

Contribution Framework 2.0

Achieving high performance one conversation at a time

Challenging Conversations



Contents Page

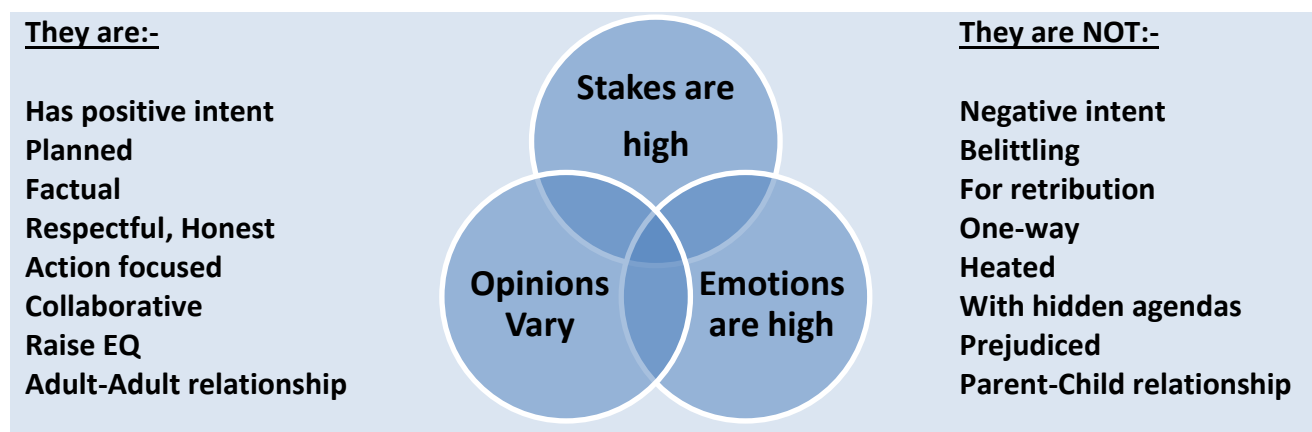
The purpose of this toolkit	3
What is a Challenging Conversation?	3
Situations that drive you to have a Challenging Conversation.....	4
Why it is important to master?.....	5
What gets in the way of us having Challenging Conversations?	7
Introducing a Structure for Challenging Conversations	8
Inner Dialogue.....	10
Tips for responding to Emotional Reactions	11
Examples of common emotional reactions and effective responses	12
Challenging Conversations Preparation Template	14
Additional Resources	15

The purpose of this toolkit

- Gain clarity on what is meant by Challenging Conversations
- help you explore the situations and issues you face with having Challenging Conversations
- provide you with tools and techniques to improve your skills and confidence in having Challenging Conversations including a structure and model
- help you plan for and engage in Challenging Conversations

What is a Challenging Conversation?

In his book, *Crucial Conversations*, K Patterson et al, defines challenging conversations as a discussion between 2 or more people where:



This definition highlights why they are **challenging** conversations, where people have a lot of emotion and importance invested in the subject, the outcomes, or process. When people are emotionally connected to a subject they are more likely to slip into aggression and debate because they feel passionate and dedicated to their cause. It is only the most considered among us who can conduct a conversation about a subject we care about and remain objective and calm.

As managers we are *accountable* for carrying out all the steps in the performance cycle; setting goals that weave in the Golden Thread so everyone understands how they contribute to Improving and Saving lives that truly stretch our staff, giving feedback to help them understand their progress and being honest with them when performance isn't at the level it should be. It can sometimes feel like when we start being open and honest we lose the kind and caring culture that we have at NCA. In fact a carefully planned conversation that tackles a difficult issue can show true *respect* and gives us both kindness and fairness, because it is in the best interest of the individual to share this feedback with them.

These conversations, though tricky, can help us remove obstacles that may be standing in the way of our staff development to allow and drive a culture of *continuous improvement*. And it shows our staff how much we care about their progress, and how much we value growing and nurturing the talent we have within our org. *Respect*.

