



# **Difficult conversations - text**

Chapter 1

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# Difficult conversations

Let's admit it; some conversations are difficult. Just the thought of certain conversations might be enough to fire up your threat reactions, giving you sweaty palms or butterflies in your stomach. But on the other side of those conversations lies clarity, progress and better performance.

This module is all about acknowledging the fear and having the conversations anyway, equipped with the tools you need to make them a success.

In this first chapter, you will look at what makes conversations difficult, and you will identify conversations you have avoided and ones you would be well-served to engage in.



## Your experience with difficult conversations

Difficult conversations take many forms. You might find it tricky to give or receive feedback, or shy away from dealing with difficult people or misunderstandings. Showing appreciation can even be a difficult type of conversation for many people.

When you think a conversation will be difficult you are more likely to avoid it - often subconsciously. This is simply your limbic system trying to keep you safe from a perceived threat.

Let's begin the self-awareness journey around difficult conversations by considering some common situations that arise in a workplace.

Which of these you are currently embracing, and which do you avoid? As you go through the list, appreciate yourself for the courageous conversations you have had in the past and be curious about the ones you avoid or have never considered.

- Talking about pay: with a direct report or with your boss.
- Asking someone to rein in extreme political views, toxic behaviours or jokes that disturb others.
- Asking your boss why you were not selected for a new role or position.
- Naming situations that get swept under the carpet: e.g., conflict or rifts between colleagues.
- Calling out racist, sexist, homophobic and other demeaning comments or jokes.
- Telling someone something you know they won't want to hear.
- Confronting resentful or disengaged team members.
- Giving feedback to someone about the low quality of their work or aspects of job performance.
- Opening a conversation with your manager or colleague to develop a better relationship.
- Having to deliver a message that does not represent your own views.
- Appreciating someone (beyond "thank you") for their good work.
- Apologising for a mistake I made or something I said.
- Letting someone know their 'humour' is having a negative impact on the team.
- Getting two team members who don't like each other to work out their differences because their attitudes are starting to impact others.
- Telling someone they will not get what they expect: a pay rise, a promotion, a sought-after position or holiday approval.
- Telling someone they will be losing their job or will be moved to another team or department.

## Which conversations do you avoid?

As you sorted through these many types of conversations, it may have brought to mind some conversations that you need to have. **Please take note of these.**

As you move through the next chapters of this module, you will learn approaches and tools that will make these conversations a little more approachable.

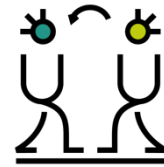
## Approach conversations with self-compassion

Once you understand which conversations you typically avoid and why, you can try a new way of approaching them.

The aim is to ensure that you do not avoid important conversations that need to happen for the benefit of you and your colleagues. This module will help you identify the conversations that you may need to have, and show you how to have them in a new way.

## Why giving feedback is hard

Even though many of us recognise that feedback can be extremely useful - even pivotal - in our careers, we do not always embrace the opportunity to give it. It is one type of conversation that many people avoid. Maybe you have tolerated some poor performance from others, only to be annoyed again and again when the unfortunate behaviour is repeated.



So where does this fear of feedback come from, and what else makes feedback so difficult?

### What does your brain do?

Think about giving feedback to someone you find challenging. Take a moment to imagine how the conversation might go.

Most likely you will notice some physiological responses, for example:

- Heart racing
- Butterflies in your stomach
- Palms sweating
- Other discomfort or tension
- An urge to distract yourself

These are normal limbic reactions that are only trying to keep you safe and protected from “dangerous” situations. And that happened by just thinking about it.

### Delivering feedback: the pitfalls

It is not just limbic reactions that prevent us from giving feedback. A study from the 1990s by Kluger & DeNisi showed that performance reviews and large-scale feedback initiatives did not improve results at 2 of 3 businesses that attempted to create a feedback culture. Many people have experienced this lack of positive impact, or they may have personally experienced poor or traumatising feedback. This could be a result of these common pitfalls when delivering feedback.

### Implementing feedback models without care

Unfortunately, many people try to follow the steps of a model without paying attention to their impact and how the information is being received (or not) by the other person.

When a model is not paired with care, empathy, and an emotional state that helps the feedback land with the receiver, it is useless.

