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## ***SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO BE "THE BOSS" - PART II***

### **How to have the difficult conversation**

September 2020



**"Last month's article, "Sometimes You Have to be "The Boss" discussed the importance of holding employees accountable for their behavior. Click [here](#) to read that article. This**

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month, I want to talk about how you deliver a difficult message when you need to be the boss. How you deliver that message can have a huge impact on how well the employee can hear the message, whether they are willing to accept the message and how they may decide to behave moving forward.

First, let me clarify, that crafting the message the best way possible still does not make you responsible for the employee's reactions. We can influence to some degree, hopefully, but human beings are ultimately responsible for their own reactions.

Here's a simple approach that I teach for difficult conversations because it has never failed me:

1. **Start with why you want to have the conversation.** Be honest and caring and please don't ask to meet with someone and leave them hanging overnight or over the weekend worrying about the conversation. Try to catch them early in the day to schedule a time that day to talk. Here are examples of a "why" you might give them:
  - a. I want to talk with you about a situation that has been brought to my attention.
  - b. You're doing a great job here, and there are some things that I think can help you so I want to share those with you. (aka feedback)
  - c. I have some concerns about things I'm hearing that I want to discuss with you to hear your perspective.
2. **Give them the facts.** It is your job to separate fact from fiction. When someone

appropriate

Create a plan  
you can confidently  
embrace to move  
forward



**In any conversation,  
there are two different  
perspectives.**

Before delving too far into a difficult conversation, probably after you present the facts, take time to ask some questions to understand the other's perspective before proceeding. Understanding each other's perspective is usually pretty important for a positive outcome. When this piece is missed in the conversation, it's easy to end a conversation in conflict rather than resolution.

One time I had a direct report who was new in our office. She wasn't fitting in well. She was defensive and always assuming the worst in the rest of us, in an office where we had a very team-centric helping-each-other-succeed kind of culture. I finally sat down with her one day to address a particular incident and I asked questions and started listening. She had been a teacher in an inner city school, where she shared

is describing the situation to you, separate the facts from the emotions and any judgements of an employee based on past experiences with them. There's a fine line there too – the past may be important in establishing a pattern of behavior, but you must be careful to look at the situation through its own lens as well. If you assume they are just repeating the behavior, you can end up allowing your perception to get in the way of the facts in this situation, which may very well be different. When it is time to have the conversation there should be no interpretations, no emotions, no blaming or labeling the behavior. Just give them the facts, stated clearly and succinctly, with any appropriate or necessary details. Be specific. Generalizing just brings questions and hurts your credibility. Generalizing gives the person the ability to say or think you are just... (fill in the blank). At this point, ask them if the facts are correct before you go further. Otherwise, you may embarrass yourself. I can tell you many stories about managers who thought they had an iron-clad case and they didn't have all the facts and only ended up looking like a fool. I once dealt with a manager who had all the facts right, but had the wrong employee!

3. **Tell them what impact their behavior is having.** What is wrong with the behavior? How is the behavior impacting you, team members, clients, customers, and others in the organization? Help them see it from other people's perspective. It is important for the employee to understand the impact of their behavior, because they simply may not be aware, or may be making

with me how teachers were being assaulted by students, sometimes sexually and the administration looked the other way and there was no support. So she was conditioned to expect no support and to have to be self-protective and even, at times, aggressive toward others. Understanding where she was coming from made all the difference in moving forward together in positive ways. We rarely know where people are coming from or what is in their past unless they tell us, but our pasts influence all of us in how we behave and react to various situations.

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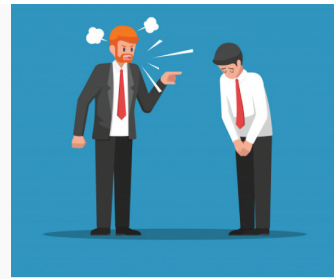
**One difficult conversation is better than a bunch of conversations that avoid the truth.**

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assumptions about the impact that are way off base. This is at the heart of why you need to have the conversation. The employee needs to understand that the behavior is working against their own self-interest.

4. **Tell them what you want them to do differently.** This may involve some give and take. Leave the door open to work it out. How will the alternative behavior be helpful not only to others, but also to the employee themselves in terms of building better relationships, gaining respect and helping their own career development?
5. **What do you value in this employee?** What can you share with them about how they are valued so that the feedback will not feel all negative? If the person understands that you value them and you are giving them feedback because you care about them and want them to flourish, it can help them be more accepting of the feedback and it can help remove the sting.
6. **If appropriate, be sure the employee knows the consequences, both positive and negative.** First, share all the positive impacts of changing their behavior. Then, share the consequences if they do not change their behavior. You should be prepared to document this discussion and know that any consequences you share will be backed up by your HR department. Don't ever threaten what you cannot carry out.

Start with a soft approach. You can always get harsher if the situation demands it, but it's more difficult to go from harsh to soft. If they are not taking the feedback well, then you can turn it up



**Speak** when you are **angry** and you'll make the **best speech** you'll ever **regret**.

*-Ambrose Bierce*

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## Recommended

### *Reading*

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#### **Crucial Conversations – Tools for talking when stakes are high**

Authors: Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler

#### **Thanks for the Feedback**

Authors: Douglas Stone & Sheila Heen

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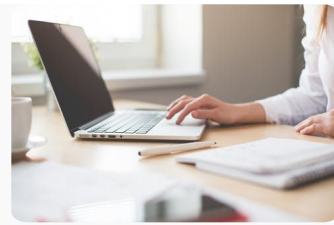
as many notches as necessary, but starting off harsh, will likely earn you the reaction that “the boss is a jerk”.

**Consider the personality of the individual.  
How do they need to receive feedback or  
constructive criticism or correction?**

- Direct and to the point, without a lot of sugary language?
- A lot of details and information to understand what happened and be able to process with you what their perspective was at the time and why they did what they did?
- Sandwiched in between a lot of positive feedback?
- Asking them questions to give them time to respond, and think and be heard?

Have you had personality training? If not, reach out to me and I will be glad to introduce you to a simple four-color model that will give you tons of information about what others need, how they approach their work and how to more easily encourage them, manage them and motivate them.

So, let me share one example with you. I am someone who likes feedback direct and to the point if I messed something up. So, years ago, I had a complicated and difficult situation to deal with. I approached someone to help me as a second-chair for some negotiations. My boss came to me and said, “Joy, you mishandled that situation. You should have gone through me to get that help and let me go to their boss to pave the way. His boss was upset and it didn’t make me look good either. Next time, come to me



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and I'll help you." I said, "Got it. I didn't think it through in the midst of the chaos. I apologize. It won't happen again." And he said, "Ok, let's go get some lunch." And that was the last I heard about it. We didn't need a long, drawn-out meeting and I didn't need it sugar-coated. I really appreciated his directness and his confidence that my simple reply was all that was needed.

What does the employee you are dealing with need? If you have no clue, reach out to me for a complimentary session and I'll help you.

Sometimes though, a lot more time is needed than the example I just shared. You may be dealing with an insecure employee struggling to figure things out. You may be dealing with someone with an oversize ego who may need knocked down a couple pegs and some consequences put in front of them. You may be dealing with someone who is immature and really doesn't have a clue about appropriate behavior and is trying to imitate other people they've known or what they've seen on TV. Who knows what they may be thinking. Finding out is part of the process of handling this conversation well.

Decide the strength of the message that is needed before you approach the employee. For some, the weight of a feather may be enough and anything stronger will damage their motivation and enthusiasm. For someone at the other end of the spectrum, they may need a heavy hand with the threat of serious consequences. Think it through.

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be as caring as you can be toward the person.  
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