
Difficult times; Difficult conversations

Open discussions can be beneficial for staff in times of uncertainty, but only if managers know how to have the difficult conversations, says **Richard Wilkes**

Look at the headlines of any newspaper today and you would be hard pushed to find something positive about levels of business, the financial health of companies, economic forecasts, employment figures, inflation ... the list could go on. Only occasionally is there any glimmer of hope that things might get better, and that whatever is coming won't stay long. It is a fruitful season for soothsayers, the "I told you so" brigade, the groundless optimists, merchants of doom and anyone else who wants to throw in their pennyworth.

The blunt fact is that nobody knows what lies ahead. We do know that, currently, job cuts are a reality across all sectors, businesses are struggling, prices are rising, houses are not selling, and people and businesses are finding it hard to raise capital, let alone spend it.

There might not be any quick fix or immediate solution at the macro level, but at a smaller, human level, there are things managers can do to make their staff feel valued in uncertain times.

Why have the conversation?

Because there is so much uncertainty at the moment, some might think that conversations with staff about the present and the future would be a fruitless exercise.

We recently delivered some training to an organisation that had just undergone a merger – a time, when, inevitably, people are concerned about their jobs, promotion prospects and rewards. The delegates completely understood this context, but admitted that they favoured the approach of "keeping your head down and waiting for things to get better". When we asked why, the response was telling: "Because we don't know how to have that conversation; it puts us in a vulnerable position. Normally, conversations can be geared to something topical and specific to roles, performance, targets, deliverables, and so on. If we can't have strict parameters to our conversations, then we would be using precious time on, well, simply a conversation. That would be confusing for them and us."

Managers have had a great deal of resources directed their way to help them with the behavioural aspects of managing

people, but it seems as though these skills have been used mostly in times when there is a degree of certainty – positive or negative. However, how people are dealt with during these more uncertain times is critical. The first reason for having the conversation is, therefore, simply to communicate. Not being listened to or communicated with is a root cause for discontent. If you've ever sat on a delayed train, you will know the frustration that builds up when no one communicates why there is a delay, but a simple announcement from the driver, even if he says he does not know the reason either, will help relieve the feeling that no one gives a damn.

Secondly, not being upfront and transparent will only lead to trouble later on. That trouble could lead to a grievance being initiated, and even to a tribunal. That might seem an extreme outcome, but it is often the lack of transparency that drives people to a more formal process. It is therefore very important to be clear with staff about issues including what is happening on their own projects or any potential drop in bonuses. Such news may or may not come as a shock, but it will eliminate the resentment about not being kept in the loop.

Thirdly, if good people are going to stay and help the organisation through the difficult times, then you don't want to lose them once the outlook brightens up. The principal reason for staff leaving firms and companies is because of their relationship (or lack of it) with management. The task itself is not a primary concern, but how they get on with their manager is.

How to get it right

Let's take a hypothetical situation. Susan is a manager in a financial services firm that manages investments. One of her sales team, Edward, has been very effective at bringing in new clients, and therefore revenue, into the firm, which is particularly commendable in the current market.

Because of his successes, Edward understandably believes that a promotion is inevitable. Indeed, before the drop in the market, the firm had every intention of promoting him, and although no promises were given, it was an unspoken under-



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standing based on his performance reviews, the fact that he had exceeded targets, and so on.

However, the new role would be more strategic and have less involvement in direct sales, and with the situation as it is, Edward would be more useful in his present role. The decision has been made not to promote him, and it is now Susan's task to break the news.

In some ways, she starts from a position of strength: she has a good working relationship with Edward, she has been frank with him about his performance gaps, and he trusts her. He is also aware of the state of the market. However, she feels as though she is letting him down and is nervous about his reaction.

Susan should begin with some careful preparation. She needs to ensure that, when she has the conversation, she can effectively communicate the exact reasons why her superiors made that decision. Whatever her thoughts about its merits, she must toe the line; otherwise, her authority will not be respected. However, that does not rule out the need for openness and honesty: openness about the state of the markets, and honesty that this is a difficult situation and a difficult conversation for both of them.

There is a school of thought that says that, when delivering bad news, it should always be prefaced by something positive. This could seem rather false, but it is really a matter of discretion for the manager: some people might be more comfortable with that style, others less so. It might be useful to get some thoughts from others on the approach to be taken. This is where the role-play technique can be a useful tool. In this scenario, there is no substitute for instinct; it is important for Susan to trust in the relationship she has with Edward and do what she feels is right.

During the conversation, however the news is received, it is vital to *listen, listen, listen*. All too often, we try to overcome our nerves and unfamiliarity with a situation by *talking, talking, talking*. The news is about Edward; it is his time, managed by Susan. She should ask him for his thoughts, including about levels of business and his role.

Edward might well ask for some timelines for the promotion.

That is not really on the agenda, but Susan should acknowledge his aspirations and say that, at this time, it is impossible to say. He certainly would not appreciate a waffling answer that tries to stall the uncomfortable truth of not knowing what will happen. People usually like to hear good things about themselves, so Susan should, without fawning, say that his performance is excellent and is not being questioned in any way.

A skilled manager can, without shifting the burden, acknowledge that it is a shared problem. This is not a deflection, but a genuine piece of bridge building that could help Edward feel that it is not exclusively his problem, and that, in fact, he will be part of the (longer-term) solution. Susan needs to bear in mind the trinity of the manager, the individual and the firm; it will help provide a cohesiveness to the discussion and present the problem in a holistic way rather than simply focused on Edward.

It is important to agree a follow up process – Susan should not close the door behind him, breathe a large sigh of relief and think that she doesn't need to bring that up again for a while. Instead, both parties should agree some dates for regular conversations and agree to monitor Edward's role.

Edward, provided he has been treated with honesty and respect, can now make up his mind about whether to stay with the firm or not. Importantly, his manager has not tried to conceal anything or give a false picture. He would find it difficult to raise a grievance, based simply on his frustrations at not getting the promotion.

This is a hypothetical situation, and there will be others presenting much more of a challenge. In these uncertain times, we would do best to see having the conversation as a starting point (preparing well beforehand), followed up by continuing to be as transparent and frank as you can. One final thing: ignore the title of this article. Anticipation of the "Difficult conversation" can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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