### Human biases and subjective criteria

Performance criteria is subjective, and our brains find it difficult to evaluate these.

Our biases weigh in heavily and our PFC capacity will alter our thinking and ability to evaluate. If we are tired or distracted, it will be much more difficult.

With all of this going on, it's a wonder that it works at all.

## Discomfort in delivery

If you are uncomfortable and awkward in giving the feedback, then your discomfort will be conveyed and that can create doubt in the feedback receiver.

This is even more prevalent if you have to give feedback that you do not believe in because someone else asked you to give that feedback. If you do not believe it yourself, the receiver is likely to sense this and not believe it either.

## Receiving feedback is hard

Listening is always a bit difficult, but it is even more so when receiving feedback. It takes effort to focus, hear what is being said and take things in that you do not want to hear.

## Change is hard

Even if we are open to hearing feedback and we agree that something needs to change, it is still hard to make that change. Our brains simply prefer to keep doing things the way they are being done right now.

Think about changes you have tried to make in the past that you ended up forgetting about or falling short of. It's natural. It takes time, energy, motivation and commitment to actually follow-through on making a change.

This lack of follow-through and lack of actually making a change is another reason that people avoid giving feedback – we know it's not likely to make a difference in the long-run and it might just annoy the other person in the short-term.

## Investigating feedback further

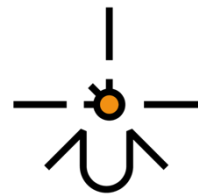
Feedback supports people's learning and development, it addresses performance issues and it enhances the quality of work.

But feedback can be even more than an opportunity to learn, it is an essential part of healthy and strong relationships and team culture.

- Feedback is a sign of respect.
- It builds trust.
- It helps to address issues before they fester.
- It helps people become aware of blind spots.
- Feedback boosts engagement and retention.
- It increases positivity.
- It reduces the anxiety of 'am I doing OK?'.

Feedback can indeed create more trust and strengthen relationships.

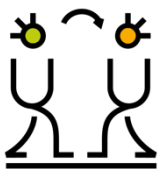
A starting place is with good intentions and develop a mindset that is positive and learning-oriented. In essence, feedback is one of the mechanisms that helps us grow and develop. It is also a means to creating a robust and productive culture.



## Feedback initiatives and performance reviews

Despite all of these possible positive outcomes, feedback has, honestly, not been all that effective in most workplaces.

In the 1990s, a large-scale study was conducted (by Kluger & deNisi) to determine the impact of organisations that had implemented "feedback interventions" including performance reviews and regular feedback. Take some guesses about the impact on the organisations' business results.



Only 30% reported that there was a notable positive impact on business results.

Slightly less than 1 out of 3 businesses benefitted from a huge investment in creating a feedback culture. 40% of organisations reported that feedback had a negative impact on business performance and results. Another 30% reported no impact at all.

In other words, there were more people who reported a negative impact than people who reported a positive impact.

## A history of institutionalised feedback

Now that you've seen some numbers on the effectiveness of feedback cultures, let's look at the history of workplace feedback development in relatively recent times. We will see how widespread feedback initiatives were initially based on some false information and assumptions.

### 1860

The term "feed-back loop" was coined in the 1860s to describe a mechanical process like a thermostat.

The process is simple: you set a desired state, the current state is measured and compared to what is desired to assess the difference. With that information, a decision can be made to heat or cool a room in order to get to the desired setting.

This is a feedback loop. It's simple. It's helpful. It provides essential information. There's no judgement that the room temperature is good or bad, just information that this is how it is so an appropriate choice can be made.

### 1900

In the early 1900s feedback was introduced into factories. Factory workers were able to find out how effective they were: information was fed back to them about nuts and bolts, gaps and tolerances, and other quality measures.

According to an influential (and apparently very biased) study, this information helped them improve their effectiveness and behaviours changed. Quality and motivation both improved markedly.

### 1950s

In the late 1950s, based on this pivotal but questionable study, feedback was introduced into offices.

Leaders started trying to measure the office workers' effectiveness on a wide variety of tasks: criteria were determined, and people were measured against that criteria and **the performance review was created.**

And for more than 60 years, organisations have been trying to figure out how to improve quality by implementing feedback systems, **all based on controversial and suspect data!**

## Why receiving feedback is hard



Receiving feedback from colleagues is the key aspect of creating a feedback culture. When everyone in an organisation can receive feedback, it creates a culture of improvement and openness, and develops the compassion and empathy needed to give effective feedback. Thus creating even more opportunities for growth.

