



Are you avoiding that “difficult” conversation with an employee or co-worker? Leadership expert Merge Gupta-Sunderji, CGA, gives you the tools to take command *now*

## The Leader’s Guide to Difficult Conversations

by Merge Gupta-Sunderji, CGA

**P**eter, Ana, Manuel and Sasha were taking a much-needed coffee break in the supervisors’ meeting room one morning. “Ugh, I have to talk to Melissa about her repeated tardiness,” groaned Peter, as he slouched down even lower in his chair. “She’s been late to work every day this week. I just hate having these conversations.”

“I know what you mean,” said Ana. “Sometimes the topics we have to discuss with our people can get pretty uncomfortable. I had to confront one of the secretaries about her malicious gossip and the rumours she was spreading amongst team members.”

Manuel jumped in, “It’s not just talking to our staff that’s the problem. I had to break some bad news to the boss the other day, and I kept putting it off for as long as possible. Finally, I just had to muster up my courage and walk into her office.”

“I think I have all of you beat,” added Sasha, “but I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry. I’ve received several complaints about one of our new call centre agents. Apparently he has a very offensive body odour. I tell you, when I signed up for the supervisor’s job, no one ever told me that I’d have to talk to one of my employees about better hygiene!”

If you are in a position of leadership, it is very likely that you cringed at least once while listening in on this conversation. In fact, if you are a supervisor, manager or team leader, you cringed because you’ve probably been faced with a similar, or even identical, situation. It doesn’t even matter if you don’t have the title of supervisor or manager. If you’re in any sort of leadership role, you have no doubt found yourself in a situation (or two) where you’ve had to bring up a “difficult” subject with a staff member or co-worker. These types of conversations are a reality of the workplace. But they are also a measure of good leadership.

The unfortunate fact is that most people would much rather walk on hot coals in bare feet than have this type of discussion with an employee or colleague! But have this discussion you must. You see, the unwelcome truth is that the “problem”—whatever it may be—will not simply go away. No matter how much you hope and wish and pray that the situation will magically resolve itself, it won’t. In fact, the probability is high that unless you take action, the state of affairs will probably get worse!

So the initial step in dealing with the difficult issue is that you must make the first move. This doesn’t mean that you should embarrass or bully the other person; in fact, quite the contrary. It means that you must bring up the issue in a clear and respectful fashion. Your goal is to control the dialogue. Through your choice of words, your tone of voice and your reactions to the other person’s responses, you can frame and steer the conversation in the direction that you want it to go. Sometimes you can say it straight; other times you will have to ease into the topic; and in other situations you will need to be sensitive to and acknowledge the other person’s discomfort. But no matter how you do it, address it you must.

Once you have begun, you have to continue. And “direct” is the only way. You cannot beat around the bush, you cannot imply and drop hints; you have to be clear about what you want changed or what you want to happen. If you are not clear, the chances are pretty good that the other person simply won’t get the message. Remember, the odds are high that the other person doesn’t perceive what you are bringing up to even be a problem, so why would you expect that he or she can “read between the lines”? Tone is very important here—your goal is to be empathetic, compassionate, respectful, yet direct. Not easy, but definitely possible.

Expect that the other person will be angry or upset. It’s a natural

reaction, so don't hold it against them. Instead, focus on not losing your own temper. Most people don't realize that getting angry has an unintended consequence. The actual message conveyed when you get angry is, "I don't feel like I have a lot of power in this situation, so I am yelling, since that is the only thing that I feel that I can do." So don't lose your cool.

Keep in mind that when the other person loses their cool, your goal must be to react with composure. You do this by acknowledging their anger and refusing to respond in kind: "I can see that this situation is very distressing to you." Alternatively, you can deflect the anger by suggesting that the antagonism is displaced: "I don't understand why you are getting angry with me. Have I done something else that is upsetting you?"

As your conversation continues, be sure to indicate your interest in resolving the situation rather than escalating it. "The last thing I want to do is write you up for being late," or "I have put together an interim plan that will solve the problem for the short-term," are examples of ways that you can ensure that the situation does not spiral out of control. Remember, your objective in having this conversation is to obtain your desired outcome, not to have it deteriorate into anger, resentment or hard feelings.

Finally, make sure you close the conversation in a way that maintains the same control of the dialogue that you had when you started. Often, this means that you must get the final word (but not in a negative manner). Whether it's thanking the person for listening and responding positively, asking for a future meeting to further discuss the issue, or offering to follow-up later, when you close with a positive statement, you have successfully guided your discussion towards your intended goal. However, there are times when having the final word may not be your best option. Occasionally, you may choose to say nothing in closing, if it allows the other person to "save face," or to give in gracefully.

Using these key principles for having successful "difficult" conversations, how might Peter's discussion with Melissa about her frequent tardiness play out? Here is a possible scenario.

**Peter:** Melissa, we need to talk about your work schedule. Over the past three days, I have observed that you are coming into work late. I am concerned because this affects the rest of your team as they have to cover your phone calls until you get in.

[Peter waits for a response.]

**Melissa:** Really, I don't think I've been late that often. Besides, I stay late in the evenings as well. I bet [with some sarcasm and a hint of anger] nobody noticed that!

**Peter:** You may be right about others not noticing that you stay late. With respect to mornings, when you don't come in on time, it impacts the quality of the work that your co-workers do as well. I don't want to turn this into a big issue where we have to start watching and checking the time clock. I'd much rather get your agreement that this won't happen any more.

**Melissa:** [still angry] Fine!

**Peter:** I'm glad to hear you say that, and I want to help you any way I can. I'm counting on you to be on time every day from now on.

Notice that throughout this dialogue, Peter followed the prin-

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**Merge Gupta-Sunderji, CGA**, turns managers into leaders. A professional speaker, author and radio commentator, Merge gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. CGAs know Merge not only from her perennially popular speaking engagements, but from her "Further Than Figures" column, which runs in each issue of CGA Magazine. She is currently working on her second book, a practical, how-to guide entitled *Power Tools for Leaders*, as well as a new series of audio CDs.

principles outlined earlier:

1. Make the first move.
2. Continue with empathy and respect, but be direct.
3. Anticipate and respond to anger with composure and acknowledgment, but refuse to be drawn into conflict.
4. Express an interest in resolving the problem rather than escalating it
5. Close the conversation in a positive manner.

Having conversations on difficult subjects is not something to which any supervisor or manager looks forward. However, these five principles should help you achieve your desired outcome. Expect, however, that this will not be a one-time dialogue. Persistence and a commitment to follow-through, sometimes repeatedly, will be necessary in order to get the behaviour you desire.

It is very likely that the offending situation will not be resolved in just one talk and you will have to have the same conversation several times. When that happens (and it will), the key to success is to "turn up the heat a notch" in each subsequent conversation. That means that your language and tone needs to get more stern and/or the consequences more severe every time the same topic comes up.

With the courage to speak up, the skills to keep going, and the tenacity to keep at it, you too can face your next "difficult" conversation with confidence and cool. Let me know how you do! 