THE TACKLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS POCKETBOOK

By Peter English

Drawings by Phil Hailstone

“This book tells you everything you need to know to handle difficult conversations. It doesn't flinch from giving tough advice. I recommend it wholeheartedly, and will use it as a resource for my coaching clients.”

David Megginson, Professor Emeritus, Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University
CONTENTS

THE RIGHT MINDSET 7
Why we avoid difficult conversations, feeling the fear and doing it anyway, comfort zones & stretch zones, don’t collect stamps, ‘but I want people to like me!’, replace some of your head tapes, use the right subpersonality

PREPARING FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION 17
Importance of preparation, have a clear objective, what sort of ‘yes’ do you want?, the emotional bank account, style & tone

CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE 35
Why atmosphere is important, habitual approaches to conflict, your opening lines, practical considerations, the golden rule of influencing, mirroring

INCREASING YOUR IMPACT 51
How do you make an impact?, avoiding the child pose, control your giveaways, use questions deliberately, comment on their reaction, tailor your language

COPING WITH CRITICISM 59
Handling defensive feelings, the fight or flight response and how best to manage it

GIVING UNWELCOME MESSAGES 73
How to give bad news, managing expectations, asking someone to change their behaviour, avoid playing the blame game, coping with tears and tantrums

SAY NO & MEAN IT 87
Why it’s important, the problem with saying ‘no’, head tapes, different types of ‘no’

EXPRESSING STRONG FEELINGS 93
When, and how, to express your feelings, how to prepare for the conversation, clarifying your own feelings, stay in your own business, talk about, don’t ‘act out’!

TEN TIPS TO TAKE AWAY 105
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

WHY ATMOSPHERE IS IMPORTANT

The outcome of some difficult conversations is decided in the first few moments of the interaction. If you get these right, you have a greater chance of a successful encounter. This chapter takes you through the different aspects you need to consider when creating the right atmosphere, namely:

- Acknowledging, and adapting, your habitual approach to conflict
- Thinking through your opening lines
- Taking into account some practical considerations
- The golden rule of influencing
Creating the Right Atmosphere

Habitual Approaches to Conflict

Taking some time to create the right atmosphere at the start of the conversation can make a big difference as to whether it goes well or turns into an unpleasant argument. The first thing to think about is whether you are naturally a competitor or an accommodator.

Most people have an habitual way of approaching difficult conversations – I call this our default setting. Our default setting is a combination of:

- How much we want to win the conversation, and get a result that we are happy with. This is our competing inclination
- The extent to which we want the other person to feel good during and after the conversation – how concerned we are that they get their needs met. This is our accommodating inclination
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

FIVE APPROACHES TO HANDLING CONFLICT

In 1974 Kenneth W Thomas and Ralph H Kilmann created a model which combines our tendency to compete and our tendency to accommodate, giving five approaches to handling conflict.
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT
UNDERSTANDING THE FIVE STYLES

Each of us has a preference for one or two of the five styles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competers</td>
<td>Natural inclination in a difficult conversation is to win. Less concerned about the other person’s feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodators</td>
<td>Want to maintain the relationship on good terms. They don’t mind if they don’t get their needs met so long as the other person is happy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromisers</td>
<td>Prefer to ‘do a deal’ that both can live with rather than spend ages thrashing out an agreement that fully meets their needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiders</td>
<td>Strong preference to avoid the difficult conversation. The issue doesn’t get resolved: they aren’t happy and neither is the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborators</td>
<td>Want a result that meets their needs and those of the other person. Prepared to invest the time and energy in fully resolving the issue.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

WHICH STYLE TO USE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>When to use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compete</td>
<td>When you want to get your needs met, and you are not concerned about maintaining a relationship, for example, when asking for a refund in a shop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodate</td>
<td>In situations where the relationship takes priority, with your immediate needs taking second place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>When time is short and you need to agree a practical resolution that you can both live with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>This means you don’t have the difficult conversation at all! It can be appropriate in situations where things are likely to change anyway (eg, if one of you will be leaving the organisation shortly).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate</td>
<td>When you will be having an ongoing relationship with the other person and you both need to feel that your needs are being met.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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HABITUAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

HOW TO BEGIN THE CONVERSATION

Once you have decided which style you want to use, you can create the appropriate atmosphere at the start of the conversation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Examples of what to say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compete</td>
<td>‘I’m really unhappy about this faulty product and I want a refund.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodate</td>
<td>‘I know that you are concerned about this situation and I want us to find a resolution that you are happy with.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromise</td>
<td>‘I’d like us to sort this out and strike a deal that we can both live with.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>Either you don’t have the conversation, or you say, ‘I think it would be better if we didn’t discuss this’ when the other person raises the issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate</td>
<td>‘I’m really keen that we take the time to resolve this issue fully and that we both walk away happy with the outcome.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

YOUR OPENING LINES

When deciding how to start the conversation you need to think about whether you want to downplay or emphasise the importance of what you are going to talk about. You might want to downplay the importance if you are concerned that the person might have an overly strong emotional reaction to what you are about to say. If this is the case, you might say something like:

‘I want to have a chat with you about something that is bothering me a little. It’s not a big deal, but I do want to talk about it.’

You may want to emphasise the importance if you suspect that the other person may not realise the significance of what you want to talk about, or that they might try to be dismissive. You could say:

‘I want to talk to you about something that I am concerned about. I think that we both might find this a difficult conversation, and I want us both to be as constructive as possible during it.’
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The venue
Generally, somewhere that you won’t be overheard is best, and if you are working in a glass-walled office you might want to draw the blinds. If you are in a work setting, think about whether you need to book a meeting room so that you are both on neutral territory.

Giving the other person notice
Sometimes it is helpful to give the other person some notice that you want to talk to them: ‘I’d like to talk to you about x, could we fix a time tomorrow?’ This gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. If you don’t give the other person notice, ask them, ‘Is this a convenient time?’ when you approach them. If they say that it isn’t, then arrange a time that is convenient for both of you.

Timing
Don’t try and have the conversation when either party is feeling particularly stressed.
CREATING THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

THE GOLDEN RULE OF INFLUENCING

When you are trying to get a positive outcome from a difficult conversation, it’s worth remembering that the golden rule of influencing is:

CREATE RAPPORT BEFORE YOU TRY TO PERSUADE

This means taking some time at the start of the conversation to create an atmosphere whereby, even though you and the other person might have different views, you are approaching the issue as a shared problem to be solved rather than a fight that you each want to win.

There are two powerful techniques for creating rapport:

1. The emotional bank account (described in the previous chapter).
2. Mirroring.
About the Author

Peter English
Peter English has over sixteen years experience of helping thousands of managers and professionals to develop their interpersonal effectiveness. He has a particular interest in helping people at all organisational levels become more assertive and confident in tackling difficult conversations.

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