

## THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

# Fight Or Flight: The Benefits Of Facing Up To 'Difficult' Conversations

Celia Swales

It's human nature to avoid 'difficult' conversations. But when those conversations are not taking place within organisations, workplace safety and productivity can be compromised. In fact, the hidden cost of avoiding important issues is often greater.

This Thought Leadership piece outlines how to have those tough conversations, and the benefits for organisations, leaders and workers prepared to do so.

Celia Swales has been advising organisations for many years on this business challenge. Whether you call them difficult, challenging or, her preferred term, 'courageous' conversations, we often avoid them because we're concerned about our ability to handle the discussion or about hurting other people.

Avoiding these conversations, however, can let poor performance continue unchecked "until it gets really bad", or makes workers reluctant to raise safety issues that could have prevented an incident.

Conversely, being prepared to have these conversations can bring many benefits to organisations. Productivity and workplace safety challenges, for example, are continually identified and addressed quickly.

Over time, having difficult conversations becomes easier and people become more skilled at them. It becomes part of the organisation's culture, giving workers confidence that they can highlight issues without fear of repercussion, and that issues raised will be addressed.

## So how do we do it?

### Before and during the conversation

There are many measures organisations and individuals can and should take to make difficult conversations easier and more effective.

To prepare for tough conversations, Celia says, it's important to consider what the purpose is – is it to work with an employee to help them improve their performance, for example? – and what other information you need to address the issue "because in the moment you might not be able to come up with the questions you need answered.

"One of the first things I suggest people do is reflect for themselves ahead of time. So get your feelings out on a page. If you're angry with someone or frustrated, you've worked that through and it doesn't just leak out in the conversation.

"Think about what you were thinking and feeling and the events as you saw them. We go into many conversations assuming we have the one true way of seeing it, but there are many perspectives and you are getting ready to present events as you saw them."

Managing your emotions is a key element of the actual conversation, as is listening and checking you correctly understand what others are saying. Ensure all participants have had the opportunity to share their views before "you start talking about what does all that mean and what are we going to do about it?

"If it's a team or organisation conversation, consider if the person conducting the discussion should be participating and the conversation should be led by an external party."

## Practice brings everyday improvement

"I work with a team in Brisbane and in the early days the MD said to me: 'these guys are just talking about the business, I can't get them to talk about the real issues,'" Celia Swales said. "So we set up a 'courageous conversation', which is the stuff they would normally not say, and once every two months we have a facilitated conversation.

"The first time we did it we brought up all the topics they don't want to talk about and then we talked about frameworks about how to have conversations.

"It took about three months before they trusted that process and before they deepened the conversation. They've said to me now that they have better conversations outside of those sessions and their business results have improved."

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## The follow-up

Where actions have been agreed during the conversation, follow through and implement them, so your people can see the value in having the conversation. This will make them more willing to raise issues and to participate in further discussions.

Reflect on "what helped or hindered the conversation", and leave the conversation open so that any further ideas sparked by the discussion can be shared.

"It's not that you want to keep it as a rolling conversation but you want to make sure you're continuing to get all the data you need and that you are continuing to build your practice," Celia says.

"Tying neat bows around things in terms of actions and implementations is great, but leaving the conversation space open is also important."

## Safety and difficult conversations

While Celia Swales doesn't suggest a willingness to have difficult conversations on its own can fix poor workplace safety, it can reduce the likelihood of incidents by helping build a culture where risks and hazards are raised and addressed.

"My experience around safety is everyone has their own personal risk meter and unless an organisation is having conversations to align and require safe practices, people will operate with their own risk meter," she said.

"When you are in the habit of holding courageous conversations, or in a culture where people practice courageous conversations, you become less anxious about and more effective in those conversations.

"So if we hold those conversations regularly, then when I'm out in the field or having an incidental conversation I'm more likely to say 'hey mate, you're not following safety protocols here'.

"The second part of that is around problem solving. So either before a risky activity or when you've had a near miss, if no one has the setting or the skills to hold a conversation to examine what's really going on, then people in the room will be sitting there thinking 'they're not considering this but I'm not going to say anything'. And so you'll be making decisions on partial rather than all the information."

## Good, and bad, news

So when it comes to difficult conversations, Celia Swales has good and bad news. The bad news is they are "relevant wherever humans are", the good news is that with practice they can become a strength.

"This is part of being human, you're always going to be faced with the need for these difficult conversations," she says.

"But practice makes it much easier because you are more effective and you have less anxiety or fear attached to starting them.

"And it's worth it, because as an individual it gets easier and as an organisation there is a huge **hidden cost** in the conversations that are not held."

*To find out more about how 'courageous conversations' can benefit your organisation, register for the free [Webinar: Courageous Conversations for the Sake of Safety on February 18.](#)*