



Having Tough Conversations

by Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D.

No one likes either hearing bad news, or giving bad news. The art of confronting difficult situations and under-performing employees is one of the most difficult skills for many leaders to master. That being said, bad news must indeed be delivered because avoiding difficult conversations lowers morale for the rest of the team and sends the message that underperformance is acceptable.

Few executives wake up thinking, "I'm going to avoid my problems today." So why does this happen? One executive I was recently coaching worried that the situation facing him would heat up so fast that it would lead to devastating consequences. I told him to remember that these conversations should rarely be "one-shot occurrences" and that they must be part of an ongoing dialogue. More specifically, leaders must frame problem conversations as the beginning of a longer process to define strengths, weaknesses, and decisions.

What, then, are "best practices" for having difficult conversations? Here are some ideas that have worked well for dynamic executives.

1. As soon as you notice the problem, plan to have the conversation. Most problems don't go away by themselves. And the rest of your employees will observe and thank you for dealing with issues in a timely manner.

2. Ask yourself, what is the other party's frame of reference? How are they likely seeing the situation? This will help you find the best solutions.

3. Write down the points you wish to make. One successful executive I know actually scripts her conversations before she has them. Then, she carries a list of bullet points with her into her meeting to make sure she stays on target.

4. Lead with your curiosity. Even if you think you are "right" about the situation, ask the other party for their views and opinions. In addition, use open-ended questions; don't assume or simply ask "why."

5. Really listen. During tough conversations, most of us tend to be forming our own responses rather than letting the other party's words and meaning sink in. If you're not going to truly listen, don't bother having the talk at all.

Remember, you're the keeper of your company's culture. Some leaders find it helpful to make sure they're speaking as the "company representative" when they deliver bad news. This sounds like a no-brainer, but it's really not. Again, be clear about the cost of not having this conversation. Make sure it's less about the individual and more about the business and what it will take for your organization to survive, thrive, and grow.

Suggested action step from the coach: Identify important conversations you need to have in your organization. With your coach or trusted advisor, set timelines for opening up dialogue with these stakeholders.

Copyright 2005, Leading News.

Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D. is an executive coach and consultant who helps smart people become better leaders. As Senior Partner in the Levin Group LLC, she has spent 25 years specializing in organizational systems dynamics and change implementation. A distance-learning expert, Patricia uses an action-oriented and results-based approach to coach teams within global organizations, leading to increased synergy and bottom-line results. She is also a member of the Alliance for Strategic Leadership, a global network of senior executive coaches and consultants founded by Marshall Goldsmith. You may contact Patricia by E-mail at Patricia@TheLevinGroup.com or by telephone at 404 377-9408.

Receive monthly articles and updates from Patricia Wheeler and Marshall Goldsmith: subscribe to Leading News at www.LeadNews.org.