Is This Conversation Past Due?

The tension in his voice was undeniable. His halting words spoke volumes. Brian's working relationship with his boss was broken. Badly. A candid conversation was overdue, but he wasn't sure where to start.

Been there?

Whether it's with your direct report or your boss, tough talks are part of the terrain every leader must travel.

One of the hats I wear day-to-day is leadership coach, and in that role one of the most predictable themes that I address with clients is how to navigate difficult conversations. Both the WHY and the HOW.

Of all that could be said on this crucial topic, I'd like to call out four of my own MVLs –most valuable learnings—for your consideration.

Check the heart. When a tough talk is stamped PAST DUE, the temptation is to focus on yourself and 'get it off your chest'. Not a good idea. **Every successful conversation of this nature must start with a rehearsal of your motivation.** Have I owned my part in the broken partnership?

Create the context. Tough talks should **never feel like a blindside.** Preset the encounter: "Jerry, I'm glad that we can meet tomorrow. Beyond the normal things for us to catch up on, I have some important thoughts for us to discuss." Once in the meeting, create a mental mindset of being seated side-by-side (a partnership posture) instead of being seated across from each other (a confrontational posture). William Ury in his intensely practical book Getting Past No captures this well when he says "…turn face-to-face confrontation into side-by-side problem-solving." In short, you are working TOGETHER to figure out a shared concern.

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Frame the conversation. Just like a painting is enhanced by its frame, so a tough talk is positioned for success by **how it is set up**. The optimum way to do this is to move yourself from a posture of certainty to a posture of curiosity. It is risky to presume that you have a full perspective on the matter at hand. Start with questions, not pronouncements. Invite the person into the conversation. "I think we have different understandings about how to bring out the best in your direct reports. I'd like to hear your thoughts on this." Mutual understanding is the foundation upon which shared solutions are built.

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Recap the conversation. When it comes to tough talks, the practice of utilizing a post-meeting recap

email is the leader's best friend. It allows you to create both a memorial and a momentum to the conversation. Something like this. "Steve, thanks for our time yesterday. Really appreciated both your openness and resourcefulness to our discussion. I was able to gain a greater understanding about how you approach the development of your direct reports, and I appreciated the chance to share my perspectives. From our conversation, we agreed that going forward you would start your weekly staff meetings with your team members with some specific items of affirmation—to build on their successes. I believe this will make a big difference in both the morale and contribution to the overall mission of our organization. I am really looking forward to hearing how this goes when we meet next."

Ultimately, taking on tough talks is a matter of courage. Courage to do the right thing. And to do it in the right way.

Chuck Olson
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