

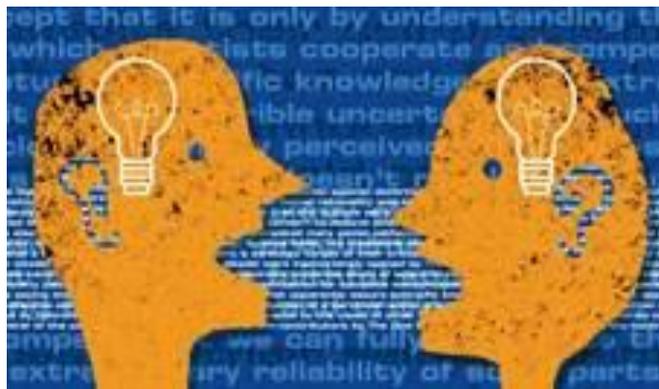


## LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT – THE ART AND PRACTICE OF HOLDING HONEST CONVERSATIONS

*By Debbie Craig & John Gatherer*

### Introduction

We've all been there before.....and we will be there again in increasing frequency in the future. You know that you need to talk to someone about an important issue, but you keep delaying it and even ducking it! Sometimes you dance around the subject, but bale out. Often you resort to your best brand of humour, cynical gibes or better still - caustic sarcasm, but the person seems to have a thick skin and an inability of getting the message. On a few occasions when you were pushed to the limits of exasperation you tackled the offender – resulting in defensive and disastrous reactions and a typical aftermath of a “no-speak” atmosphere! As a leader, you're good at your job, but you dread these conversations!



What makes our discomfort and inadequacy worse about not expressing our true feelings, speaking out and confronting reality is the intense feelings of guilt that it creates. How often have we replayed incidents and exchanges in our mind, in the middle of the night, and considered the consequences and alternatives of standing our ground, presenting our view and having the courage of our convictions – in the moment.

It is not surprising that one of the biggest trends that we have discovered over the past ten years, of working in the fields of leadership development and talent management, is the anxiety and ineffectiveness of managers and team players to hold honest conversations. People do not like any situation that could lead to conflict. Yet every organisation is characterised by a pressurised work environment, in which bottom-line results are a function of the company's goals and targets, customer needs, supplier deadlines, performance standards, people management and relationships. That's quite a crucible – especially when you add the other ingredients of personality type, cultural differences, diversity, generation gaps, power and politics! When things don't go as well as expected, how do we, as leaders and team members, address these important issues? Honest conversations should occur when the stakes are high and strong emotions are involved – a time when opinions, standards or expectations are sure to differ. People's natural reaction to many of these unresolved issues is to ignore them, avoid them or handle the conflicting

viewpoint during a flashpoint of emotion. In today's world of high-performance organisations, it is imperative to confront the brutal reality by addressing, working through and action-planning those unresolved issues.

Review the following situations. How would you handle these conversations? A senior manager who has been sliding backwards in his performance, never quite enough to be serious, but personal effort and attitude is inappropriate and his half-hearted work is not going un-noticed. You know he has a "short fuse" but needs some direct, candid feedback regarding his contributions. You also know that the conversation will be potentially explosive.

A colleague of yours who you've invited to your project team due to his special expertise is a "serial late-comer". On most occasions that you hold project review meetings, he dashes in late, with a smile and inane apology and does not seem aware of his disruptive behaviour, let alone the loss of respect from the junior members of the team. You've approached him once before about the need for punctuality but he dismissed it out of hand, citing his "pressurised schedule".

A customer who has repeatedly expressed disappointment with your sales executive as she feels she is not receiving the service that she deserves. You know that you should solicit her views and resolve her concerns, but your salesman assures you that he is working on the relationship and you do not want to compromise the contract.

Your eighteen year old son has a new friend that you and the rest of your family do not like as he comes from a broken home and appears to have a manipulative influence over your son, whose behaviour has been disappointing and out of character over the last few months. You know that your son has a strong allegiance to his friend but you are concerned about the peer influence.

All four situations are screaming at you for attention – silence and avoidance is certainly not the option! You need to hold an honest conversation, confront the reality and get involved.