NCA Group Values underpin the behaviours needed for challenging conversations



Situations that drive you to have a Challenging Conversation

This is not just about feedback - It is about every day challenging conversations, with our team, managers, stakeholders, and even outside the workplace. The situations may be many but here are a few typical examples:



- Resolving conflict
- Under performance e.g. when they think they are better than they are
- Standing up to a senior colleague
- Pointing out someone's shortcomings that are affecting the project or team
- Managing unprecedented crisis situations
- A problem they have that is impacting your work
- Doing well and hitting stretch targets but we need to ask them to do more and go beyond
- Inappropriate behaviour that does not fit with NCA values
- Communicating a change/decision they may not like

They can be summed up as two types of discussion:-

Open ended - where there is more of a reactive learning process in which two or more people seek to understand each other's viewpoints and deeply held assumptions. It is a conversation in which talking and listening by all parties creates a flow of meaning. Out of dialogue emerges a new and

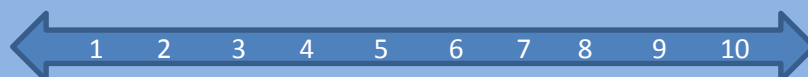
shared understanding. Dialogue is a tool for collective exploration of meaning – not a search for the right answer or the best solution.

Fixed outcome - where 2 or more people come to some form of closure either by making a decision, reaching agreement, or identifying priorities. Discussion involves convergent thinking focused on tasks. While two or more people build deeper meaning along the way, the real purpose is to come to a meeting of minds and reach some agreement.

Personal reflection:

Think of your own experiences:-

- What was the situation?
- How did it feel?
- From 0-10, how confident are you in having a Challenging Conversation?



Why it is important to master?

Research by Patterson et al found that the key thing that separated the worst and good organisations from the very best (most successful and long-standing) companies was their approach to challenging conversations and how they dealt with situations when something went wrong. The BEST simply dealt with challenging conversations. Their ethos centred on everyone, at all levels, being able to hold everyone to account. People took responsibility for their actions, for failures, and then for how to rethink strategies to make it better. They also found that those individuals who spoke out were unanimously respected and listened to, and seen as unequivocal high-flyers.

Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser also showed that people who routinely failed at delivering challenging conversations had much weaker immune systems than those who managed to resolve them well.

**Maintain
staff morale**



**Create a culture in the
workplace that thrives
on positive outcomes
rather than disgruntled
employees**

**Resolve issues
before they hinder
the productivity of
the team**

**Make employees who
may not have noticed
an issue to address it if
it affects the
organisation**

Personal reflection:

Think of own experiences in the organisation you work:-

- Is there a culture of challenging situations quickly and constructively?
- If yes, what is the outcome?
- If no, what is the outcome?

What gets in the way of us having Challenging Conversations?

Given the clear benefits of having challenging conversations, most of us still find the thought of it uncomfortable and would prefer to avoid in the hope that the issue will go away.

So, what stops us?



The elephant in the room

- Not knowing how to start
- Fear of unknown response
- Reluctance to appear weak
- Fear of an overly emotional response
- Anxiety about damaging a relationship
- Uncertainty about the outcome
- Lacking skills (e.g. feedback, listening)
- When don't agree with the message you have to give e.g. restructure/relocations, unrealistic targets
- Left it so long that it has become much worse

What are the risks of HAVING the conversation?		What are the risks of NOT HAVING the conversation?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power relationships • Retribution • Labelled as "trouble-maker" • Excluded • Lack of trust 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Poor climate - low moral • Superficial relationships • Issue worsens e.g. performance decreases • The "other" believes all is okay! • Violation of personal values

Personal reflection:

- What gets in your way of having an effective Challenging Conversation?
- How comfortable are you in delivering challenging conversations?
- Think of a recent example of where you have:-
 - **Confronted** and delivered a difficult message - what was the outcome? How did you feel? What can you learn from the experience?
 - **Avoided** a difficult message - what has happened to the issue/situation? How do you feel about it now?

Introducing a Structure for Challenging Conversations



1. Prepare

If we take time to think in advance about what we really want out of a conversation, we can use this as our anchor to keep focused. More often than not when we end up in a difficult or emotionally charged conversation, we can find ourselves moving away from dialogue and into debate where we are just trying to “win” the argument. Answering the question before we go into the conversation can act as a reminder in the moment to pull as back from our argumentative stance where we are focused more on winning the point than reaching any sort of constructive resolution.

