



MAKE IT REAL: A SINGLE CONVERSATION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

What is the conversation out there that you are dodging? The one you've been avoiding for days, weeks, months? When I ask this question to my workshop participants, many can instantly pinpoint a conversation they've been avoiding.

Your team's strength and your own success at work depends on you stepping up today and having these conversations with your co-workers. This article is a reminder that any single conversation has the power to transform any of your work relationships.

Don't fall into the rut of the Sucker's Choice. That's the false dilemma that we have only two options, both of them bad.

- **Option 1** – don't say anything, often called denying or ignoring or avoiding. Let's face it. It's easy not to express ourselves.
- **Option 2** – say something and the other person will get angry. We're afraid we may threaten our position, be seen as a trouble-maker or a complainer, and end up in a worse situation.

Remember there is an....

- **Option 3** – the middle way - which is speaking up with both care and candour.

Your manager is evaluating you every day by how effective you are at getting things done in a way that doesn't turn off your co-workers. That means tackling necessary conversations appropriately. Research shows that our success and our happiness in any relationship, at work or at home, can be predicted by our capacity to hold crucial conversations.

There are real costs associated with not speaking up. Avoiding issues becomes time-consuming. It results in less work accomplished, lower morale, longer time making decisions, missed deadlines, gossip.

Recently a workshop participant told me, "The fact still remains that some people are more open to listening to feedback than others." So true. The more stressed people are, the more strongly they feel about the issue, the harder it will be for them to truly listen. Your only option is to keep giving them the feedback in an appropriate way, eliminating all trigger words, all hot-button phrases. Most people don't have a problem dealing with honesty. What they can't deal with is a message delivered with trigger words that attach blame.

I overheard this comment in one of my workshops, "Until this session, I never realized how much my body language was alienating my co-workers." Sometimes our tone of voice, choice of words or the expression on our face can attach a load to our message that we didn't intend. When you receive feedback, do you become defensive, argumentative, sullen? Ask someone who knows you well.

At the end of a workshop a participant told the group, “Today I learned how to speak up and not be intimidated even if it’s my superior I’m speaking to.” That is good to hear. In the best organizations, everyone holds everyone else accountable – regardless of level or position. The path to high engagement and high productivity is through face-to-face conversations at all levels.

If you know something must change, then it is you who must change. It is you who needs to have a conversation with the appropriate person. Complaining to anyone other than the person with whom you have a challenge or from whom you need clarification, is toxic behaviour and leads to a workplace where people don’t enjoy coming to work.

Ironically, the more crucial the conversation, the less likely we are to handle it well. Practice these **Steps to Crucial Conversations** adapted from Susan Scott’s *Fierce Conversations*:

- “I want to talk with you” or “I want to listen to you” rather than the trigger statement **“I need to talk to you.”**
- Select **one specific** example.
- Describe your emotions: **“I was confused.” “I was disappointed.”** This way you are staying on your side of the net. You are taking responsibility for what you feel, not telling others how they should be.
- Clarify what’s at stake – for you, for your team, for your organization, for your clients.
- Identify your contribution to the problem: “I realize I didn’t provide you with sufficient training on this new system. I take responsibility for that.”
- Indicate that you want to resolve the issue: **“I want to resolve this situation – the effect your conversation with some clients is having on the number of complaints I am receiving.”**
- “I want to understand your perspective.”
- Complete all the above steps in **60 seconds maximum**.
- After that, be sure you **stop talking and listen**. Yes, no talking, just listening!
- Don’t be satisfied with what’s on the surface. Dig for full understanding. “Say more about that.” **“Tell me if I’ve got it right.”** Paraphrase.
- **Stay silent. Practice full, radical listening.**
- **Close your conversation:** “Given everything we’ve talked about, what do you feel needs to happen?” “What steps do you want me to take?” “What steps will you take?”



Make sure your language is free of absolutes. Trade “You said” for **“I thought we agreed.”** Trade “It’s clear” for “I was wondering if...” By taking the attitude that you could be wrong and using tentative language, you have a much greater chance of both resolving the issue and strengthening the relationship. Learning to deliver the message without the load allows you to speak with clarity, conviction and compassion.

The real difference-maker is having these conversations regularly. Become an aggressive collector of feedback. Ask your supervisor for feedback. Ask your co-workers for feedback. Be someone to whom others can tell the truth. You go first!

Here's an example. Give your supervisor or manager the great news that you hunger for candid feedback. Ask him or her for a commitment to be direct and prompt with any ways he or she sees you can improve. Then don't leave it to chance. Prime the feedback pump by mentioning something you've been working on. You might say, "When I get overwhelmed and stressed, I can be rude with people. If you see this, I really want to know."

The Papuans of New Guinea have a term, *mokita*, which means "that which everyone knows and no one speaks of." And they judge the health of their community by the number of mokitas that exist. The less mokitas, the healthier the community.

As you step up to crucial conversations and handle them well, this set of skills can positively influence every area of your life. You'll be more respected and more appreciated at work and at home. Remember that any single conversation can make a big difference. People will surprise you. **You will surprise you.**

A participant recently told me, "I'm making the commitment. I'm going to step up to the plate and have that conversation I've been putting off."

Good practice! Joyanne Landers
joyanne@elephantearstraining.com