The response required is engagement, face to face eyeball to eyeball dialogue – there is no escaping it. In recent times, leadership engagement has been referred to as one of the most essential practices of the transformational leader – having continuous discussions and reciprocal dialogue with direct reports, colleagues, customers, suppliers and higher management. It is essential that the leader not only masters the skill and process of addressing conflict and difference, but creates a culture where all team members feel safe and comfortable in speaking out or challenging points of view. There is also often the need to hold honest conversations with your boss or other senior leadership impacting on your work responsibilities as a result of their leadership style, lack of strategic management or inappropriate values or attitude. These are always more sensitive and require both courage and a professional and accomplished approach in addressing these delicate matters.

One of the interesting features that we utilise in facilitating high performance team workshops is during the latter stages in the session when we introduce the "dead cat" metaphor and encourage the participants to surface the real issues from under the table and deal with them candidly "at the table". It is natural for a group of team members to tread warily around surfacing the critical issues for fear of clashing with sensitive feelings or damaging established personal relationships. The licence given to the team to list and work systematically through known irritants, constraints, derailing behaviours and dysfunctional dynamics acts as a stimulant to bring out "home truths" and commence a process of resolving real issues affecting high performance within the team.

One needs a similar candour, boldness and accountability to holding difficult and crucial conversations – what we prefer to call honest conversations. We have developed a process and skill

toolkit for leaders to be more competent and certainly more confident in mastering this important area. From the many workshops in which this process and approach has been introduced, we have had extremely positive feedback and reviews from the leaders and managers as to its practical application.

### **Towards a culture of healthy conflict**

We have always advocated that change is about difference and difference comes from different thinking. It is natural that with the exponential growth of change in our work environment that the multiplicity of different views, ideas, expectations, understanding and timeframes has the potential to heighten and increase conflict.

We have found that honest conversations are needed in three general zones of problems:

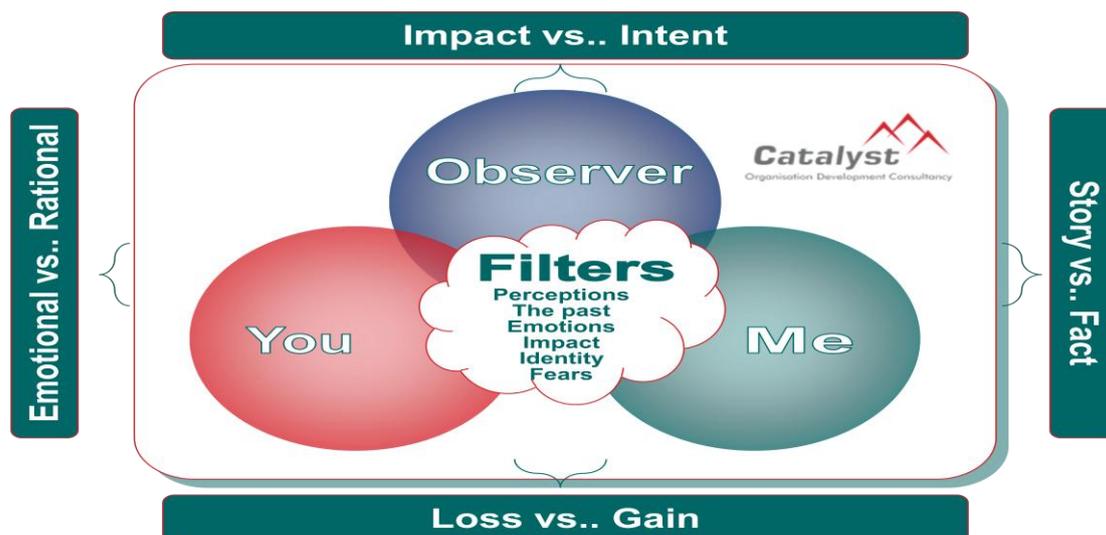
**Relationship breakdowns** – often due to a breakdown of trust; often due to assumptions made and misunderstandings; often when relationship expectations are not met; when we feel let down, betrayed or disrespected; sometimes associated with feelings of loss – which provokes anger, fear or hurt.

**Performance or behavioural problems** – usually due to disengagement, lack of awareness or EQ, lack of skill in a new role, disappointment at work, inappropriate attitude, abusive behaviour or loss of respect from team members.

**Leadership style** – often when a leader's behaviour and attitude is in conflict with the organisational values, the leadership style is autocratic, risk averse, non-communicative, too operational and indecisive.