Remember to step out of our own heads and what WE want out of it and think about what is the best outcome.

What do you want to achieve?	What is the issue?	What is your mindset?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For them • For the team • For the organisation • And the relationship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate fact from fiction • Risks of NOT having the conversation? • Risks of HAVING the conversation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will you want to behave? • How do you tend to react? • What experience can you pull on?

The pay-off of answering these questions is two-fold:

1. We recognise what our aims are so we go in prepared
2. We can take stock in the moment and remind ourselves of what our true aims are for the conversation, which can bring us back from unhealthy debate and into dialogue again.

Another important aspect is to plan when and where the conversation is going to take place. This makes the conversation far more likely to actually happen.

As we discovered earlier, one key factor preventing us from having a challenging conversation is that we don’t know how to start. We are now going to look at a simple, clear structure that can help overcome this problem. It’s just a guide – to help us keep and return to dialogue not emotional debate

2. State Intent

Don't beat around the bush with this, maintain focus and state the issue that needs to be discussed. This should not be how you are feeling or an emotional 'rant' at this stage.

Consider how you might express intent of the conversation beforehand. For example....

"I'd like to have a performance conversation with you".

"Let's get together to talk through your recent progress/ performance at.....etc"

"We haven't looked at your goals lately – let's put some time aside to revisit....."

3. Tell your story

Communicate with GRIT (Generosity, Respect, Integrity, Truth). Remember to keep the NCA Values in mind.

It's more important to tell your whole story. Put your message out there so you can listen to their response. It's important to cover all of the facts, how you feel about it and the bigger picture effect it has. This is more important when receiver doesn't care much for the relationship but will care more if repercussions elsewhere. It may help to use a feedback model to help structure this. For example, **Situation-Behaviour-Impact (SBI) Feedback Model**

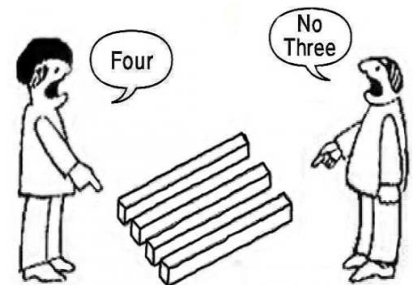


The SBI feedback model bases feedback solely on facts so the individual can understand the effects of their actions

It is popular because of its succinctness. It also keeps emotions out of the process. It's important to use "I" statements and withhold judgment when using this feedback model; otherwise, it will undermine the feedback you're giving.

4. Listen to their story

Sometimes it can be a hard task to keep in dialogue and get the other person to open up. It is important to consider the impact on how they feel. It's not about making assumptions and guessing how they feel. You need to appreciate and respect if their story differs from your own. Be aware of your own filters based on own assumptions and judgements – look for affirmation and ignore or dispute anything else.



Inner Dialogue



Our inner thoughts and dialogue can hinder listening to others and we can make all sorts of assumptions about what they are saying or doing instead of being open, receptive and being PRESENT.

Pressing “pause” can give us the opportunity to keep an open mind, defer judgement and totally focus on LISTENING to the other persons perspective without jumping in.

5. Manage Reactions

Having uncomfortable conversations at work is never easy but if we feel confident that we know how to deal with *emotional reactions* we will not need to feel threatened by the prospect of having a challenging conversation in the future.

Tips for responding to Emotional Reactions (*Forbes Coaches Council*):

- **Step into their shoes** - Be generous - give them the benefit of the doubt - be open to change
- **Reframe** - Try to put a positive spin on their words/actions and listen for good intentions
- **Control** - If we get the best out of others we can prevent our own emotions going awol and stay in control
- Focus on creating value - **positive intent**.
- Stick to the **facts** - write them down in advance - this is your *anchor*!
- Be objective and compassionate - **firm but caring**
- Look for **neutral ground**
- Use the power of the **pause** - "let's pause for a minute – what are we trying to achieve here?"
- **Adult to adult** - "How can we help each other achieve this?"
- **Don't take it personally** – if you feel outcome is achieved (even if relationship broken) we need to focus on finding the "truth" of the matter rather than being a "people pleaser". Take the higher ground
- Approach with **curiosity** rather than judgement

Remember this is your job. Help them to understand it is your responsibility to address issues and explore ways to resolve them in line with the NCA Values.



