



Part II

Ten Tough Conversations

Negotiating tough terrain

What this chapter will help you to do

As a people-leader, holding difficult conversations is a necessary if challenging part of your job. But even though the message may be tough, both to give and to hear, the conversation needn't feel threatening for you *or* for your team member.

Part II covers ten of the toughest situations you're likely to face. Six focus on performance problems, four on wider issues. Whatever the topic, the purpose of this section is to help you to feel confident in leading that discussion, and to help you make sure it's as positive and productive as possible.

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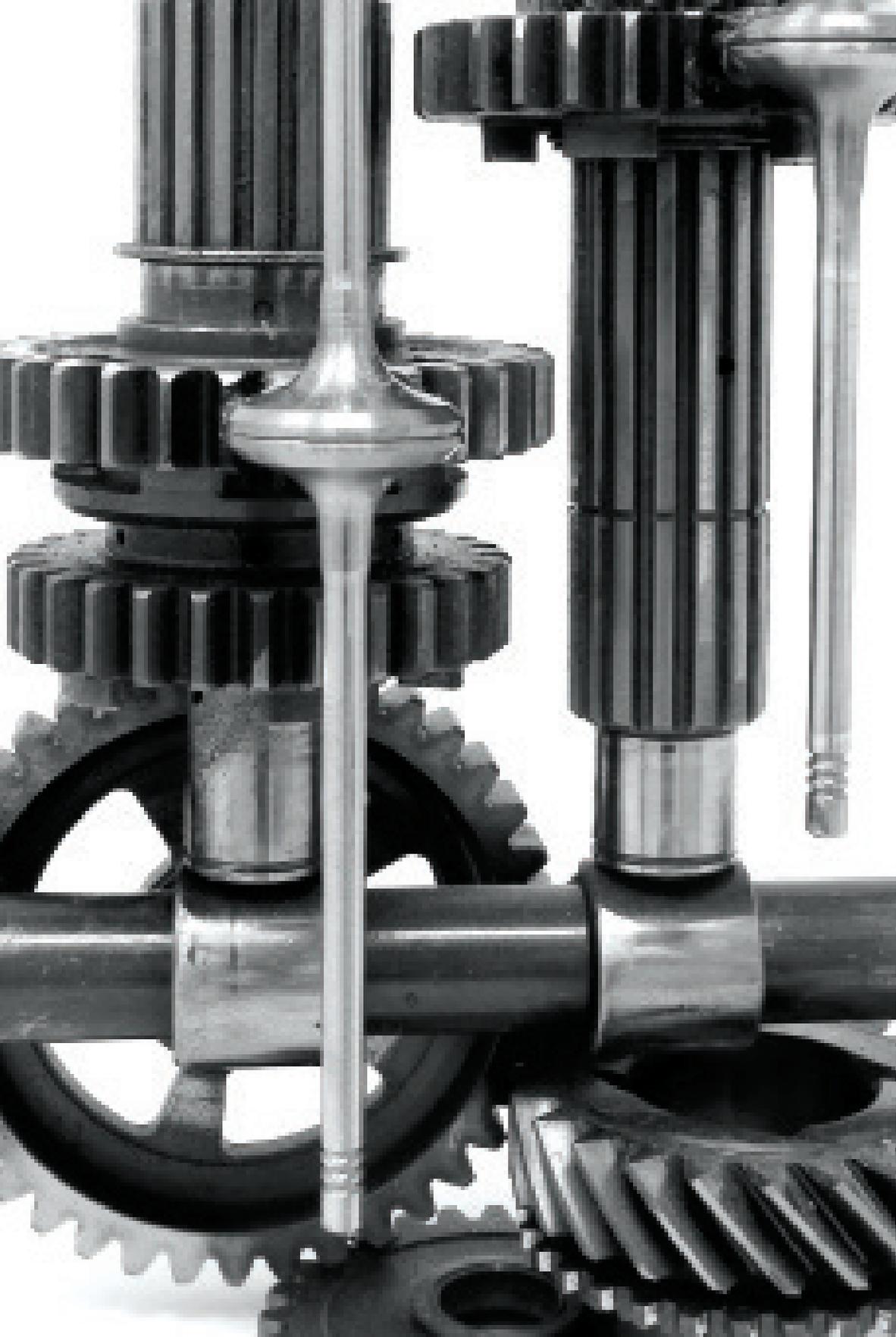
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Why tough conversations matter

“Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.”

—Publilius Syrus, Syrian scholar

Close to where I live on the south coast of the UK, the Solent is one of the busiest waterways in the world. Enormous cruise and container ships sail in and out of Southampton Docks each day, dwarfing the hundreds of yachts and ferries that also crisscross the narrow channel between the mainland and the Isle of Wight.

On January 3, 2015, one of these cargo ships, the *Hoegh Osaka*, ran into trouble a few miles from port. Carrying a £30 million consignment of luxury cars and heavy machinery headed for the Middle East, she listed, flooded, and ran aground on a sandbank. Expensive Bentleys, Land Rovers, Jaguars, and Porsches broke loose and collided with heavy diggers and military equipment.

For the next few weeks, the *Hoegh Osaka* sat stranded, easily visible from the shoreline. There was intense speculation about the cause of the accident. Having spent two years as part of the naval operations team for Portsmouth, I knew that shallows on that stretch of water were notorious for catching out unsuspecting seafarers, and general conjecture among the local population was that the captain or pilot had probably made a basic navigation error. The official investigation that followed showed a far more complex picture, however.

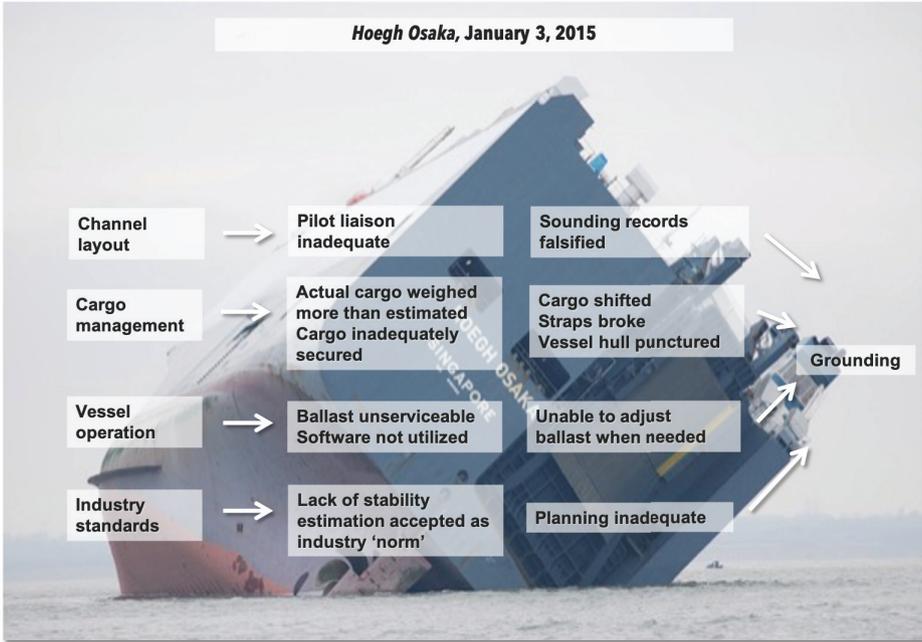
Human error was indeed a major contributor, but so, too, were technical issues and failings in industry standards.

