

1. What is a Healthy Conversation?

Conversations are everywhere – they occur in all directions, downwards, sideways and upwards. Organisations can build and maintain strong professional relationships between their employees and leaders through promoting healthy and productive conversations. When we engage in a healthy conversation we are able to talk about anything, maintain the relationship and reach a good outcome. A healthy conversation means we are delivering more than a message, we are inviting the other person into the conversation with us. Healthy conversations happen when people feel safe enough to discuss the “undiscussables”, challenge each other’s views and think together to determine a way forward.

2. What is a Difficult Conversation?

Different conversations are difficult for different people, for different reasons. Difficult conversation, are usually the ones we want to have the least. Generally speaking, they are any conversation that we are anxious about having. They tend to revolve around matters of significance. Anytime we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues are important or the outcome is uncertain, there is potential for us to experience the conversation as difficult. Such conversations may include:

- Performance Reviews
- Giving critical feedback
- Raising sensitive issues
- Saying no to someone
- Setting expectations
- Expressing disagreement

3. The Common Mistakes

Carrying out difficult conversations is an ongoing learning curve. We often fall victim to the same mistakes repeatedly. Some of the most common mistakes we make in difficult conversation include:

- We approach them as a win/lose or right/wrong
- We believe we have to choose between telling the truth and keeping a friend
- We don’t plan for them and therefore we confront the wrong problem
- We don’t rein in our emotions
- A lack of mutual respect
- We dive into the content in the first thirty seconds and go straight to fixing the problem
- We avoid the tough issues and water down the content so the message doesn’t get across.

4. The benefits of Healthy Conversations

The benefits of engaging in healthy conversations are endless for any organisation. Healthy conversations are about:

- Helping people and organisations perform better
- Creating an environment of trust
- Encouraging open and honest dialogue
- Reducing fear and uncertainty
- Building leaders
- Finding achievable and creative ways forward
- Identifying challenges
- Getting people to realise their potential

5. Don't dive into it, plan and think about it.

We should never approach any conversation without pre-planning. Prior to and during a healthy conversation we should:

1. Think it through
2. Describe the purpose
3. Tell your story
4. Ask others to share their view
5. Listen actively

6. Avoid delving into argument or debate

Argument and debate inhibit our ability to listen to the other person's story and to understand how they view things. Arguing also inhibits change occurring. When we look to understand another person's view, it does not mean that we have to agree to it. To avoid disagreement sliding into an argument or debate you should:

- Manage your emotions
- Look for areas where you do agree and build on these
- Where there are differences in perspective, don't suggest the person is wrong, just suggest that you differ
- Provide evidence or examples as to why you see things differently
- Be inviting, ask for their thoughts