

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 first paper of our fourth series covering 'Difficult Conversations Made Easier'.

For more information on *Know+Do's* services, solutions and resources view our website www.knowanddo.com or contact info@knowanddo.com / (0161) 280 4567

Approaching Difficult Conversations

Think Paper No 1. 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 and encourage you to take action using them.

Our last series of *Think Papers*² introduced the **3Ps** concept of *Purpose, Process* and *Payoff*. We covered how this fundamental framework could be used to help focus attention on the main issues within a workplace from an overall business strategy through to planning a meeting.

This fourth series is based on a recurring need we have identified working with our clients over the last 12 months. These are uncertain times and the global economic slowdown is no longer just a backdrop in the media. It's a reality being felt in every organisation, in every team. The path ahead is less clear than before, tension is up and uncertainty is rife. Surviving and not necessarily thriving, seems to be a dominant theme.

The relentless pace of change, increased workloads and expectations have made the workplace a more challenging environment in all industries. Simply keeping your head down and working harder won't change anything. This all means that communication has become increasingly important within organisations. For managers *difficult conversations* are a fact of life in any workplace, whether they involve delivering difficult feedback, communicating change or discussing behavioural issues, or more everyday problems such as disagreeing with a superior, responding to bad behaviour or dealing with those coming into work late.

A report into difficult conversations at work³ highlighted that many middle managers, were finding themselves under increasing pressure as they were being tasked with breaking bad news to others whilst being unconfident in their own job security. The report also stated "...it is the job of managers

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

² <http://knowanddo.com/archives/1513>

³ http://lcp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Difficult_conversations_at_work_survey_results_and_guide.pdf

Knowing + Doing = Being



to be responsible and accountable to their direct reports and own line managers, regardless of how difficult the conversations; developing managers who are able to tackle these head on is essential if businesses want to maintain employee engagement and productivity in tough times.”



We recently ran a Difficult Conversations masterclass⁴ in Manchester which sold out weeks before the event. We surveyed attendees prior to the masterclass and over 60% said that they had experienced an increase in the last 12 months in the number of difficult conversations in their workplace. Attendees were mainly looking for more confidence and techniques to frame and begin difficult conversations. Most answers around the underlying cause of difficult conversations could be grouped under recent changes to contracts or services and the individual impact of this.

So what exactly is a ‘difficult conversation’? There are a variety of definitions but essentially a difficult conversation is anything *you* find it hard to talk about. This means that for different managers difficult conversations may vary widely. Another perspective is offered in the best-selling book *Crucial Conversations*⁵ where the authors described such conversations as involving some or all of the following: *Opposing Opinions* and/or *Strong Emotions* and/or *High Stakes*.

There are only really three options to having a difficult conversation people either:

- i. **Avoid them**
- ii. **Tackle them badly, or,**
- iii. **Handle them well**

Think back to some of the difficult conversations you’ve needed to, or have had, recently and jot up to 3 of these down in the following table. Be honest with yourself - have you avoided having the right conversation; did you fudge around the issue or just go procedural; or did you plan and execute as envisaged?

Difficult Conversation Topic	Person/s	Outcome <i>(avoided/handled badly/handled well)</i>

Table 1. Recent difficult conversations reminder

So what helps you to begin to tackle difficult conversations? First and foremost we would suggest that you change your perception and language **to begin to think about approaching the right conversation as opposed to having difficult conversations.**

⁴ <http://knowanddo.com/archives/2023>

⁵ Patterson et al, 2012. *Crucial Conversations* 2nd Ed. McGraw-Hill

Knowing + Doing = Being



The following four step process helps to provide a simple framework to approach a conversation.

1st. Face the problem

- Am I the right person? Is it your problem? Are you the person responsible for the issue or the member of staff?
- The 'now or never' moment. You tend to know this instinctively, so act ASAP. A problem left festers. Build a culture of conversation and let others know you're open to listening.
- It's difficult, but why? Because the situation might be challenging for you. You may not have experienced it previously. You may not have handled it well before. The person is known to be argumentative or emotional.
- Recognise your own needs. Ask for support or additional training if needed.

2nd. Prepare

- Establish the facts; do your homework. Is the issue based on opinion or fact?
- Reflect on what you know about the individual; ask them questions to build your understanding.
- Check your organisational policies; be clear and consistent in their application.
- Do you need to brief anyone else before the meeting such as HR or your line manager? This can help if a person seeks to escalate the issue.
- Plan the meeting; where's the best location and/or time, to have the right conversation?
- What's the outcome you are after? What would work for you; remember to be open to the other person's view though.
- Get support if needed; do you need to ask for advice or speak to a peer before having the conversation?

3rd. Remember your skills

- Get Skilled. The theory helps but it's no substitute for the practice. The so called 'soft skills' you need to rely on are critical to your role as a manager in the current unsettled funding climate.
- Communication skills, negotiation skills, and self-belief/control are some of the core skills needed.

4th. Set, state, ask, agree

- Set the right tone - it's not a chat; let the other person understand the context.
- State the issue clearly and provide any evidence to help make your point. Be careful not to accuse and judge before the next step;
- Ask for an explanation; this must be a genuine offer. Trust may need to be built. Actively listen to any explanation – you may be surprised.
- Agree a way forward and let the person know how you intend to record the conversation and any next steps.

Knowing + Doing = Being



Preparing the right conversation takes time, but most managers would agree this time is well spent compared to the fallout from an ill-prepared approach. The latter can allow judgement to creep in as we present our view of what's happened, or what we believe the other person should be doing, without asking for an explanation. This is win-lose thinking and not received well on the whole.

It doesn't matter how much you practice, difficult conversations should always challenge you. You can't and won't have the perfect conversation each time you want to tackle a significant issue. Human interaction will always have an emotional element attached to it. Effective practice can help you to reduce but not eliminate fear and anxiety, and make having the right conversation more manageable. Being realistic means you are more likely to tackle the right conversation at the right time, with the right person.

Having a systematic approach, being open to learning and having a process of reflection will help to ensure that you continue to develop your skills and knowledge. Such skills are likely to remain in high demand to support staff and colleagues in a continued culture of significant business change over the next few years.

*"While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business, a marriage, or a life, **any single conversation can.**"* Susan Scott

The need for managers to be able to have the right conversations with staff has never been higher. Times might be tough, but the right conversation at the right time helps to ensure that employees are engaged and appraised realistically. Organisations with more engaged employees are more likely to be thriving than just surviving.

To help managers have the right conversations, *Know+Do* are proud to offer the **Difficult Conversations Made Easier** masterclass that can provide prompt, practical and versatile tools to improve the experience and outcome of difficult conversations with staff. This can be booked in-house for a group of staff or places can be reserved on our open events programme – see <http://knowanddo.com/services/difficult-conversations>

By attending this masterclass your managers and staff will gain:

- Increased confidence in addressing difficult conversations with individual staff and teams
- New techniques to improve their ability to control and resolve tough issues
- Models that help them and their colleagues others have better conversations

For more information or to book a masterclass please contact us on info@knowanddo.com or call (0161) 280 4567

Author: Andrew Ramwell [[🐦](#) @rammers02]