Among a long list of safety issues, the report included that:

- Instruction manuals lacked sufficient guidance, which meant cargo had not been positioned correctly.
- Securing straps were only half the strength required.
- The ballast system wasn't fully serviceable and had been incorrectly calculated.
- Loading plans were inaccurate by over 300 tons, with the weight of the large shipment of Land Rovers being particularly underestimated.

The resulting instability meant the *Hoegh Osaka* was unlikely to

survive a turn at normal speed, and this proved to be the case. As the ship maneuvered down the Channel, she started to keel. Problems were exacerbated as the cargo broke loose. The tumbling vehicles breached the hull, the ship flooded, and her fate was sealed.



The *Hoegh Osaka* was eventually recovered, albeit at a cost of £10 million. Most of the vehicles were safely driven off, although—much to the disappointment of local bargain hunters—there was no quick deal to be had on the quayside.

The grounding is a reminder of how the cause of a disaster is often more complicated than it seems at first glance. This truth also applies—although usually less expensively—in many everyday situations. We may see a simple explanation for an error, but on closer inspection we can regularly find that the underlying reasons are more numerous and also more nuanced.

At work, making it your habit to analyze the wider context first and avoiding the temptation to jump in too quickly to hold a member of your team responsible has several vital advantages:

- It gives you a better chance of avoiding any possibility of a repeat.

- It makes for a fairer discussion.
- Your team member will be more ready to explore their own contribution to any issue.

Why things go wrong

There are three main aspects of the wider context that it will almost always be helpful to examine when problems occur:

- **Ineffective or unhelpful organizational policies and processes** It's often impossible for people to do a good job if faced with inadequate resources, poor training, substandard equipment, and inferior processes, no matter how hard they try.
- **Ineffective leadership** Three of the main problems here are poor communication, unclear expectations, and a lack of direction. Mostly, these issues are down to leaders not having the skills they need. Sometimes, however, it's because the wrong people have been promoted. Bullies can appear to have the "right stuff" because they're forceful, but they end up creating an oppressed, underproductive, and often unwell workforce. Technical specialists with a limited interest in the people element may also not be right for a people-leadership role, despite having good intentions.
- **A blame culture** Whether it's part of the organization's culture or limited to a specific team, hunting out a scapegoat when things go wrong can be especially damaging. It's a hugely tempting solution because it's simple, it's quick, and it absolves others (possibly you) of responsibility. Best of all, saying "It's your fault this has happened" can seem a smart way to make people sit up and improve. Those leaders are thinking, "*That'll make sure they don't do that again.*" Job done.

But it can backfire badly.

Studies show that blaming people weakens your relationship with them, especially if they've been brave enough to speak up about their mistakes. They're likely to see it as being punished for being honest. Possibly worse still, it results in *more* mistakes, not fewer. This is because people start to bury inconvenient truths and slipups under a code of silence, and when that happens, people don't just fail to learn from their own mistakes, they also don't learn from the mistakes of their colleagues.

This isn't to say you should create a blame-free culture. Accountability is vital in any organization, and many of the conversations covered in this chapter will show you how to instill an appropriate level of personal responsibility in each of your team. But there's a world of difference between holding people justly accountable and shaming them.

“It takes real courage to ask questions when the answers may be hard to hear.”

As the boss, you'll also need to shoulder some responsibility. It's only human to want to protect your self-esteem, and it takes real courage to ask questions when you know that the answers may be hard for you to hear, but it's one of the single most important ways you can build respect and trust.

Why tough conversations are tough for your people

In addition to “external” challenges caused by the organization or leadership, conversations can be tough for a number of “internal” or psychological reasons that are natural to us all. These include that:

- **Making a mistake threatens our self-esteem** Most of us know we're not perfect. Just the same, falling short in some way can still feel humiliating, as if we're not putting in enough effort or we're not good enough. This can affect how we see ourselves, often making us less confident, and that in turn can damage our relationships with others. We can become defensive, even when we know that we need to improve.
- **People see the world differently** How we see the world is influenced by practical factors such as age, gender, and culture, but also by less obvious aspects such as personality type and life experiences. These often lead us to develop strong beliefs, beliefs that can be so embedded that we consider our rules as *the* rules, and we will defend them accordingly. We may do this even if those rules are at odds with organizational standards. Time-keeping and dress codes are two of the more innocuous examples, yet even these can arouse very different opinions about what's acceptable.
- **Under- or over-inflated egos get in the way** People who are extra-conscientious or anxious can be especially tough on themselves. Feeling guilty for—in their eyes—falling short or never matching up can make conversations about where they went wrong difficult for them. They can feel like this even when there's a totally reasonable

explanation.

At the other end of the scale, those with an unchecked ego can lack humility and be unwilling to listen, let alone learn. We'll explore this further in "Tough conversation 3: Acting like a diva."

- **People assign the cause differently** How we pinpoint the cause of an error can sometimes depend on whether that mistake was caused by us or by others, especially in cultures that put emphasis on individual achievement, such as the US, Canada, and the UK. Called the "fundamental attribution error," it works like this:

When things go well for us, we see **ourselves** as responsible: "*It's because I worked hard that everything was finished ahead of time.*" When things go well for others, however, it's the favorable **situation** that has triumphed. "*It's because it was a quiet day that it was possible for you to finish early.*"

When things don't go well, we switch this around. It's the **situation** that's responsible for our problems: "*It's not because I was angry; it's because the meeting was tense.*" But when things don't go well for other people, **they** are at fault: "*It's because you used an angry tone that the meeting was tense.*"

- **People judge themselves on their intentions** When things go wrong, people tend to judge themselves on their good intentions, even when the final outcome is disappointing. For example:

That curt response they gave to a customer? It's obvious, surely, that they were trying to speed up so that other customers wouldn't have to wait.

