



HELPING MANAGERS AND LEADERS **PREPARE** FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Peter Young,
OCM Associate Coach-Mentor

Of the many topics managers and leaders bring to coaching, one of the most frequent I encounter is “how do I handle this difficult conversation with a work colleague without damaging our relationship?” And while many have a theoretical understanding of what is needed, it is within the coaching dialogue that we unearth the more precise aspects of their speech that will otherwise sabotage their intended conversation.

Over years of conducting such coaching conversations, the six areas below have emerged as the most commonly occurring features of speech where a few simple changes can bring about dramatically different outcomes. Each feature represents a different way in which the client’s language gets subtly misaligned with their best intention for their difficult conversation. Each provides an example of how unhelpful unconscious attitudes get reflected in speech and behaviour. By bringing attention to these misalignments and by conducting simple experiments with the client’s language, it is common for them to start feeling more confident and authentic; for them to feel they are bringing more of what is true and important to them, whilst experiencing greater openness to the other, thus generating improved outcomes both in the work and in their relationships.

FROM EMOTION-LADEN TO EMOTION-EXPRESSED

Many of us have learned not to express our feelings, and indeed for much of the time we are not even conscious of them. Instead, emotions leak out in tone of voice and body language in ways which are unhelpful. A great example of the power of recognising and expressing emotion is described by Matthew Syed in *Black Box Thinking*. Several major aviation disasters might have been averted had the concerned co-pilot felt free to express his emotion. Instead, and this is encountered also in coaching conversations, the individual leaks their concern in the form of a question, such as “do you think we should?” The concern gets lost, along with an implicit invitation for the senior party to ‘know best’, and thus the real message doesn’t get across. In aviation, and now increasingly in medicine too, the junior party is encouraged to use a phrase such as “I feel concerned”. The directness of this approach brings gravity and demands appropriate attention.

FROM MINIMISING TO ESTABLISHING IMPORTANCE

Once the uncomfortable emotion is felt and labelled as above (concern, frustration, anger, etc.), this can lead to real clarity about what it is that feels threatened and that needs to be given importance in the conversation. For example, a leader’s annoyance with poor quality work may lead to an understanding of the importance in the leader’s mind of protecting reputation. Or irritation with a clockwatching colleague may lead to an understanding of the value placed on team members having each others’ backs. By being able to state what is important to you, and then using this to frame the conversation really grabs attention. Contrast an opening statement of “This is important. We need to talk about teamwork” with the minimising that often characterises such conversations, such as “would you mind giving me a few moments; it’s just a little thing”

FROM USING A GENERALISED 'WE' OR 'YOU' TO A STRONG PERSONAL 'I'

A common consequence of feeling somewhat child-like or 'one-down' in relationships at work is the tendency to avoid the demand of really claiming our thoughts, feelings and wishes as our own. So the word 'I' gets lost, and instead a generalised 'we' or 'you' gets used. Instead of bearing the weight of our thoughts with a clear "I think ..." or "My opinion here is ..." the burden of ownership gets diluted with a mushy "Perhaps we should think about ..." Of course the other party is thus unconsciously invited to ignore, disagree or dismiss.

FROM IMPLIED REQUESTS TO MAKING CONCRETE EXPLICIT REQUESTS

A further impact of feeling child-like is the hope that by raising an issue, however subtly, the other party will know exactly what to do. After all, wasn't there a time in life when our parents were omnipotent in our eyes, capable of anything, which is perhaps what we unconsciously still wish for from our superiors?! – The result is that we fail to make clear and concrete requests and the other party is left to think, "what do they want me to do?" Indeed, this is usually the first thing in the person's mind when we start speaking. It's important to note that wishes are usually different from requests, but in individuals' minds they are commonly blurred. Wishes for example may be to prevent a bad thing happening such as, "I need to know that production continues to function safely" whereas requests will be for a concrete action such as "You need to complete this check list before the start of every new production run."

FROM ASKING QUESTIONS TO MAKING STATEMENTS

As indicated in a number of the examples above, when lacking confidence we often couch our language in questions rather than taking the weight and ownership that statements demand of us. So clients will often say "Do you think ..." when it is not really a question at all! What they really mean is "I think ..."

FROM AROUSING SUSPICION WITH AVOIDANT OPENINGS TO CLEARLY FRAMING INTENTION

People often start their 'difficult conversations' in a long-winded and avoidant way with comments or questions such as "How do you think things are going?". Such openings naturally arouse suspicion in the listener along the lines of 'something is coming and it doesn't sound good!' which is both damaging to trust and to receptivity to the message. Instead, by framing the conversation and making intentions crystal clear at the outset, trust and confidence are built, even in the midst of the discomfort. "I need to talk to you about safety; there is an important issue to be addressed." when it is not really a question at all! What they really mean is "I think ..."

IN CONCLUSION, THE FOLLOWING ARE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF APPLYING THESE INSIGHTS IN A COACHING SETTING:

First, there of course are many times and places where the language traits presented above as misaligned are entirely appropriate, aligned and useful. Indeed clients may point this out, sometimes even defending against making changes. There is for example always a 'we' as well as an 'I', and of course there are places where we need to ask questions rather than make statements! Our job however is to bring them back to their wise intentions, and to help them identify where they are acting in keeping with these, and where simply out of habit.

Second, it's often the case that by investigating just one or two of the above misalignments, this is enough to shift the entire tone of the conversation. As coach I tend to listen out for the most commonly occurring one, or the one that seems to hold with it the greatest limitations on the client's success.

Third, I invite the client to play with the change right now, and to experience what it's like to do so. To notice how it feels different for them to say it in different ways, to consider what makes it difficult for them perhaps, and then to ask how they will support themselves to sustain the change outside the coaching room.

Contact us to find out more about how we can support you and your team.