Examples of common emotional reactions and effective responses

Keeping your cool

Think of when you get very angry over something trivial. E.g. someone jumping a queue.

Remember what happened - changes to your *breathing, temperature*? Did you feel more *tense*?

If you can identify what happens to you then you will notice in the moment.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) theory, by A Beck, states that by changing our interpretation of events affect our feelings, which can subsequently influence our actions and emotional response. Other people don't make us angry or mad – the way we interpret their words and actions makes us feel an emotional reaction, which in turn makes us angry and act in an enraged way.

Dealing with silence

Our personality often dictates how comfortable we feel with silence. Some people feel silence is energizing and provides space to reflect, while others find silence draining and prefer to talk things through. During a coaching conversation, it is important to allow thinking time, and resisting breaking periods of silence with another question. Often staff members may need a lengthy pause to explore and formulate thoughts and feelings. Have confidence to hold the silence; be attentive and encouraging, but don't speak!

EMOTION

RESPONSE

Avoidance



Let's bring it back to the issue at hand. We need to acknowledge what's happening

Silence



It is important we talk about this. It is serious. Let's try and reflect on what's happened. I'm keen to hear your view and how we can move forward. I don't have all the answers.

EMOTION

RESPONSE

Blame



I understand that there may be other people involved but right now I'd like to keep this focused on you and I.

Anger



Can we try to explore and understand the reasons why you are so angry?

It seems as if you are really angry, and for some reason can't work together with me – what's going on

Crying



*Let's take a moment before we
continue*

*for you – can you explain what is
happening and why you are feeling
unsafe*

6. Agree next steps

When we are in an emotionally charged situation it is very easy for us to lose focus and come away with no conclusion, which can ultimately make the situation even worse.

Once information has been shared and opinions expressed, it is vital to move on to positive steps to address the situation. As far as possible, this stage needs to involve give and take. It's not a question of either side.

Coercing the other to accept their view of the situation or of either side seeking an easy way out by passively submitting to the demands of the other. It's about exploring the issues, finding common ground and identifying potential ways forward that work for both parties. Asking open questions will be helpful here. Both sides may need to adjust their previously held assumptions and accept a degree of compromise.

Share your own ideas and listen to the other party's suggestions in return. Explore the reasoning and motivation behind all suggested courses of action. Once agreement has been reached, clarify what has been decided, who is responsible for what; and set a workable timescale for agreed actions or changes.

Remember the 2 types of conversation:

Open ended - where there is more of a reactive learning process in which two or more people seek to understand each other's viewpoints and deeply held assumptions. It is a conversation in which talking and listening by all parties creates a flow of meaning. Out of dialogue emerges a new and shared understanding. Dialogue is a tool for collective exploration of meaning – not a search for the right answer or the best solution.

Fixed outcome - where 2 or more people come to some form of closure either by making a decision, reaching agreement, or identifying priorities. Discussion involves convergent thinking focused on tasks. While two or more people build deeper meaning along the way, the real purpose is to come to a meeting of minds and reach some agreement.

Implementing and practicing some of the tools and techniques above will enable you to stay focused and reach a mutually positive outcome.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

Challenging Conversations Preparation Template

What do you want to achieve? <i>For them, team, organisation, relationship? Positive intent?</i>		
What is the issue?		
Facts? Stick to these	Fiction? Put to one side (Assumptions/rumour)	Risks involved?
What is your mindset? <i>How do you feel? What behaviours do you need to apply? What experience can you pull on?</i>		
What are some possible actions you hope to agree on to resolve issue? <i>Remember to be open too and adapt or accept their suggestions</i>		

Additional Resources

Articles

Forbes: How to have a difficult conversation at work

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashiraprossack1/2018/10/28/how-to-have-difficult-conversations-at-work/#63b168bd10b7>

<http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki>

Videos

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoFe_NRRITQ

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpS8P4Trdgc>

Books