That budget overspend? Self-evident, wasn't it? They were using good judgment to get the equipment repaired and back in production as quickly as possible.

The problem with intentions is that they're often unspoken; people assume that you *know* they were aiming for better, even when they fall short.

- **People think they're better than they are** Sometimes people have a more favorable view of their talents than the reality. Most of us see ourselves as more charitable givers, better drivers, more courteous citizens, and even safer bungee jumpers than we actually are.

At work, this "unconscious incompetence" can manifest itself in a number of ways. For example, we can think we're more dedicated, far smarter, and definitely more helpful than we actually are.

The Dunning–Kruger Effect, as this is known, exists at all levels of competence, even among professors, most of whom see themselves as better than their peers. The problem is most acute, however, with those at the lowest levels of performance, for the simple reason that they lack the ability to recognize their own shortcomings. Jumping back to conversations earlier in the book, this means it’s important to give your team members a clear picture of their achievements and gaps during regular progress updates, for example.



Ninety-four percent of professors rated themselves as higher performers than their peers.

- **People “misremember”** Most of us regard our memory as a reliable, if incomplete, recording of the past, but psychologists, neuroscientists, and lawyers all tell us otherwise. Eyewitness testimony, for instance, is notoriously *unreliable*, causing doubt in up to 75 percent of serious criminal cases. We tend to edit what happened, reconstructing memories based on our own remembered experiences and our knowledge of the world. Soon, those adapted memories become so real to us that we defend them, even when hard evidence proves otherwise. This is one of the reasons why specific examples are so important in many of the tough conversations that follow.

Five reasons to hold tough conversations

Given all these complexities, it’s understandable that you may be tempted to avoid tough conversations altogether. But *not* leading them will make things far worse. Here are five reasons why:

- **Unaddressed issues affect everyone** It pulls everyone down if someone is ignored when they fail to deliver on their commitments or when they behave in an unacceptable way.
- **Your credibility as a manager suffers** Overlooking a problem will earn you the reputation of being an “easy touch.” It also sets a new low in terms of expectations for performance.
- **Silence and secrecy breed anxiety** If you’ve

“The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.”

— Lieutenant General David Morrison, former Australian Chief of Army

developed a reputation for hiding information, people will always be on edge, wondering what you haven't told them, even when there's nothing for them to be concerned about.

- **The longer a problem goes on, the harder it is to correct** When shortcomings are left unaddressed, they tend to get worse, and this makes it much more difficult for people to get back on track. They won't thank you for not guiding them sooner.
- **You can't expect your team to step up if you don't** If you aren't able to do battle for your team, it's unlikely that they'll make the extra effort for you.

A tough conversation is never easy to hold, but it's vital you develop the competence and confidence to lead them. The more you step up, the more experience you'll gain and the better you'll get.

What to prepare for a tough conversation

Before we begin, keep in mind that there are a few situations that you shouldn't try to handle on your own. Contraventions of company policy, willful or grossly negligent behavior, or anything that compromises safety, for example, will require guidance from your HR or people team. If you're ever in any doubt, they'll be pleased to help.

For less critical matters, however, a one-to-one conversation will usually be your best course of action. Each of the tough conversations that follow has its own specific needs and these will be covered as we go through, but whatever the topic, you'll need to be ready to do three things:

Manage your stress

Be clear about boundaries

Show genuine empathy

Manage your stress

It can feel daunting to have a tough conversation coming up. Give yourself permission to feel apprehensive; it's not only natural but also shows you care. At the same time, however, it's going to be important

to keep your anxiety under control. You'll need a clear head, and the more stressed you are, the harder it will be to think rationally. A few ways to help reduce your stress are to:

- **Prepare your opening words** Always decide ahead of time what your opening sentence or two will be. Once the discussion is underway, you won't have time to muse over what those words should be, and there's a risk that you won't express yourself as well as you hoped. Whatever you say will set a trajectory for the conversation that can be hard to change, and if the right words don't suddenly appear, that trajectory may not be a good one. Don't make it up on the fly.

Another trap that managers often fall into when choosing their words is to suddenly become unusually formal and distant. It's often a self-protection mechanism, as if to say, "*This isn't me talking, it's the process.*" But it will only raise your team member's hackles further and inflame a situation that's probably already combustible enough. Rehearse your opening words using everyday phrases and body language. And—as ever—keep those words objective by addressing the issue, not your team member's personality.

The cases that follow have examples of words you can adapt for this purpose.

- **Expect people to feel threatened** In a tough conversation people feel under attack and it's human nature for them to push back. You may think you're offering helpful advice, but what they'll hear is, "*You're to blame,*" or "*You've failed.*" This feeling of being attacked can be so intense they may argue they're in the right even when they know they're in the wrong. Look at it as a normal response, *expect* it, and help them through it by keeping the conversation calm and constructive.
- **Avoid giving a knee-jerk reaction** When someone makes an error—say, for example, they omit some important information from a report—our natural tendency is often to think, "*Why on earth would they do that? Clearly they don't care.*" It's usually caused by a mix of frustration, worry that we'll be blamed, and guilt that it may be our fault in some way.

It can also be caused by something less obvious: the language we use.

In her TED Talk "*How language shapes the way we think,*" Lera Bo-

roditsky explains that in English the tendency is to say, “*He missed out the data.*” In Spanish, on the other hand, the tendency would be to say, “*The data was missed.*” This subtle change in focus influences what we pay most attention to. Using English, we remember who did it; using Spanish, we’re more likely to remember that there was an accident. This, in turn, has implications for whether we’re inclined to resort to immediate blame rather than use careful reasoning.