These conflictual issues, behaviours and attitudes require feedback, upward management and change and there are real consequences that can evolve and spiral out of control, if left unattended. Ultimately it is affecting your performance as a leader.

One of the primary tips we teach that underpins the process of holding honest conversations and helps people become unstuck is for you the leader, as the initiator to visualise yourself in the conversation with the opposing person but for you to also stand back and take on a third party (observer) role. This imagery helps you act out a mediator function during the process, helps you filter the past perceptions and emotions associated with this relationship and prevents you from losing control when you are participating in the actual session. It is always so easy to get into the infamous "I am right, you are wrong" mode and sometimes you need to practice some lateral thinking or seek some middle ground to resolve a stalemate!



There are also four perspectives that one needs to consider during the process of the conversation.

**Impact vs. intent** – distinguish between the motivations for the discussion against what actually happens

**Story vs. fact** – the need to assess the facts of the situation under review against the distortion of perceptions and assumptions

**Loss vs. gain** – the need to review the implications of concession and compromise – the need to lose the battle to win the war

**Emotional vs. rational** – the ability to keep control of one’s emotions and remain objective in contrast to being caught up in the “heat of the battle” and resorting to personal and subjective “blow-outs”

### The process of initiating and holding honest conversations

There are a number of distinct stages and sequences to master honest conversations and we offer these steps for leadership to practice working through them as follows:

**Purpose and initiation** – The need for honest conversations and tackling deep seated and difficult issues is not a daily occurrence, so the initiation of this event should be handled in a fairly formal manner, which also emphasises its significance to you. You need to consider the purpose and potential outcomes, weigh up the benefits versus the consequences, when and where to have the conversation and how you set up the session.

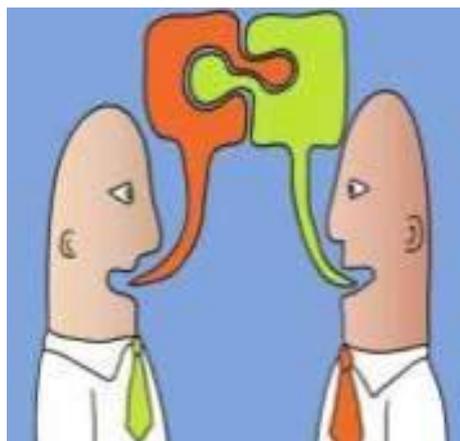
With reference to the logistical arrangements, you need to invite the person for the conversation at a mutually suitable time, either in a written form or talking directly to them and frame the high level purpose and your desire to resolve any differences as a win/win outcome. It is also sometimes useful to hold the conversation away from the work environment at a neutral venue, away from any disruptions and colleagues or staff interest.

**Engage** – As is the case in any coaching or mentoring experience, the first step in the actual engagement is get the conversation off to a good start by building rapport – showing interest or offering a view on a common area of work, family, leisure activity etc. It is also important to set the right tone, using eye contact and taking on a relaxed and informal conversational style.

The opening is important – explaining what happened, how you felt about it, starting with all the facts as you set the scene. Always start with facts, not feelings. Your feelings are the least factual and often most controversial element. Remember the imagery of the observer watching over both of you, keep objective, show no emotion and respect the “taking turns”, reciprocal exchange of dialogue. The greatest skill to apply in this stage is active listening, without any interruptions – listen to understand! Watch the other person intently for any cues and signals that you can gain further clarification and from which you can build on. Show respect during this initial exchange and acknowledge whatever the position or defence that is being presented by the other party. Remember that you need to be in control of this conversation.

**Unpack** - During this stage you need to move deeper into talking about your feelings, how you responded, the influence it had on the team, how the situation impacted on the results etc. You need to unpack two of the process perspectives (loss vs. gain), what you felt you lost in the altercation and (intent vs. impact), what was your original intent compared to a description of what actually happened. The skills of multiple open ended questions is paramount in this stage as you seek to build a clearer picture of the issue, incident, attitude or behaviour that precipitated the conflict or difference of opinion. It is extremely important to gauge and assess the other person’s response to this unpacking process as it can provide significant information, viewpoints or rationalisation to focus on. Again use the skills of empathy and acknowledgement to keep the conversational flow, integrity of approach and reciprocal exchange at a positive level.

