

Is it time for an Adult Conversation?

By Susan Schilke; July 18, 2018

The conversation is the cornerstone of communication. Studies say we spend about 80% of our time in communication – and of that, we spend about 25% reading and writing; and 75% speaking and listening. Not much time in our education is spent on the critical skills of speaking and listening we use every day in conversation. And most leaders are effective in their ability to speak and listen to other leaders and your team members.

But we all struggle with the tough conversations. My favorite book on this subject calls them *Crucial Conversations*, and say they occur when emotions are strong, opinions vary and the stakes are high. I'll borrow leadership coach Carol Hull's phrase for these – Adult Conversations. The conversation that has to happen when someone's behavior is getting in the way of performance, and you need to address it.

I have some guidelines on the best way to handle these. I can't guarantee success, however, situations that warrant an adult conversation don't improve by themselves. Fuming in silence, or worse, complaining to others, isn't going to help. And when these frustrations come out in anger, that almost always make things worse.

So here are seven strategies on what to do – and what not to do – to approach these conversations and increase your opportunity for resolution or at least progress.

1. **Be Brave.** Have the conversation you need to have with the person you need to have it with. You might get some blowback because good people will defend their actions, and most will have an emotional response to behaviors being viewed negatively. Take that chance, versus ignoring it or worse, complaining to others under the guise of 'venting.' That pattern is toxic in an organization, and it's not how you want your co-workers to address concerns they have with you, is it? Some issues may need involvement from others or HR, and, at the same time, in a lot of cases you can have direct impact. Addressing behaviors that get in the way is every leader's responsibility, not just the CEO.
2. **Start with Behaviors and Facts,** not negative assumptions and conclusions you've drawn. Be specific and detailed – 'Jack, you missed the last two meetings, and been behind on several deadlines on the project. It's making it difficult to stay on the overall timeline.' vs 'You don't care about this project at all, and you're putting us all way behind.'
3. **Presume Positive Intent** in the behaviors and tell yourself the best story possible to explain what is happening. Most people have the same motivations you do – look for the good intentions behind the behavior. Sometimes we see behaviors and fill in the blanks with negatives. If you're going to draw conclusions, make them positive ones.
4. **Choose Your Words.** 'I' statements work better than accusatory 'you' statements (see #2 above). And here are four other words to avoid: Never, always, but and should. Never and always are practically never accurate, and almost always an exaggeration. 'You never hit the deadline' or 'You always miss the meeting' just provokes someone and likely isn't true. Be specific. In tough conversations, most people hear the word 'but' as 'I didn't really mean that – here's the real point.' Replace 'but' with 'and' if both phrases are true. Or just skip the attempt to soften the blow and respectfully make your point. 'Should' is a word of judgment and my mother taught me: Never should on yourself or others. Replace 'should' with 'could.' Everyone likes options and no one likes to be judged.

5. **Ask Questions and Listen to Learn.** An adult conversation is not a monologue, it's a two-way street, so seek first to understand. Ask questions, and actively listen to the responses. "I know situations change, what'd going on? How can I help?" Don't 'yes, but' the answers. "Yes, I know you've been busy, but we are all busy!" Hear and acknowledge the answers. Then collaborate on solutions.
6. **Build Relationships.** Regularly invest in relationship building with people you work with. Steven Covey calls it deposits in their emotional bank accounts. Adult conversations have to have a foundational relationship or they just don't work.
7. **Look at Your Role.** Sometimes this might actually be strategy #1. Be ready to acknowledge what you could be doing differently or better. And come prepared to hear more about that in the conversation. Look at the situation carefully and objectively— how much of this is about someone else's behavior, and how much is it just about you?

On the receiving end of one of these conversations, it's natural to feel defensive, but try to fight the desire to immediately explain and defend. Actively listen to really understand what's being shared. Don't shoot the messenger – adult conversations are an opportunity to learn and grow and not easy for people to do. Though painful, the conversations where someone respectfully pointed out a non-productive behavior that I had to acknowledge and try to address – those were tough, and they made me better. I worked on modifying the behavior getting in the way, with some degree of success every time.

A final tip: don't expect your adult conversations to fundamentally change people. And that's ok because most people are amazing, doing their best and worth investing in. You may encounter situations where your best efforts at addressing issues will hit a wall. It happens. You still have to try.

These conversations are part of being an adult; and required to be a leader.

Having adult conversations with our co-workers means respectfully, honestly addressing issues that get in the way of productivity and performance; thoughtfully, with an open mind and heart. Demonstrate these conversations and others will have them, too; and the whole company can get past challenges that get in the way.