The more you’re aware of this pitfall, the more it gives you a chance to stop and think, “*Why do I think the way that I do? How could I think differently? What thoughts do I wish to create?*”

- **Be ready to take a deep breath** Literally. This may seem like an inadequate suggestion, but there’s a wealth of research around why this works. Try it the next time you feel tense. A deliberate deep breath—completely filling your lungs and releasing it slowly—gives you the six to ten seconds you need to take a mental step back from the brink. It can also relieve physical stress in your body, maybe not by much, but enough to make a difference. Just remember to do it imperceptibly, perhaps while you’re listening to your team member, so that it doesn’t sound like an enormous sigh.
- **Keep your focus on reaching a constructive outcome** The reason for the conversation is to find the best way forward for your team member. You’re investing in them to help them improve. That’s a good thing.
- **Choose a good time to talk** When you talk has a big impact on your resilience and also that of your team member. The best time to choose is when neither of you is in a hurry, tired, or hungry, any of which will make the discussion much harder. Hopefully, you also know **not** to wait until 5 p.m. on the last day of the week, tempting though this is since it means you won’t have to face the person again for a few days. But without a chance to close the matter or ask questions, they’ll probably spend the weekend in a state of unwarranted stress. This is another time when you’ll need to use courageous leadership.

“Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.”

— African proverb



Five things that people might say when they feel threatened

“It’s not my fault.”

“I may have done this, but you did that.”

“It’s not that important.”

“No one else has said anything to me.”

“You have no idea.”

Stay calm and respond with something like, *“Can you talk me through your perspective.”*

Be clear about boundaries

Some of the tough conversations we’re about to cover will need you to be very clear about what’s OK and what’s not OK. Bigger issues such as ethics, email policy, and leave allowances are usually taken care of in your employee handbook. What’s less likely to be covered—and may need clarifying by you—are requirements around day-to-day behaviors.

Establishing boundaries helps your team in two important ways:

- Each person can take full responsibility for staying within those limits once they know what those are.
- When they know what is OK and where they have license to operate freely, it gives them a greater sense of safety and control. *More freedom rather than less.*

Boundaries are equally vital for your peace of mind as the manager. With parameters in place, you can relax in the knowledge that people understand what’s acceptable and what’s not, especially in gray areas that are often less clearly defined. For example, is it OK if they drop into your office for a chat whenever they wish? Can they use the internet for personal reasons during working hours? Is it OK if they routinely leave work early ahead of others? These may seem trivial, but they tend to crop up far more often than serious issues. In essence, if there’s something that matters to you, it probably needs to be set out.

To set boundaries:

- **Know what limits are necessary** Pick your battles carefully. At the same time, be careful not to go overboard by restricting people so much that they no longer have important freedoms. Examples of

How to lead tough conversations

This section shows you how to lead ten of the most common tough conversations (plus one extra by popular request). Six focus on performance problems, and the rest look at wider issues.

Performance problems:

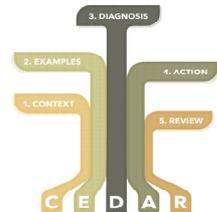
1. Disruptive behavior
2. Needing the same improvement conversation twice
3. Acting like a diva
4. Making a major mistake
5. Second-hand feedback from a senior colleague
6. Two team members in conflict

Wider issues:

7. A lower performance review than expected
8. A promised promotion not materializing
9. Low morale due to cutbacks or redundancies
10. A team member is seriously stressed

Extra conversation: A personal hygiene problem

The first six performance conversations each use the CEDAR structure. If you've read the feedback chapters, you'll already be familiar with these steps, but if not, it can help to take a look before you begin (see p.169).



Tough conversation 1: Disruptive behavior

As Ralph Waldo Emerson is quoted as saying, “No member of a crew is praised for the rugged individuality of their rowing.” The ability to work collaboratively with others is important in most organizations, and disruptive behavior needs to be addressed—whether it’s deliberate or not—before it contaminates the rest of the team and the working environment. Examples include:

- Treating others insensitively or rudely
- Behaving in an aggressive way
- Taking credit for other people’s work or not acknowledging the efforts of others

- Behaving in a passive-aggressive way such as disengaging, withholding information, gossiping about colleagues, or being aloof or irritable
- Carrying out small negative actions that add up to something bigger over time, such as constant grumpiness when asked to do a task, moody responses to colleagues, or rarely volunteering to help others

This last behavior is harder to pinpoint because each action may be minor on its own, but if you suddenly find yourself thinking, “*This continual negativity is exhausting*,” that may be your signal that their attitude has reached the level of “compliant defiance” and needs addressing.

If you’re unsure about the seriousness of the problem, in the first instance always ask your HR or people team for advice. Usually, however, the most appropriate way of tackling the situation is to hold a conversation with the person so that you can find out what’s behind the behavior and where to go next.

Preparing for the conversation Once you’ve prepared yourself mentally, next choose the words you need to set the context. As far as you can, keep these factual and ask for their perspective early. This will avoid any sense of “accusing” your team member. Here are a few examples of what you might be tempted to say and what will work better instead:

Table Pt II.2

Opening the conversation

Tempted to say...

“This behavior is totally unacceptable.”

“You steal the credit for other people’s ideas.”

“You used very aggressive behavior.”

“You’re so lazy.”

Instead say...

“Have you noticed how your approach can damage trust in the team, and our overall capability as a result?”

“When you said it was all your idea, it took away credit due to others on the team. How can we make sure your work is fully recognized while also giving credit to others?”

“When you spoke to [X] it came across as a personal attack rather than professional support. Is there something concerning you that led you to use such strong terms?”

“Your role requires a lot of hard work, but it seems as if it doesn’t motivate you?”