But it is not always easy. If you do not manage your limbic reactions, feedback may trigger you as much as it helps you. And if you find receiving feedback difficult, this might also add to your stress about giving feedback.

Let's explore why receiving feedback may be challenging for you.

## When feedback triggers you

Not everyone is trained to give feedback consciously or graciously. In these - sometimes quite negative - situations, your limbic system will create a strong threat response. Your heart-rate goes up, you want to fight back or run away and overall, it feels awful and can often be a source of limbic threats.



When feedback is not delivered well, you might feel that the person giving it is attacking you, venting at you, mocking you, embarrassing you in front of others, or trying to problem solve at your expense. Your heart-rate goes up, you want to fight back or run away and overall, it feels awful.

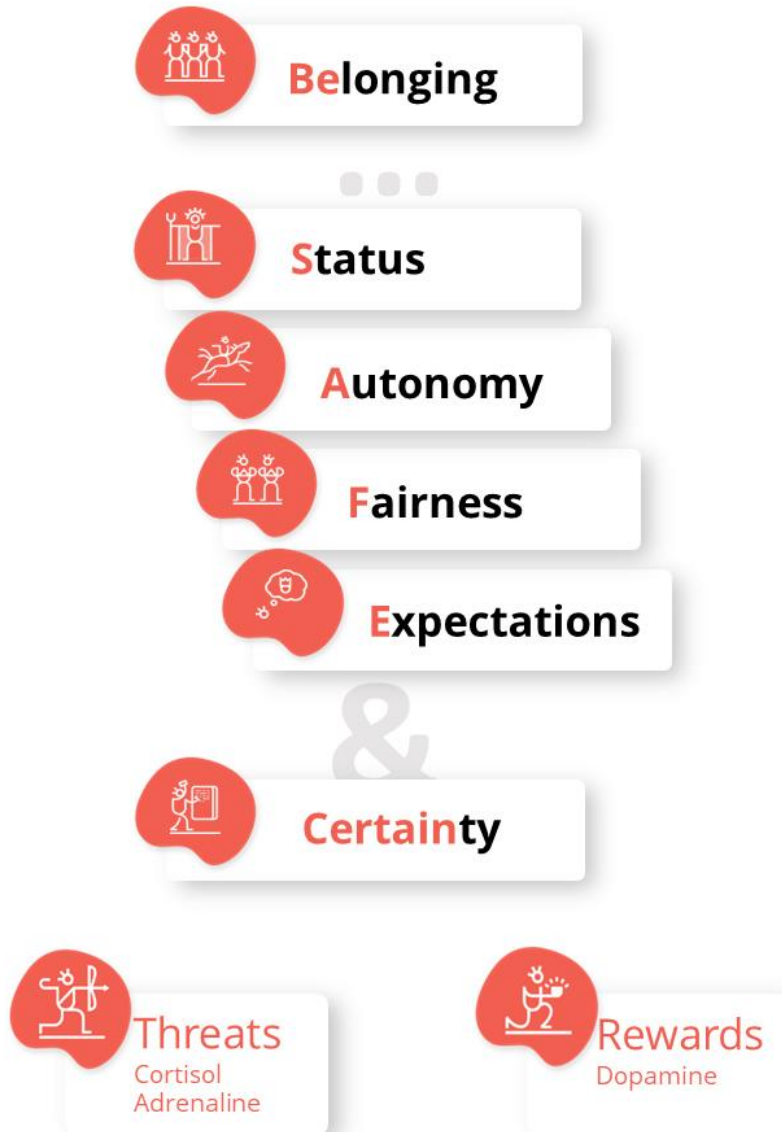
In these situations, one or more of the Be SAFE and Certain elements is being threatened and you are experiencing a strong threat response. (If you need a refresher on the Be SAFE and Certain elements, see next page.)

Feedback will not always come to you in a way that's easy to hear because the giver may be nervous, angry or trying to get their own needs met. But, if you are able to listen with openness and curiosity, you may get some really great information that changes the course of your life or opens up a blind spot.

