get really mad when he criticizes you and his insulting manner makes you feel personally attacked.”

How do I begin?

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.
- I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)?
- I think we have different perceptions about _____. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas about how to _____.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

Staying in control

- You need to control the meeting and how it progresses.
- Adopt a professional manner.
- Set out from the beginning how the meeting will run, the issues you wish to discuss and how you hope to move forward.
- It can be difficult to control your emotions if the individual becomes confrontational or makes an accusation about you.
- Remember to focus on the behaviour and not the person and to remain objective and non-judgemental at all times.

A framework for discussion

Introduction

- Begin the conversation by explaining the purpose of the meeting
- Adopt a calm and professional manner
- Reassure them about confidentiality – both prior to and after the meeting.

Explore the current situation

- Open questions

Summarise

- Reflection

Explore options

- Encourage creativity
- Suggest options

Formulate a plan of action

- Make ideas concrete
- Be specific

End discussion

- Make arrangements for next time
- Do you need to refer on?