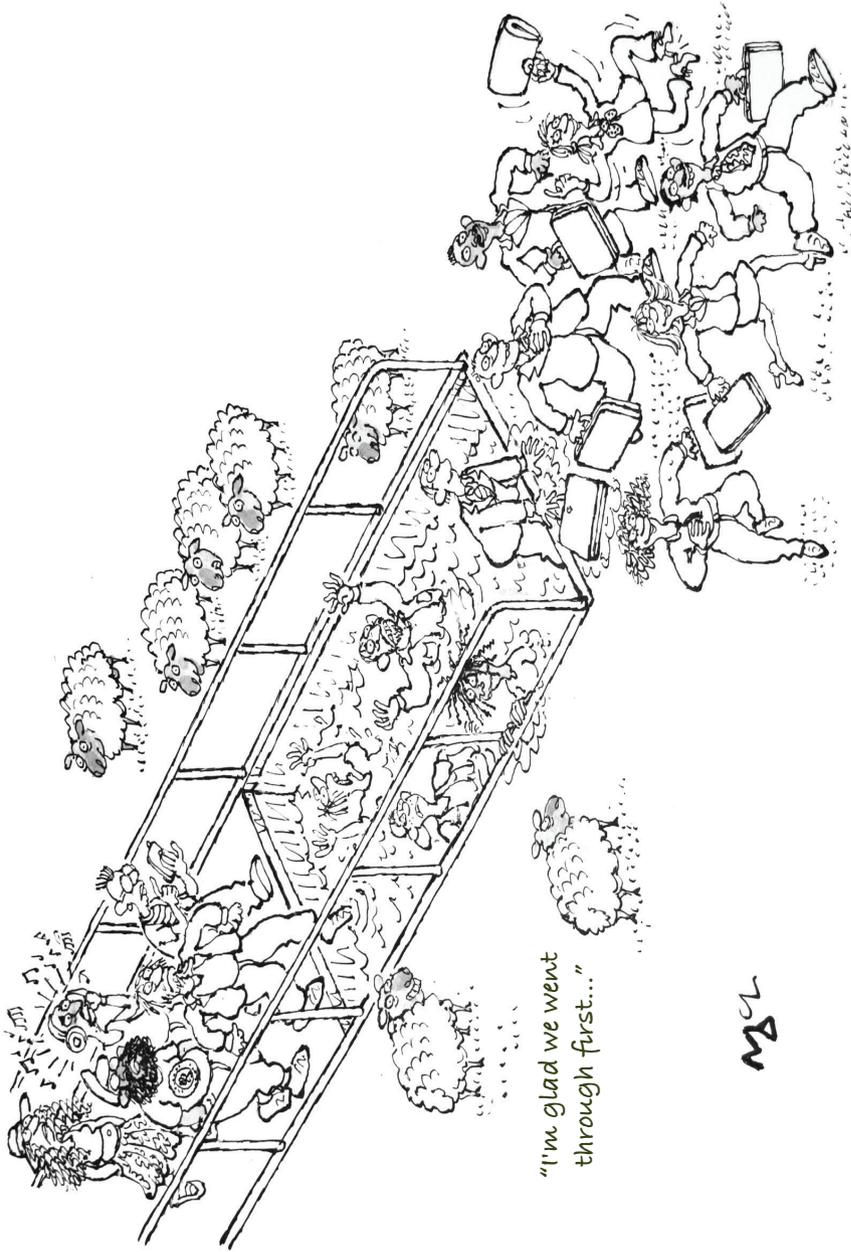
Using the “sheep dip” method

Visits by the vet were a regular occurrence on our farm as I was growing up. As part of the stock’s general health check, our flock of sheep would sometimes be “dipped” to protect them from infestation. This involved filling a shallow channel with disinfectant and then driving the entire flock through it. With much noise and splattering, every sheep would be immersed, whether infected or not.

It’s an approach that can also be useful at work. When it comes to less serious issues and before singling anyone out, consider whether a general reminder to everyone—or “sheep dip”—would solve the problem. By sending out a note to the whole group about expected behaviors, you avoid pointing the finger at any one person.

Example: Have dress standards become too casual?

Say something like: *“This is just to remind everyone that as we regularly host clients in the office, we need to keep to certain standards of dress. While it’s great to be relaxed—in fact, it’s an important part of our culture—flip-flops, denim, and similar casual clothing must be kept for personal time. Our complete dress guidelines are in our employee handbook but do ask if you’re not sure. If in doubt, it’s always better to err on the side of professionalism. It’d be great if we could all keep that in mind.”*



"I'm glad we went through first..."

MS

Facilitating the conversation Use the CEDAR framework to guide the discussion. Here's how to apply the steps specifically to a conversation about disruptive behavior:

Context

- **Exchange your normal greetings and raise the topic promptly** If it feels natural, ask briefly how things are going, but avoid prolonging this or it will sound—and we have to admit it usually is—insincere. It's also likely to make it harder for you to begin.
- **Describe the behavior from your perspective** Keep this short and simple, just a couple of sentences that describe the behavior.
- **Explain the impact on others** Cover the effect their actions are having on the team's results, and probably on their morale, too. If the behavior breaches any boundaries, team values, or workplace policies, spell out what that breach is.
- **Explore their perspective and listen to any concerns** Ask how they see the situation. Listen for any triggers that might be behind their behavior.

Examples

- **Illustrate the situation with specific examples** Sometimes one large example is enough, but usually two or three smaller ones will be important in building a full picture.
- **Always explain the examples in one lump** One of the most frustrating things for your team member will be if you drip-feed examples one by one. It comes across as "... and another thing... and another...". It also makes it harder for you because they're likely to shoot each example down one at a time. Instead, group them together so that the situation is obvious.
- **Judge when to move on** Once they grasp the issue, move on to diagnosis. This may mean skipping over some examples, but keep in mind that your aim is to illustrate, not berate.



Setting context and examples: aggressive behavior

Here's an example of how to explore the context for a good performer who is being unusually aggressive toward colleagues:

"Thank you for breaking off to have a chat. It's important for us to have this chance to talk because you're a key member of the team, especially in

[X]. I wanted to get together because over the last few weeks you've been responding sharply to other team members, and it would be really helpful to get your take on this. It's important to look at this together because it's not your usual approach and it influences how well we work as a team, as well as your own results.

For example, during our meetings last week and yesterday you ignored other people's suggestions and reacted pretty strongly when your own ideas were questioned. There have also been a few occasions recently when you've made disparaging comments about your colleagues' work on our current project, such as when you described [X]'s document design as rubbish.

Can you talk me through this from your perspective?"

Diagnosis

- **Ask them what the underlying causes might be** Start with a wider situation analysis. What's called "low frustration tolerance" can often be triggered by issues such as being under severe pressure, problems at home, or irritation with leadership or processes. It's important not to let this become a blame game, however, so instead of asking *who* may have caused it, ask *what* may have caused it.

Unless the reason is already obvious, next ask how their actions might have contributed to the issue. Possible causes are explored in Table 8.1 (see p.198). Ask questions like, "What led up to this?", "What do you think some of the wider reasons might be?", and "What might be down to your own approach?"

"Don't ask who may have caused an issue; ask what may have caused it."

- **Empathize with them if they are facing genuine difficulties** If their behavior is caused by a real issue, show you understand by saying something like, "I can see what you mean. It's really tough when something like that happens..." Just make sure that this is sincere; people hate being patronized.
- **Be prepared to give them thinking time** Insights can take time to come into focus, so be as patient as possible. One option is to take a break and ask them to come back when they've had time to think this through. Be sure to reconvene within a day or two at most, however. In some cases, your team member may also be hesitant because their frustration is with you. If this might be the case, ask something like, "What can I do to help?"

to contact.

Also, please come and talk to me if you have any individual concerns. I'll be glad to help wherever I can."

