

Knowing + Doing = Being



Know+Do publishes monthly *think papers* for its subscribers and clients highlighting different issues that promote the philosophy of '**knowing+doing=being**'. Our approach is: if you cannot define where you want to **BE**, how can you **KNOW** your plans are correct and what you are **DOING** will help you reach your goal? This is the fourth paper of our fourth series covering 'Difficult Conversations Made Easier'.

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What's The Easiest Thing To Do?

Think Paper No 4. Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier

Welcome to the fourth series of our popular *Think Papers*. The papers have been designed to capture our company values¹, including sharing and simplicity. We aim to take topical areas of knowledge and share our thoughts and experiences of these in an accessible way to encourage you to take action. We welcome your feedback about how the Think Papers have helped you or your teams.

This series – Difficult Conversations Made Easier – is focussing upon practical support to managers and leaders. The pressure on modern workforces is to achieve more each year with less resources. Therefore, how people are managed, motivated and supported is crucial to improving performance in companies of all sizes, stages and industries.

The previous Think Paper² covered how to diffuse personality clashes within the workplace. The pace and speed of change can seem overwhelming at the moment. One manager recently compared it to being knocked over by a wave, feeling disorientated and scrambling to get back up only to be met by another crashing wave, and this repeating almost endlessly. In short, it's very tiring and difficult to get your bearings.

At a recent presentation we delivered at a housing association conference we met with plenty of staff – both at management and operational levels - who could empathise with the description of crashing waves. Managers in particular found it increasingly difficult to prepare and implement change only to find that outside circumstances meant additional change was needed on top of any already planned change. Staff can find this confusing and sometimes this is wrongly (or indeed rightly) perceived that managers don't seem to know what they are doing. Many managers of course, are trying to shield staff from too much information about the levels of uncertainty and

¹ <http://knowanddo.com/about-us/values>

² Diffusing Personality Clashes. Think Paper No. 3; Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier
<http://knowanddo.com/archives/2284>

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change. The truth is that often they may not be able to provide answers anyway, as the market conditions are uncertain and funders/customers are reticent to commit until the last minute.

There is also a danger that managers get stuck in a more 'directive approach' to managing. This can feel disempowering to staff if overdone. Regular readers will remember that one of our earlier series of Think Papers³ looked at the two different styles of directive and coaching management. Neither approach is better than the other per se, but both are context specific. If there is an emergency, such as a fire, it's useful to have someone direct staff to safety. The analogy is deliberately chosen as many managers are stuck in fire fighting mode and convinced that when they get through the next change they can take a more coaching approach; only to have another fire start!

In relation to the scale and speed of change, the directive approach may not offer the best options long-term for an engaged, flexible and committed workforce. It can be difficult to get staff to be able to be more self-directed. This is further compounded by the serious nature of the implications of change. Staff positions are being scaled back, hours reduced and budgets cut. Staff can be wary of taking the initiative and many are almost demanding to be micro-managed to avoid making mistakes. This can also be the result of managers being stuck in thinking, "I know how; I'll tell you and you follow the instruction."

The question then remains how managers can engage with staff in a non-threatening, empowering way that helps to instigate a plan for action? Is it possible to push from a, "You know how; I'll ask you and you can decide" perspective? The simple answer is yes. However, it requires you to present a method of engagement that both encourages and offers a non-threatening and non-traditional perspective. We like to use the following format that involves asking four questions that all begin with "What's the?"

- I. **What's the easiest thing to?**
- II. **What's the funnest thing to do?**
- III. **What's the hardest thing to do?**
- IV. **What's the first thing you could do?**

The thinking behind this format is to allow ideas to be generated rapidly and not in a traditional project methodology approach. We normally advocate that the four squares are drawn out on a flipchart (see fig 1) and that individual staff or teams are then asked to sketch a similar format on a blank A4 sheet and jot some words down next to each question. Crucially the ideas must be generated from the perspective of the individual first and foremost.

Many times the issue that the individual is wrestling with is seemingly intractable and they can find it difficult to know where to begin. We've experienced this with coaching clients where they might typically say, "I can't do anything," or, "nothing I do makes any difference." Both of these are absolute statements that can easily be reversed by throwing back a challenge and question over the terms 'anything' or 'nothing'. Most times clients quickly realise that there is always something they can do, no matter how small.

As the Chinese philosopher, Lao-tzu said "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." The "What's the..?" quadrant provides a simple process to engage with the issue in a way that

³ Coaching for Change. Think Paper No. 2; Series 2: Managing Change <http://knowanddo.com/archives/1102>

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generates ideas and does not over commit an individual to a specified action. It also enables them to interact with the issue immediately and in a way that seems non-threatening.

The different questions provide a range of viewpoints or perspectives that the individual has to access. Ideas should be generated in a non-judgemental way by allowing individuals to jot down their thoughts quickly without filtering them. When handling what can be a difficult issue individuals can get stuck and over complicate their approaches to dealing with the issue. This format encourages a more creative approach to finding solutions and ultimately taking action.

So the question “*What’s the easiest thing to do?*” enables someone to put down the simplest step they could take thus providing the important first step of the journey. “*What’s the funnest thing to do?*” considers a basic human need – we respond well to things we enjoy. “*What’s the hardest thing to do?*” recognises the reality of some issues and brings openness to the discussions. “*What’s the first thing you could do?*” provides a platform to start tackling the issue; to take the knowledge you have from the exercise and apply it – to ‘KNOW and DO’!

Feedback from participants who’ve used the process suggests that sketching the quadrant out also makes it feel a little less formal and easier to engage with. Done quickly, it can also help identify issues that individuals were unaware of as they don’t dwell on the big stuff but shoot some quick thoughts down. The language is quite deliberate in that it doesn’t commit the individual to deliver anything they write down. It does however provide a foundation from which they can begin to formulate a plan of action. You can always add a further question at the end – ***What will you do now?***

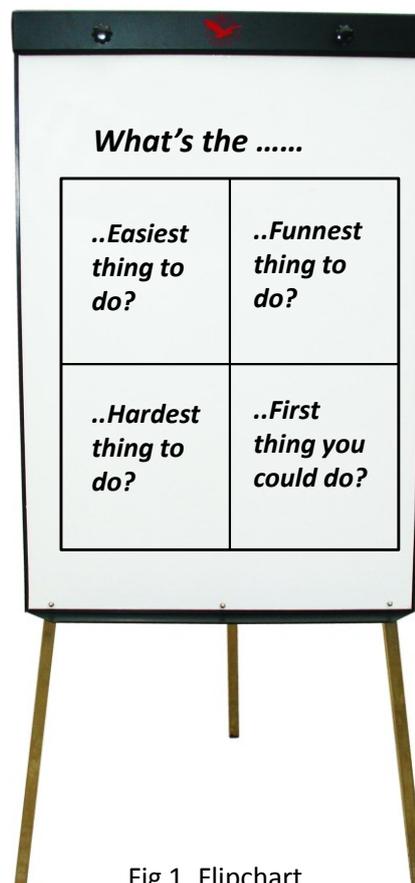


Fig 1. Flipchart

Future Think Papers will help the reader expand on these communication techniques to improve the motivation and management of others. To help managers, Know+Do offer in-house training on a range of management issues. We also have expert performance coaches available to support leaders in business. For more information or to book a masterclass please contact us on info@knowanddo.com or call (0161) 280 4567.

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