When feedback is delivered irresponsibly it is very likely that we will react with a threat response, defensiveness or other toxic behaviour. It is even possible that we will react that way even if the feedback was delivered graciously and with heart.

Consider either type of delivery in the exercise below. But first remind yourself about the **Be SAFE & Certain model**.

## Be SAFE & Certain



Think about a time when you reacted strongly to feedback

- How did you feel in the moment?
- What Be SAFE & Certain need was being threatened?

Now think of a time when you were at your best receiving feedback.

- What were you focusing your attention on and how did that help you hear what the other person had to say?

## Conversations you might avoid

What are the conversations that you and your team avoid - those things that hang around like unfinished business?

Trying to address conflicts that are under the surface can feel tricky and out of our control. But if we avoid them, they often fester and get in the way of effective communication, collaboration and good teamwork.

You are going to take a look at conversations that are commonly avoided. Consider which of these you might be trying to avoid.

## Addressing tricky topics

There are some topics we wish we could just forget or ignore, often centred around a current or past conflict. You might be telling yourself that you can put off the conversation or deal with the situation another way, but avoiding the conversation just gives the conflict space to grow.

Take a look at these common tricky conversations.

### Elephants in the room

People often speak about “elephants in the room” – events or situations that nobody wants to address but everyone knows about and perhaps gossips about.

You can lose a lot of time by having to dance around these elephants, as you accommodate this person who can't be on a team with that person or another who refuses to apologise for previous insults to someone else. It costs time, money, energy and morale.

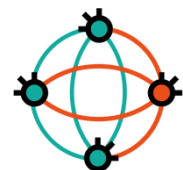
Maybe there are unresolved issues that keep coming back but nobody dares to address them, even though they clearly have an impact on people. These types of unfinished business are like elephants that are trying to hide under the carpet. For example:

- Unresolved arguments.
- Unchecked racist, sexist, homophobic or other unprofessional comments.
- Consistently toxic behaviour including harsh 'banter' (e.g., "can't you take a joke?").
- Cliques or an overt in-group and out-group.
- Microaggressions.
- Known pay disparities.
- Not respecting others and their talents.
- Vicious rumours or gossip.

### Disgruntled employees

Large-scale studies by the Gallup organisation and by Gartner research have both shown that well over half of employees (even up to 87% says Gartner) are dissatisfied. Both studies show that about 25% of employees are actively dissatisfied which means they actively or passively are working against the organisation's best interest.

These people will create negativity and it will spread to others, destroying overall morale. A common cause for this behaviour is feelings of unfairness. You might remember that the common reaction to unfairness is retaliation or revenge. In workplaces, employees who feel they've been treated unfairly will feel vindicated when they work against the organisation.



Is there anyone on your team that might be dissatisfied, seeking some kind of revenge and/or spreading negativity?

## Mismatched expectations

We all make assumptions, often without realising that they are assumptions rather than agreements. Then, when our expectations are not met, we are disappointed. Blame or defensiveness is a natural next step and off we go into a limbic dance or blame game.

Do you recognise any of these mismatched expectations from your team?

- "I thought *you* were speaking to the customer about that!"
- "Wait - you didn't proofread my document before sending it? It has so many typos!"
- "I've checked all the boxes for my current role - when do I get a promotion?"
- "I've been here a year - when do I get a pay rise?"

Ideally, we set expectations up front, but even so, we are not likely to cover all of our assumptions. As soon as you realise that there is a mismatch in expectations, it is important to raise it and clear it up. But, it is difficult. The limbic system wants to be right and will cling to the idea that your assumption was right and your frustration justified.

## Managing up

If you are not getting what you want from your current manager, you might need to take responsibility and ask for what you need. This may feel like an unfair or challenging conversation that you want to avoid. While we point to your direct manager, this could also apply to anyone with some kind of power over you - including senior leaders, stakeholders or customers.

Think of a manager that you enjoyed working for and consider what was great about that person and your relationship. It is likely that you will come up with a mix of these qualities where your manager:

- supported you
- believed in you and challenged you to stretch your abilities
- gave you both positive and growth-oriented feedback
- was both present for you and let you find your way
- you both trusted each other

If you are not getting what you want from your current manager, you might need to take responsibility and ask for what you need, which might feel unfair and challenging.