When morale is low, helping your people to refocus and reenergize requires deliberate and positive action. For more on how to help your people develop resilience, see the next conversation.

Tough conversation 10: A team member is seriously stressed

Global competition has ratcheted up the pressure on most organizations over the last decade. It's now routine for employees to be asked to handle more demanding tasks, put in longer hours, and learn new ways of working. The effects of the 2020 pandemic worsened this pressure, sending the number of people looking for advice on mental health skyrocketing.

To respond to this growing need, many companies have established dedicated plans or employee assistance programs. Initiatives include on-site medical support, the right to request flexible working, health and wellbeing apps, support for carers, and the provision of personal protection equipment. While these are often invaluable, on a day-to-day footing it's often the manager's practical support that can have the greatest impact on reducing stress. This support comes on two levels:

- On a personal level, through individualized support
- At team level, by maintaining a healthy work culture for all

Providing support for an individual team member

Before looking at what you can do to support your people, it's useful to remember that not *all* stress is bad. Most of us like to challenge ourselves, to be pushed just enough beyond our comfort zone so that we become more today than we were yesterday. But when that challenge becomes too great, or the wrong type, it can start to affect our health and wellbeing. Frequent headaches, problems sleeping, and anxiety are just some of the more common issues.

Giving people clear opportunities to say "I'm not OK" is critical.

One of the difficulties with stress is that it's not always easy

to predict where each person's tipping point sits. Individual susceptibility—including your own—depends on the duration and intensity of that pressure, but also on background factors such as personality, experiences, and lifestyle. Two people can face exactly the same stress yet react quite differently.

The first indication you might have that something's not quite right with a member of your team is likely to be a change in their usual behavior and demeanor. For example, a usually dynamic person may seem frequently tired, grumpy, or tearful, or a strong performer may show an unexplained drop in their standard of work or appearance. Your ability to notice these changes is key. Despite huge strides, stress remains a taboo topic in many circles, and people can be reluctant to tell you for fear of being seen to "have issues," potentially harming their career prospects.

Not speaking out is a problem that's often exacerbated at senior levels. Ben Horowitz, a software entrepreneur and venture capitalist, summed this up when he said, "It's like the Fight Club of management: the first rule of the CEO psychological meltdown is don't talk about the psychological meltdown." It's even more difficult in the more macho industries. A 2017 study in the UK showed that construction workers were nearly four times as likely to commit suicide as other professionals. Giving people clear opportunities to say "*I'm not OK*" is critical.

If you notice a pattern of unusual behavior:

- Remember you're not being asked to become a psychologist, just to check how people are doing and take any practical actions that you can.
- Set aside time for a friendly inquiry about what might be behind this, ideally over the next day or two. A good way to keep it low-key is to add it to the end of your next routine get-together.
- Make sure it's a private chat. Health-related issues are confidential unless they become a legal or health and safety matter.
- Check in advance what support is available in your organization so that you have an idea of what you can offer. This will depend on the specific issue, but it's always a useful thing to know.

To guide the conversation:

- **Ask how things are going** Open the conversation simply. Although

this is a sensitive and personal issue, most of us respond well to a genuine inquiry. Treating the conversation as a normal part of working life reduces any sense of stigma. You might also emphasize that the conversation is totally confidential. Ask something like:

“What are the biggest pressures for you at the moment?”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

If their performance has become noticeably different, provide a brief example.

“You have had some problems with [X area] recently and I was wondering what might be behind this?”

“I’ve noticed you don’t seem to be on top of your work in your usual way; is everything OK?”

- **Listen** It may well be the pressure of work affecting them, but equally, it may be the stress exerted on them in another area of life. Serious concerns about their health, financial problems, or relationship issues are likely to impact performance. It’s not always easy to pinpoint a single cause. Many instances can be caused by a combination of issues at work and home. As you listen:
 - **Be patient and show compassion** Give the person time to collect their thoughts and put them into words. As you listen, remember that your facial expression will reveal a lot about whether they should trust you or not.
 - **Avoid interrupting or judging** This isn’t easy, partly because it’s hard to hear that someone isn’t coping and partly because it’s going to take effort to help them. Keep in mind that managing wellbeing benefits everyone, including you. We all feel more motivated and committed when we’re supported. That leads to better results, helping you to feel less stressed in the process.
 - **Recognize that the stress is real for them** Each person’s threshold is different, even if their problems might not seem that burdensome to you. As comedian Ruby Wax put it, *“We have no bouncer at the door of our minds to decide what gets in and what doesn’t.”*
- **Explore what support would be helpful** Make your first response, *“Thanks for letting me know.”* It can take courage for us to admit that we are struggling. Then talk through what support might help them to work through the situation. This will depend on whether the issue is non-work related, work related, or a mix of the two.



Offer third party support

In some instances, a member of your team may prefer *not* to discuss what's concerning them. If this happens, offer the possibility of talking to a third party such as your HR representative or another trusted advisor such as a mentor or doctor.

If they completely stonewall your efforts, respect their privacy. At the same time, if there's a prolonged drop in their results, you'll need to have a practical conversation about how they might recover their usual performance.

Where issues are not work-related

Don't set out to "solve" issues that are not related to work. You'll probably be helping more than you know just by being supportive. The stigma of appearing unable to cope means that people often feel isolated when stressed. Talking about it with you can be a release and a huge relief. Depending on the specifics in each case, you may also be able to take a number of practical actions; see Table II.4.

Where issues are work-related

The most common causes of stress at work include having unclear goals, a lack of autonomy, or simply too much to do. All of these are fairly straightforward to put right, but it can feel challenging if your actions may have contributed in some way. A deep breath and the ability to accept that you may need to change your approach will be needed if you're to maintain or rebuild trust. In more serious cases, a bit of "time out" may help. The CEO of Lloyds, Antonio Horta-Osorio, took eight weeks off work in 2011 after suffering from extreme insomnia caused by the banking crisis. The break, together with professional advice in topics such as mindfulness, sleep, and diet, helped him to return to full health.

Often, however, the pressure can be alleviated with thoughtful and carefully targeted support from you. Important actions you can take include:

- **Help people to prioritize** Sometimes people don't have the experience to judge where best to spend their time. They get lost assigning what to do now, do later, delegate, never do. Working through
-

Table Pt II.4

Possible cause

Examples of ways to provide support

Financial worries

Where financial concerns are work-related—including when employees are furloughed—make sure people understand the reason behind the decision, the impact on their compensation, and what to expect. Whether concerns are work-related or not, however, your organization may be able to offer a workplace wellbeing package to assist them in bringing their finances under control or becoming more financially literate. Offer to help track down professional agencies where this would be welcomed. Debt support organizations, the voluntary sector, or specialist charities may also be useful sources of support. Talk through how to lessen pressure at work while they deal with the issue.

