

# ***Nailing difficult conversations***

By Kate Jones

You can put them off for as long as you like, but there's no escaping difficult conversations.

What scares us most is confrontation: how to bring it up, where to do it and what the fall-out will be. So it's no surprise that 53 per cent of us prefer to dodge difficult conversations and 80 per cent worry about causing an angry response.

But there are easy ways to take those conversations out of the too-hard basket and into the can-do tray.

Gina Ralston is an expert at negotiating conflict. As director of the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria, she oversees responses to almost 20,000 disagreements every year. These can be about neighbourhood issues such as the cost of a fence or noise, workplace problems or anti-social behaviour.

While it's tempting to procrastinate dealing with difficult situations, Ralston's golden rule is sort them out fast.

"The key to resolving any dispute is to address issues early, in a clear and relaxed way," she says.

"Disputes can start out as small irritations but can escalate quickly and get out of control if they aren't addressed early."

Before taking on that dreaded conversation, how can you best be prepared?

## **Pick the right time and place**

Avoid having a conversation in the heat of the moment. It's sure to end in tears or worse.

Instead, plan a talk when both parties are not stressed and make sure you both have enough time to talk through the issues.

While there's no perfect place to tackle a tough topic, aim for impartial turf. This could be a cafe or meeting room where everyone feels comfortable and there's less chance of an ugly scene.

## **Know what the problem is**

Be clear about what the issues are if you want to sort out your differences efficiently.

Psychologist Savannah Ellis, who works with couples dealing with infidelity, says it's a good idea to write down a plan of action – especially for those feeling uneasy.

"The best advice for those who are not in their logical state of mind is to always to write a step-by-step plan on what to address during the conversation and key actions to resolve the situation," she says.

## **Keep your cool**

Losing your temper defeats the purpose of a peace-making conversation.

"Keep your emotions in check and stay relaxed," says Ralston.

"Focus on attacking the problem, not the person. Use 'I' statements that communicate how you feel, what makes you feel uncomfortable and what you would like to change."

## **Assume nothing**

Fear of provoking a negative response is the chief reason people avoid difficult conversations.

A survey by UK workplace mediation firm Globis found 97 per cent of respondents were anxious about stress levels, 94 per cent were worried about damaging self-esteem and 80 per cent of people were afraid of an angry response.

According to Douglas Stone, author of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, it's not helpful trying to predict how others will respond.

"Learning that you can't control the other person's reaction, and that it can be destructive to try, can be incredibly liberating," he says.

"It not only gives the other person the space to react however they need to, but also takes a huge amount of pressure off you."

## **Look for solutions**

It's better to bend than break, so work hard to achieve a compromise. The goal is to find a solution that works for both of you, but if this isn't possible be prepared to give a little.

The trick is to take it step-by-step and allow for breaks if needed, says Ralston.

"Allow the other person time to digest the information and to have a think about possible solutions," she says.

"This might be the first time that they have understood how you feel."

## **Strategise**

Personal issues are at the heart of the hardest conversations in the workplace, according to Specialist HR principal consultant Gabriel Alkan. These can include personal hygiene, office romances and bullying.

Sorting out these messy situations is a matter of strategy, Alkan says.

"When employers need to discuss any one of these topics my advice is they need to strategise on how best to deliver the message without offending, accusing or causing further disruptions in the workplace," he says.

Source; <http://www.theage.com.au/small-business/managing/nailing-difficult-conversations-20150517-ggyxz0>