

Critical Conversations: Utilizing Feedback Opportunities to Enhance Employee Performance

“Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Why is having a challenging conversation so difficult? It feels like there is so much at stake. Our stomach gets tied up in knots. We dread sitting down with the person. We just don't know how to face saying something someone might not want to hear, or something they may challenge us on.

We often hear from our clients:

- *Managers just aren't having the tough conversations*
- *Everyone's operating at a different level, we're not on the same page*
- *We aren't giving meaningful performance feedback*
- *People are uncomfortable talking about “inappropriate” behavior*
- *Departments aren't sharing information or talking through challenges to solve problems*

We can easily break a conversation into two components:

- There are two perspectives (or more)
- Each perspective has a rationale

The difficulty occurs when we want our own perspective to be the “right” perspective. That makes us feel like we have to “fight” for something. If we change our thought process to one of inquiry, a chance to gain an understanding of the other perspective, it feels less confrontational. Ultimately, it boils down to the old faithful “win-win” strategy. When both sides of a conversation are oriented to creating something that works best for everyone, no one will lose.

*“This is what I want in heaven...
words to become notes and conversations to be symphonies.”*

Tina Turner

Steps to having a critical conversation:

1. Why is it important to have a critical conversation?

Critical conversations are those conversations that inspire a better outcome. If they didn't happen, things would remain status quo. When they do happen, things change for the better. People are more connected, processes improve, there is a clear understanding of goals and expectations, and accountability is established and agreed to. Having critical conversations are risky, because in order to arrive at a better outcome, the conversation needs to be robust. These conversations take time. They are

not easy. They are likely to be ongoing. But when we have critical conversations, we improve relationships, systems, products, customer satisfaction, and outcomes. The first step is recognizing the importance of having the conversation, rather than skirting the issue or letting things go.

“Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish.”

Sam Walton

2. Should I/ Shouldn't I? Deciding whether to have a critical conversation.

Critical conversations are risky. The topic is often uncomfortable or complex. As humans, we are oriented to keep things simple, easy, comfortable, and peaceful. We don't want to make things more difficult for each other or for ourselves. We certainly don't want someone to be upset with us or create negative feelings. Having a complex conversation goes against the grain. So finding the right time and place, and determining when it's worth it to commit to the conversation is important.

In weighing the pros and cons of having a critical conversation, a good place to start is thinking about the end result. What are possible outcomes of the critical conversation? Is the benefit stronger than potential negative consequences? It's a good idea to map out the potential outcomes as well as the possible strategies for dealing with the problem at hand. Another great way to evaluate the pros and cons is to ask other (appropriate) people. Check in with a mentor, a peer, a confidant, or your supervisor. Getting additional opinions on the worthiness of the cause can provide additional data points that may have been potentially missed.

3. How to plan for and navigate the conversation

For a critical conversation to have a positive outcome, the approach should be one of inquisition, understanding, and intent to create a better outcome together. With each participant having a stake in the solution, the plan becomes relatively easy. It's simply a matter of taking the time to think about what the **critical questions** are. Where are you stuck? What information do you need? What would help you have a better understanding or grasp of the situation? How is the issue preventing you, your team, or your organization from reaching goals, maintaining processes, or accomplishing tasks? And how can you best understand what the other person needs to be successful or make necessary changes?

- a. Come up with a list of questions.
- b. Establish your goals for the conversation.
- c. State your goals up front and inquire whether they are in agreement on the initial goals.
- d. Then ask questions to help understand how to come to a win-win outcome.
- e. Make commitments on agreements that are made and plan for follow-up conversations.

“I have yet to find a man, however exalted his station, who did not do better work and put forth greater effort under a spirit of approval than under a spirit of criticism.”

Charles Schwab

4. How can we make it an accepted part of how we communicate?

It's not easy to take the first step in tackling a critical conversation when it's not a normal part of the culture or if it's not something you have done before. It's a good idea to start small. Sometimes just asking a simple question such as "can you tell me more about that," or "can you explain how you came to that conclusion" can begin to create a pattern of taking a pause to talk something through, rather than just going with it or overlooking a potential issue. Pushing back with questions begins to forge a path where it's okay to have inquisitive discussions.

- Pick topics that are easiest to come to a win-win solution, where the stakes aren't that high.
- Build on successes – reflect on how a better outcome was achieved and encourage others to do more of that.
- When possible, leaders should state the expectation that critical conversations will be a normal part of the culture and have them with their staff whenever possible. They also need to ensure staff feels supported.

"Conversation should be pleasant without scurrility, witty without affectation, free without indecency, learned without conceitedness, novel without falsehood."

William Shakespeare

What not to do:

- Approach the conversation as if you have something to "tell" the person. The better approach is to aim to understand the other person's perspective.
- Go into the conversation knowing exactly what outcome you want to see. It's better to be open and see what outcome you can create together.

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