Health

Suggest they talk to the HR team, who may be able to help with specialist advice or arrange time off for medical appointments. For more serious issues, such as when healthcare might be required or if the cause is work-related, this will usually need to be a formal referral. Working from home or following part-time or flexible hours may be helpful options. Help people to maintain a healthy work/life balance.

Family or relationship issues

Arranging childcare can be a struggle for many parents, for example, and an ageing population also means that an increasing number of employees are caring for elderly relatives. Whatever the reason, small changes to working arrangements can help to ease pressures. Consider lightening their load, perhaps by adapting their working hours. Where the concern is temporary, it may be useful to reassign duties across the team.

In more serious or long-term situations, arrange to consult with HR—together with the person—to explore more substantial adjustments to their working arrangements. This might include options to work from home more often, switch to part time, or permanently follow flexible hours. HR will also provide advice about how best to support carers or those who have been bereaved, for example. Offer help in finding professional advice where this would be welcomed.

this together can help them recognize where best to put their attention. This gives them a better sense of control and they will acquire new skills in prioritizing.

- **Adjust too-difficult targets** In some jobs going the extra mile can become the norm, especially after a round of staff cuts. Remote working has also had an impact, with managers struggling to measure productivity without relying on observing people working at their desks. Three actions can help here:
 - Use weekly check-ins to set realistic targets for the week ahead.
 - Schedule regular progress updates to track whether work is running ahead or behind time/budget.
 - Collect feedback about how each person is doing from a range of stakeholders to help build the bigger picture.
- **Develop their capabilities** An upcoming project might be giving them sleepless nights because they feel ill-equipped. Invest in their development where their lack of competence is causing anxiety.
- **Help them overcome perfectionism** When I worked in air traffic control many years ago, one of my colleagues once commented, “*Air traffic controllers never have a ‘good’ day, because perfect has to be our normal.*” Accountants, pharmacists, programmers, and editors are among many jobs where precision is a day-to-day requirement. Striving to achieve the best possible standard of work in those industries is healthy professionalism. However, in most jobs there’s a clear difference between leaving little room for error and never accepting anything less than perfect. Where this is the case:
 - Help people to understand where “perfect is the enemy of good,” as Voltaire put it. Time spent on polishing tiny details on one project may be better spent on teeing up the next. Give a few practical examples of where this can be the case.
 - Explore together the difference between healthy striving, as in “*I want my work to be the best,*” and debilitating self-criticism, as in “*I must never fail*” or “*What will people think?*” Mistakes are part of the process of learning. Help your people to see them as the result of trying something new or difficult.
- **Promote time-management skills** One of the most useful ways to reduce work-related stress is to help people use their time effectively. For example, encourage your team to:

“Am I good enough?”

Yes, I am.”

—Michelle Obama

- **Arrange their schedule** to tackle the most difficult challenges when at their freshest. Perhaps as a team you could set aside two or three hours one morning each week to be meeting- and call-free.
- **Build in reasonable margins of time**, especially when making commitments to customers or clients.
- **Recognize distractions caused by other people**. Coach them in how to manage others’ expectations and how to say no constructively.
- **Be aware of distractions that they cause for themselves**, such as having their cell phone within eyesight when they’re trying to concentrate.
- **Create clear boundaries** between work and home by using their commute to wind down from work and avoiding working at weekends.

Following up

Whether the issue is work-related or not, keep in contact and follow up sooner rather than later to see how things are going. If people are absent for a significant amount of time, don’t forget to pass on information that will help them to stay in the loop. Once they return, talk through what support they might need, help them to get back up to speed, and maybe arrange a team event to reintegrate them as quickly as possible.

Maintaining a healthy work culture for your whole team

Your day-to-day approach can make a significant difference to your team’s ability to weather stress. Useful actions are to:

- **Treat discussions about wellbeing as the norm** De-stigmatize the topic by approaching conversations about mental health with the same openness as conversations about physical health. For example, at team meetings ask people what support they need to cope with pressures they’re facing.
- **Help people to “worry well”** Worry is a natural and often helpful response to problems, but it has to be constructive and energizing. The frequent assumption that the worst will happen—catastrophizing—rarely helps and more often is debilitating. Telling ourselves “*They will hate me*” or “*This is bound to fail*” isn’t healthy.



Good worry

- Can change things
- Solves problems
- Is linear
- Takes a cool, realistic look
- Works as constructive impatience



Bad worry

- Can't change things
- Is habitual
- Goes around in circles
- Catastrophizes
- Becomes destructive rumination

- **Help people to take a healthy perspective** Mistakes can feel overwhelming, but it often helps to reframe them. For example:
 - What will this look like ten years from now?
 - What would you tell your best friend if they made the same mistake?
 - What mantra might help, such as, “Kites rise against the wind”?
 - How bad was it *really*?

The humorous replies that singer James Blunt gives to Twitter trolls show how a different perspective can help to defuse a potentially upsetting comment. Here are a couple of examples (his replies are in green):

“James Blunt just has an annoying face and highly irritating voice”

“And no mortgage.”

“James Blunt has got a new album out. Is there anything else that can go wrong?”

“Yes. He could start tweeting you.”

- **Foster good team relationships** Strong friendships are an important

buffer against stress. Poor relationships, on the other hand, mean that this support is absent and, worse still, can lead to grievances. Think about ways that you can help build team spirit (see p.148).

- **Celebrate progress** Set a great example by taking time out to recognize achievements. Arrange that pizza. Send that note to say thank you.
- **Build resilience** The workplace isn't always a fairytale setting, but as author Sarah Ban Breathnach writes, "Always remember, it's simply not an adventure worth telling if there aren't any dragons." Help people to understand that resilience is not about everything turning out OK. Resilience is about being OK no matter how things turn out. Expecting, facing, and then learning from difficult professional situations is vital if they are to build mental toughness. One of the best ways to do this is to practice one manageable but stretching step at a time, reflect on it, then have another go, a process known as "graduated exposure." This way, they can break a seemingly insurmountable situation into smaller pieces.