**Learn** – So many clashes and conflicts occur as a result of different perceptions, assumptions, beliefs and past baggage that one brings to relationships. This stage requires discipline and flexibility and the ability of leaders to critically examine their own thinking, feelings and actions as a result of exploring the critical issue and broadening their awareness and understanding during the process. Leaders need to evaluate their own judgement, reactions, self-image and emotional responses in the relationship. It is in essence the honest conversation that you need to have with yourself, as an after- action review and take the wisdom and learning from the experience into your future.



**Options** – This is a critical stage to identify options and alternatives to resolving the problem or topic. The initiator needs to facilitate this stage skilfully and it is important that both parties enter into the spirit of conflict resolution, exploring the various options in an open manner and consequences that need to be considered. Some of the areas of investigation include what both parties can live with and a decision as to what can be let go or sacrificed to move on. Obviously there can be a wide array of options across the continuum of consensus - from forgiving, forgetting and re-uniting to slowly rebuilding trust to agreeing to disagree and simply parting ways. Importantly one needs to strive for an acceptable outcome and the philosophy of possibility thinking can facilitate some positive future plans. The use of empathy and reflection skills can add significant value and integrity to the conversation as one of the parties may have conceded far more than the other, in an effort to move on.

**Actions** – The final stage in the process of mastering honest conversations is reaching agreement on specific actions to address the issue under review, as well as build trust and restore the relationship. It is often useful to agree on the need to talk more and share expectations, which helps healing some of the raw emotions that were central to the conflict. One of the commitments that can be entered into (in a case of misunderstanding or misperception) is to share thoughts and feelings earlier with each other and an open invitation to ask questions to gain better understanding. There can be a host of different

actions but one of these has to be the writing up of the rationale, overview, outcomes and commitments from the session, as a note for the record. There should also be an agreement reached on making time for coaching, performance reviews and regular feedback. The last feature of the conversation should be the initiator summarising the actions, accountabilities and timeframe before concluding the session with a positive or encouraging review of the spirit in which the discussion was held.

## **Conclusion**

Leaders are going to be faced with an increasing number of difficult and delicate situations, reactions and mind-sets in the future and cannot avoid or distance themselves from addressing and confronting derailing behaviours, sub-standard performance and inappropriate attitudes. They cannot also “shoot from the hip” and hope to have a professional outcome from a tough situation or emotive disagreement.

The progressive leader needs to master the art and practice of holding honest conversations and take on future leadership challenges with confidence.



**SOURCES:** Patterson, G and S. McMillan. 2002. *Crucial conversations*. New York: Mc Graw Hill

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### **DEBBIE CRAIG**

Debbie has over 18 years' experience in the field of strategy, leadership development, change management, talent management, high performance teams and organisational development. She has worked and consulted at leading local and global organisations in the private and public sector throughout Southern Africa and internationally in the UK, Australia, South East Asia, China, South America and the USA. Debbie is a skilled strategist, design architect, team builder, a powerful facilitator, change agent and executive coach. Her passion is transformation and empowerment which she facilitates through individual coaching and empowerment workshops, team-development workshops, corporate training and consulting assignments and organisation wide strategic change interventions. Debbie is the founder and Managing Director of Catalyst Consulting which she has grown into a successful consulting company with her business partner, John Gatherer.

Debbie has published a book, "I am Talent", on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous articles, appeared on radio talk shows and presented at conferences.



### **JOHN GATHERER**

John has over 38 years' experience in the fields of HR, labour relations, training and development, leadership and strategic change management, having held senior and executive positions in Anglo American plc. and the De Beers Groups. John joined Debbie Craig at Catalyst Consulting as Principal Consultant, specialising in strategic change, leadership development, talent management and executive coaching, working locally and internationally. John brings a deep and practical knowledge and expertise to his roles as facilitator, consultant and organization development specialist as well his ability to think strategically and design innovative solutions. John has managed large scale people management projects and transformation journeys in Africa, Asia, China, the UK, India, Kuwait, Australia and the USA.

John has co-authored a book, "I am Talent" with Debbie Craig, on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous journal articles and contributing chapters to Management education publications and presented at conferences and workshops. John's other passions include photography and travel and he has written and published a number of photographic "coffee table" books on African Wildlife and Adventure Travel.

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