

## Handling difficult conversations: executive summary

Difficult conversations are a fact of life in any workplace, whether they involve a manager delivering difficult feedback, communicating change or discussing behavioural issues, or more everyday problems such as disagreeing with a superior, responding to bad behaviour or dealing with those coming into work late. What's more, with another recession on the horizon, a business resorting to pushing the 'redundancy button' is a constant threat to jobs and cause of pressure on middle managers, unconfident in their own job security whilst often tasked with breaking bad news to others.

Yet it is the job of managers to be responsible and accountable to their direct reports and own line managers, regardless of how difficult the conversations; developing managers who are able to tackle these head on is essential if businesses want to maintain employee engagement and productivity in tough times.

### Are managers confidently and assertively tackling difficult conversations?

At the beginning of 2012 we surveyed over 100 management and human resources professionals to gain an insight into how difficult conversations are being handled at work. We found that managers rate their confidence dealing with difficult conversations more highly than it is perceived by others, suggesting that in reality conversations can often be put off or mishandled. When asked to rate their own confidence in dealing with difficult conversations with any other individual at work, over two thirds of managers (68%) rated themselves as either extremely or very confident. However, when we put the same

#### The most difficult conversation subjects for managers:

- 1) Behavioural issues (23%)
- 2) Poor performance (20%)
- 3) Personal hygiene (20%)
- 4) Firing or redundancy (11%)
- 5) Absence and lateness (6%)
- 6) Communicating change (5%)
- 7) An individual with personal difficulties (3%)

question to HR managers, only one in five (21%) felt that managers in their organisation were either extremely confident or very confident to address difficult conversations and almost half (47%) of those surveyed felt that managers were either extremely or very unconfident. Furthermore, half of HR managers (48%) felt that difficult conversations are either frequently or often referred to HR when they could be effectively dealt with by the manager. Overall our results suggested that sensitive conversations are often being delayed, risking a detrimental effect on staff morale.

Whilst preparation is key to ensuring a difficult conversation has a clear goal and conflict is well managed, managers intimidated by difficult conversations may spend too long on this. When we asked line managers what their first step was when addressing a difficult conversation, for two thirds (67%) it would be to prepare by clarifying the facts. In addition, when asked who they would approach for advice when dealing with difficult conversations with a boss, direct report or peer, just 4% of line managers said that they would go to no one. When we asked HR managers what they would like managers in their organisation to do differently when handling difficult conversations, 42% of answers focused on actually having the difficult conversation, rather than putting it off, whereas only one in five (19%) focused on better preparation.

#### The most difficult conversation subjects when addressing managers:

- 1) Requesting a payrise (32%)
- 2) Asking for feedback (25%)
- 3) Agreeing targets (13%)
- 4) Challenging manager (13%)
- 5) Manager's behaviour (5%)
- 6) Poor management (5%)
- 7) Seeking promotion (2%)



Preparation *is* essential - particularly when breaking news that needs to be delivered tactfully and backed up by facts. However, much of the difficulty behind a conversation lies in reacting to the person's emotional response and dealing with conflict – areas that long-term coaching and working on emotional intelligence can support. The imperative that leadership development focuses on these areas was reinforced when we asked line managers why they put off difficult conversations; preparation was the response of only one in four (25%) and the majority (63%) explained that it was due to apprehension of how the other person would react.

Our survey showed that the importance of handling difficult conversations promptly and effectively is broadly recognised, with all HR managers surveyed saying that their organisation provided some kind of support for handling difficult conversations to at least some of their managers; 84% use coaching, 48% use training, 16% use written manuals and 12% provide support from HR. However, when asked how *well* HR feel managers are trained in handling difficult conversations the average rating was 3/5 – neither well nor badly; only one in three (32%) HR managers felt that managers were trained either extremely well or very well and one in four (24%) opted for very badly or extremely badly. Furthermore, less than one in ten (7%) of line managers stated that they never put off difficult conversations, with over half (60%) saying that they either often or sometimes put them off.

## The importance of handling difficult conversations early

Handling a conversation early can prevent issues reaching more formal stages such as disciplinarys, grievances or employment tribunals, and quash any potential for problems to grow. This negative impact of delaying a difficult conversation and allowing the problem to escalate can include lost business, damage to company reputation, higher staff turnover, missed targets, loss of morale, lower productivity, greater stress and even missed opportunities.

Learning Consultancy Partnership have produced a free guide which provides some practical starting points for individuals to assess and adapt their approaches to difficult conversations. Our guide focuses mainly on managers, although much of the advice can apply to any situation where difficult conversations arise. Further training workshops or individual coaching sessions may be beneficial e.g. on developing emotional intelligence or how to give and receive feedback, particularly for managers under certain pressures such as the task of communicating redundancies.

For your free copy of the guide and full survey results please email [enquiries@lcp.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@lcp.org.uk), with the subject line 'difficult conversations'

Learning how to handle difficult conversations is key to leadership development and coaching work. In our experience it has been a recurring subject brought up by both managers and HR; our short guide represents what we have learnt over the years. We hope our advice can help to equip managers with the tools to handle difficult conversations, taking them a step closer to our vision; workplaces that recognise how conflicts and change may be challenges but always represent great opportunities to learn and grow – as individuals and organisations.