Final thought

Managers can't easily help others through stress if they are suffering from it themselves. Taking care of yourself is every bit as important as taking care of your team. As researcher Brené Brown puts it:

"Somehow, we've come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we're very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It's as if we've divided the world into 'those who offer help' and 'those who need help.' The truth is that we are both."

Here are five tips that can help when you're feeling under pressure:

- **Identify your stress triggers** Understanding *what* hijacks you will help you to know where you need to build coping strategies. Then...
- **Develop coping strategies** These might include learning how to reframe situations, studying mindfulness techniques, and growing your skills in areas such as conflict management, delegation, and—of course—performance conversations. Even something as simple as making up your own mantra may help.
- **Decide what you can let go** It's almost inevitable that there will be

more on your plate than you can process to your entire satisfaction. Sometimes good enough is good enough.

- **Ask for help** You don't have to do everything yourself, and besides, your team might relish the chance to take on more responsibility.
 - **Take time out** Pulling on your walking boots / running shoes, meeting with friends, listening to music, and booking a long weekend off—whether now or by planning ahead—can all help to reduce stress.
-

Extra conversation: A personal hygiene issue

I've added this conversation because it comes up so often in workshops as "the worst conversation *ever*." So, here's an example from a former colleague that's always stayed with me.

"As the summer arrived, one of my team began to smell bad. It wasn't too strong at the start of the day, but after a few hours the odor reached the whole office and it was hard to concentrate. I opened the windows and lowered the office air-con, but it didn't help much, and I knew that someone (i.e. me) had to tell him. The worst part was that he was a really nice person and I didn't want to upset him.

After a couple of weeks, I couldn't wait any longer. I read every bit of advice I could find and steeled myself to say something. We had a one-to-one meeting in a closed office coming up, so this really had to be the moment. We talked through the agenda, and then I asked him if we had covered everything. He said yes, everything was fine.

I could feel my heart speeding up, but as casually as I could I said, 'I have one more thing. Just to let you know that you have mild body odor and it would be great if you took care of it.'

He looked at me, and after a moment he simply said, 'Thanks for telling me. I know I sweat a bit. I'll get it sorted.'

And much to my relief, he did. Each morning and lunchtime he would use the office showers, and the only smell from then on was of antiperspirant."

You'd expect someone being told about a personal issue to be taken aback or hurt. However, once they know about it and have time to recover their composure, they often take action. They may even ask you to let them know whether they have been successful.

Here are a few of the tips from this example in case you're faced with a similar situation:

Do:

- ✓ Find a private moment, ideally tagged onto the end of a routine discussion.
- ✓ Show empathy with the words you use. We're all human.
- ✓ Talk to the person as your equal to avoid sounding condescending.
- ✓ Keep the message simple, calm, and matter-of-fact, much as if you were reordering stationery supplies.

Don't:

- × Don't talk to others about it.
- × Don't say any of the following:
 - "I consider you a friend, so I'm going to be honest with you..."*
 - "This is a bit sensitive..."*
 - "Other people have also noticed..."*
 - "You could have a medical problem..."*



Here are two examples of simple and considerate wording you can adapt:

Body odor:

"I hope you don't mind my mentioning it, but by the end of the day it can get very hot here and your deodorant seems to have stopped working recently. I thought you probably didn't know, and wondered if it might be worth trying a new one."

Bad breath:

"I hope you don't mind my mentioning this, but I noticed that your breath can be quite strong now and again. I know when it's my own breath that it's almost impossible to spot this myself. I thought you'd probably like to know, so that you can grab some mouthwash."

"What if there's no change?"

In the most extreme cases where there is no change, hold a second conversation. Simply say, *"I hope that it's helpful to know that your [body odor] is still noticeable, in case it would be useful to talk to someone about this."*



What if a tough conversation doesn't work?

In several of the conversations covered in this chapter we've seen how essential it is for the person to adapt their behavior in order to meet the needs of the role. However, people might still struggle despite being given comprehensive support. Here are two main reasons why:

- **A lack of fit with the role** Not all capabilities can be developed. In other instances, organizations may not have the capacity to support that development. While coaching can often be transformative—or a performance improvement plan in serious cases—its effectiveness also relies on the person's aptitude and attitude. Besides, not everyone wants to *be* developed. If people aren't motivated by the type of work they're doing, it's hard for them to put their energy into changing their behavior.
- **A lack of fit with the culture** Each organization has its idiosyncrasies and sometimes they don't align with a person's capabilities or preferred approach. In rare circumstances, people will be emotionally unsettled in an organization whose purpose or philosophy is at odds with their own. They may be able to tolerate the environment for a while, but in the end it's likely to take more effort than they're prepared to give.

Whatever the lack of fit, check with your HR team about the best way to support the team member. You could investigate whether a position that's more suitable to their aptitude or attitude is available. In some instances, it might be possible to reconfigure the original role to suit the person's strengths.

If opportunities can't be found, or if continuing with the person isn't in the best interests of the organization, it's probable that you will need to discuss their departure. Help people to consider where they *can* be a contender and what sort of role or organization might be a better fit for them. In the end, the process will depend on your local labor laws, but in every instance you have a duty of care to make sure their exit is respectful, transparent, and compassionate.

Additional resources

The following resource can be downloaded from www.oilintheengine.com/resources

- **How to Receive Feedback** Coach your people in how to receive feedback from colleagues, even when they disagree with it.
- **Skills for Calibration Meetings** How to present the business case for your team member during calibration / moderation meetings.



Suggested further reading

“Why incompetent people think they’re amazing—David Dunning,” TED-Ed, <https://bit.ly/3hy9irO>. An animated presentation explaining how people frequently overestimate their abilities.

“Change blindness,” Harvard University of Politics, <https://bit.ly/3keisSV>. Video clip showing how easy it is to miss what’s in front of us.

“How language shapes the way we think” by Lera Boroditsky, TED Women 2017 <https://bit.ly/2UY65jv>. An engaging talk that examines why we think the way we do, including how we react to mistakes at work.

Making a major mistake

Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success by Matthew Syed, John Murray, 2015. A superb book which draws on a vast array of real-world examples to explain why we need to learn from our mistakes.

“Overloaded circuits: Why smart people underperform” by Edward M. Hallowell, *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005. Explores how brain overload or attention deficit trait can affect a leader’s performance and how to control it.

The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error by Sidney Dekker, CRC Press, 2017. Explores how to think differently about human error at work, including the trade-offs between safety and other pressures.

“Strategies for learning from failure” by Amy C. Edmondson, *Harvard Business Review*, April 2011. Article examining what causes