



Taking *the* Lead

Speaking Up at Work

Donna Rawady

When an interpersonal conflict or an unresolved business need is negatively impacting business, regardless of the perceived challenge, a miscommunication or a lack of communication generally sits at its core.

If you want to build your confidence before entering a sensitive conversation, entertain the idea of it going badly... Prepare yourself to respond (not react) to the reactions you fear.

Why do so many of us struggle with being direct and honest with our associates in the workplace? In my experience, the answer is fear of more conflict and negative repercussions. The concern is valid. Sharing our concerns or ideas for change honestly with an associate or coworker may generate a less-than-desirable outcome. On the other hand, a lack of direct and genuine communication is likely to generate confusion and inaccurate assumptions, and ultimately strained and unproductive

relationships—all of which stifle our ability to be truly collaborative. Business success is generated through successful collaboration, so it becomes a significant leadership issue to set a standard that fosters direct and honest communication, even in challenging situations.

Being well prepared increases our confidence and the odds for a successful outcome. So here is a four-step preparation process that may help you personally, or help you coach your colleagues and employees to more effectively prepare to address that concern, or propose that idea, even in the most difficult of situations.

1 Focus the conversation on the business impact. Avoid talking about your personal frustration. For example, you may be approaching an associate because you feel that he or she isn't pulling his or her weight on a product development project. The positive outcome of this discussion will affect your teamwork, and in turn, your department, because the two of you will be working more efficiently and productively. It will affect your customers because your efficiencies will allow you to deliver a product sooner. Preparing to focus on the business impact also helps you check your motive for the conversation. Even in the most frustrating situations, if your motive is pure—in that it is truly for the benefit of your organization—you are more apt to generate collaboration and agreement, or at the very least minimize debate regarding the outcome you're seeking.

2 Recommend a detailed solution. If you're going to present a problem, be sure you're offering a complete solution. Most likely, your solution will ask something of the person(s) you're talking with or proposing to. It could be as simple as getting the necessary approval or agreement. Perhaps you're asking for his or her commitment to participate differently in a process or in how he or she keeps you informed. It's also imperative that you include your role in the solution, which will reflect your specific commitment towards improved communication or new business strategies. If applicable, include a summary of costs and strategies in writing. As you practice and coach others towards solution-oriented discussions, you begin to set the standard.

3 Be ready for anything. If you really want to build your confidence before entering a sensitive conversation, entertain the idea of it going badly. Prepare yourself to respond (not react) to the reactions you fear. When deciding on your prepared responses, reiterate the benefits and affects on the business at hand (from step one). Emotions are louder than words. So even if it doesn't go well, you won't want to leave the conversation with your emotions on the table. You will want to leave the room with your business-oriented motive on the table, as food for thought. For example, if you're

proposing that you and a colleague make the effort to keep each other better informed, and the reaction is negative due to the person feeling defensive, you might prepare this response: "I hope you'll reconsider. I'm confident if we both make an effort we can be more productive and work better as a team." Or, if you're proposing a hefty software purchase for your department and the response is no, due to budget, you might prepare this response: "I'm disappointed, because I'm confident from my research that the customer retention that this software would generate will far outweigh the investment."

4 Jot down or bullet key words and/or phrases. Your notes should help to anchor you to what you prepared, should the conversation get off track. Be sure to include the phrase "follow up" at the end of your notes to help prompt you to schedule a later conversation either to confirm a specific direction, or evaluate the agreed-upon solution.

Honest communication in the workplace is a simple phrase that reflects a myriad of complex skills and strategies. Being well prepared is one strategy that will increase your ability to generate results. **BSM**

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