

# People & Culture Leader Guide - Courageous Conversations

## Purpose

There are times when you know you should talk to someone, but you don't. Maybe you've tried and it went badly.

Or maybe you fear that talking will only make the situation worse. Still, you feel stuck, and you'd like to free up that stuck energy for more useful purposes.

Holding conversations that are out of our comfort zone as a leader is one of the most important skills that a leader can develop. It is a skill that is essential to the motivation, performance and success of your team.

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## 1. Key Information

### I. Be prepared

- Clearly understanding the matter at hand is important in preparing for a conversation.
- Take time to prepare what it is you would like to discuss and understand why you wish to discuss it.
- Be clear that the need for the conversation is not based on assumptions.
- Be emotionally ready and understand how this situation makes you feel.
  - a. Are you anxious, angry, fearful or tense?
  - b. Be aware of how you are feeling and address your emotional responses so as not to impede you from having a calm, honest and open conversation.
  - c. Keeping an open mind to others' point of view is critical to establishing a favourable resolution that works for all.
- Work through what a good outcome might look like. What are your parameters and how much are you willing to compromise?

### II. Have the conversation face to face

- When having a conversation with an employee that may address sensitive topics, try and have the conversation in person.
- Arrange a time and place for the conversation demonstrating that you are taking the matter, and the employee's position seriously. The personal approach will help build a feeling of trust and approachability – if handled well.

### III. Take the time to listen

- Show appreciation and optimism, reinforce confidentiality, briefly state the issue, and invite the other person to tell you how they see the situation.
- Take turns stating issues and feelings. When speaking use "I" messages and collaborative language.
- Acknowledge how the conversation may be difficult for both yourself and the employee and how they may be feeling.
- Be mindful of not talking too much – which can happen if you are anxious or nervous.
- When listening, don't interrupt; ask open questions; reflect feelings; pay attention to non-verbal communication. Shift from 'me versus you' to 'us against the problem'; focus on behaviour or the issue, not the person; identify interests versus positions, find common ground, summarise new understandings and progress.

### IV. Communicate clearly and honestly

- Outline why having the conversation is necessary and what it is that needs to be resolved.
- Manage your emotions and responses to what is being said. If you are uncertain about how to manage your emotions, you can contact Benestar for Leaders support for dealing with complex or people issues.
- Non-verbal voice cues such as tone, pitch, volume, inflection, rhythm and rate of speech are all important aspects of effective communication.
- Stay focused on the matter at hand and try to limit discussion on unrelated matters.

### V. Find solutions

- Brainstorm together with creativity and without judgement, problem solve with a focus on common goals and issues at hand.
- Agree on a mutually satisfactory solution or on an individual specific solution, ensuring a balanced result.

- Carry out a reality check – will the proposed solution work for the present and the future?
- If you reach an impasse, break the issue down and look for small gains, acknowledge commitment and progress, consider if and when to re-engage.
- Benestar is an available support resource for all employees and can be contacted on 1300 360 364.

## VI. Follow up

- Takes notes of the conversation and remember to quote exact words used where possible.
- You may wish to email a summary of the conversation to the employee or even yourself to assist with record keeping.
- If agreement has been reached, meet to review and refine if necessary.
- For any support in this process, feel free to contact your People Experience Partner.

## 2. Before going into the conversation, ask yourself some questions:

### I. Purpose and Outcome

- What is your purpose for having the conversation?
- What do you hope to accomplish?
- What would be an ideal outcome?

Once clear on these you will be able start the conversation with a supportive purpose.

### II. Who is my audience and what do they want?

- What might they be thinking about this situation?
- Are they aware of the problem? If so, how do you think they perceive it?
- What are their needs and fears?
- What solution do you think they would suggest?
- Are there any common concerns? Could there be?
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### III. What am I bringing to the table?

- How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?
- What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized,
- What "buttons" of yours are being pushed?
- Are you more emotional than the situation warrants?
- Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
- How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.

## 3. How Do I Begin?

### I. Here are a few conversation openers:

- I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively.

- I'd like to talk about \_\_\_\_\_ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
- I need your help with what just happened. Do you have a few minutes to talk?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it (soon)? If the person says, "Sure, let me get back to you," follow up with him.
- I think we have different perceptions about \_\_\_\_\_. I'd like to hear your thinking on this.
- I'd like to talk about \_\_\_\_\_. I think we may have different ideas about how to \_\_\_\_\_.
- I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about \_\_\_\_\_. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

## 4. 4 Steps to a Successful Outcome or S.E.E.D

### I. S for Scenario

- Be clear about the context of the feedback that you are providing
- What is the situation you want to talk to them about?
- Cultivate an attitude of discovery and curiosity
- Pretend you don't know anything (you really don't) and try to learn as much as possible about the other person and their point of view.
- Watch body language. What do they really want? What are they not saying?
- Let the other person talk until they are finished.
- Don't interrupt except to acknowledge.
- Whatever you hear, don't take it personally. It's not really about you.
- Try to learn as much as you can in this phase of the conversation. You'll get your turn, but don't rush things

### II. E for Explore

- Acknowledgment means showing that you've heard and understood.
- What is their perspective of the situation?
- How do you think they are feeling?
- Try to understand the other person so well you can make their argument for them. Then do it. Explain back to them what you think they have explained.
- Acknowledge whatever you can, including your own defensiveness if it comes up. It's fine; it just is.
- Acknowledgment can be difficult if we associate it with agreement. Keep them separate. By saying, "this sounds really important to you," doesn't mean I'm going to go along with your decision

### III. E for Explain

- When you sense the other person has finished, it's your turn.
- What can you see from your perspective that they have missed?
- Help clarify your position without minimizing theirs. For example: "From what you've told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that I'm not a team player. And I think I am. When I introduce problems with a project, I'm thinking about its long-term success. Maybe we can talk about how to address these issues so that my intention is clear."
- Think of your own example.

### IV. D for Determine

- What are the development areas identified?
- Now you're ready to begin building solutions.
- Brainstorming and continued inquiry are useful here.

- Ask the other person what they think might work.
- What can they do to grow in this area?
- Whatever they say, find something you like and build on it.
- If the conversation becomes adversarial, go back to Step 1 Inquiry.
- Asking for the other person's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage
- Consider the specific actions, timeframes for completion, and ways for the individual to be held accountable for taking these steps.

## **S.E.E.D For Success**

### **Practice, Practice, Practice**

The art of conversation is like any art—with continued practice you will acquire skill and ease.

#### 5. Additional tips and suggestions

- A successful outcome will depend on two things: how you are and what you say. How you are (centered, supportive, curious, problem-solving) will greatly influence what you say.
- Acknowledge emotional energy—yours and the other persons—and direct it toward a useful purpose.
- Know and return to your purpose at difficult moments.
- Don't take verbal attacks personally. Help the other person come back to the purpose.
- Don't assume the other person can see things from your point of view.
- Practice the conversation with someone before holding the real one.
- Mentally practice the conversation. See various possibilities and visualize yourself handling them with ease. Envision the outcome you are hoping for.