While we point to your direct manager, this could also apply to anyone with some kind of power over you - including senior leaders, stakeholders or customers.

## Appreciating others



Positivity is good for the brain and it's good for morale. But many people find appreciation difficult and awkward. Maybe it's uncomfortable because it's unfamiliar. Or maybe we prefer to follow the brain's error detectors and focus on what is wrong.

As you know, the limbic system is negatively biased. Actively appreciating people can help balance the brain's negative orientation; it increases dopamine and serotonin in both the giver and the receiver and creates more motivation and engagement.

Practise will help make appreciation feel more normal and natural.

### Who do you appreciate?

There are a lot of people in our daily lives that we appreciate even if we are not aware of it or aware of them.

Who are the people in your life whose actions you benefit from or appreciate?

Consider whether you could be appreciating these people more:

- People that regularly get their work done on time.
- Positive people who bring humour or optimism to the team.
- Those very organised people who make things happen so you don't have to think about the details.
- Revenue generators who ensure your organisation is solvent so you can get paid.
- Customer facing employees who keep your customers happy.
- Fast thinkers who can respond well to an emergency.

### Which conversations do you need to have?

Everyone, including you, is responsible for the culture of your team. Tending to the human aspect of teamwork includes addressing the messy parts of being human. There are always disagreements, mistakes and unfortunate events but they do not have to derail us. Recognise these are normal and build your strength to address them.

If you do not specifically look for these issues, your brain might fool you into thinking that they do not exist. So let's get conscious and curious.

### Take note of which conversations you need to have:

- Addressing an elephant in the room
- Speaking to a disgruntled employee
- Dealing with mismatched expectations
- Managing up
- Appreciating others

## Taking responsibility



Having identified some conversations you could do with having in your team, it is all too easy to think that it is someone else's responsibility to have them. You might assume that a manager or even HR should be the ones to create harmony, clean up conflicts or give feedback to low performers.

But, as adults and professionals, we all need to take responsibility for the culture we work in. Managing human emotions is part of being on a team.

To build a robust, trusting and high-performing team, everyone will need to take part ownership for the human aspect of teaming.

Complaining about team members' behaviours, attitudes or low-quality work is not helpful. Instead, consider how could you take responsibility when you see something that is not working as well as it could?

### 3 Options

If a situation you don't like is stressful or difficult, we often complain about it or gossip about it to feel better for a while, but if you really want that situation to change there are only three things that you can do.

#### Change the situation

Have conversations with others in the situation. For example:

- Raise awareness
- Make a request
- Give feedback
- Engage in a difficult conversation

#### Change yourself

Adapt how you engage with the situation to manage it in a better way. For example:

- Look at the situation differently
- Have a different mindset or attitude
- Learn some skills to enable you to attend to the situation differently.

#### Leave

This might mean leave the group or team, leave the project, leave the company, or just to leave 'it' – let it go and don't engage with it.

These three options work together. If you can change the situation, go for it. If you can't, are you willing to leave? If not, then the only other option is to change yourself. If you are not willing to change yourself, the only option is to leave.

There is always a fourth option of complaining and suffering. But if you want to take responsibility for your own happiness you have these three options to choose from.

## Using the 3 Options model

Start by clarifying what you want to change. Then step through the three different options to see which might be most appropriate; you can start with any of the options.

For example, you might consider first if you want to **leave** the situation. Maybe it's the best option or maybe that's not viable right now. Once you choose to stay, it might have you see the situation differently – a situation can look quite different when you actively choose to stay with it. It can give you more motivation to do something about it.

Next you might consider how you can **change the situation** – maybe you can make some requests or give feedback. If this feels uncomfortable, you might think that you cannot change the situation. Then, the only other option would be to **change yourself**. With this option, you would look at how to change your mindset, or build some courage or learn some skills so you can participate in the situation differently.

### Taking responsibility for your team environment

All three options have their place, but our current focus is on choosing to take responsibility for co-creating your working culture. For this purpose, we will now focus on how to change the situation instead of leaving or changing yourself.

Remember that you cannot control other people or their behaviour. You can give feedback, make requests or influence them by appealing to their limbic system.

In the rest of this module, you will learn to confidently address the situation and ask for what you need or what you believe the situation requires – by moving forward with a conversation that may be difficult for you.