

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 that what you are **DOING** will help you to reach your goal? This is the third paper of our fourth series covering 'Difficult Conversations Made Easier'.

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Diffusing Personality Clashes

Think Paper No 3. Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier

In the last Think Paper¹ we examined communication styles and how to use perspectives to understand and manage others well. In this edition of the 'Difficult Conversation Made Easier' series we address a common business problem: Personality clashes.

Difference between personalities is a common issue for managers. Just yesterday I was asked for ideas on how to solve a problem between two different types of personalities in an office. We all know the effects of such experiences: wasted time dealing with circular arguments, emotional exhaustion from the fall-out of the clash, increased paranoia about other people's motives, a lack of trust and morale, and more. All of this internal, unproductive activity ultimately costs any business – whether a large corporate, a small business, a local charity or a public agency – money.

Before we delve into ideas and approaches we need to understand what we mean by the term 'personality clash'. Cambridge's Online Dictionary defines it as:

"...a situation in which two or more people have very different characters and are unable to have a good relationship with each other"

So a personality clash is an issue between two or more people that has its root in their characters and the way they communicate. This is important because often we focus on the context that brought the clash out into the open, i.e. two team members arguing over who has priority when booking a meeting room can often lead to debates about booking processes, meeting room space, record keeping, IT systems, etc. whereas the cause might be more fundamental. Those two people may be arguing because they have very different styles of communication, opposing ways of problem solving, or maybe even just contrasting

¹ Communicating Clearly. Think Paper No 2. Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier <http://knowanddo.com/archives/2256>

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understanding of manners. As managers we tend to focus on the things we can control - processes, systems, resources are all within our control; the personalities of others are not! How a manager handles such issues are crucial. Dilbert (see figure 1 below) offers an opinion on how not to approach personality problems at work!



Fig. 1: Dilbert's take on 'good' line management! See more @ www.dilbert.com

I was once involved in a business where the CEO and Chairman had a significant personality clash. It came to light through a staff complaint but in reality it had been festering for years. These two people communicated differently – one was forthright and often outspoken; the other was quieter, more reserved in public meetings. When the complaint appeared it provided a focus for airing frustrations. As the matter progressed it created a divide in the company – people were seen as 'for' one person and 'against' the other. Eventually it cost the company a significant sum of money, a huge amount of time and energy plus several resignations. All of it may have been avoidable if the two people had faced their personality clash early on, by creating a structure to manage and mitigate its dangers.

Some management approaches might respond to such situations with the attitude of "get on with it". They do not mind about personality clashes provided the job is done on time, done well or within budget. In the modern working environment we know businesses of all sectors are running to tight margins, with limited resources. Wasting money is not an option. More importantly, wasting people is worse. For instance, the Health and Safety Executive found that a total of 10.4 million days were lost in 2011/12 to stress, depression or anxiety - more than for any other reason.²

So how can we deal with personality clashes in the workplace and prevent them from damaging our business? ACAS notes that managing conflict between individuals often involves a series of escalating choices of intervention³:

- i. Having a quiet word
- ii. Investigating the problem informally
- iii. Using internal procedures
- iv. Using a skilled mediator

² Health and Safety Executive Annual Statistics Report 2011/12

³ Managing Conflict at Work, ACAS, December 2009 <http://bit.ly/GCNFWB>

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This paper will focus on the first two steps suggested above – having a quiet word and investigating a problem informally. These are approaches that can occur frequently, and for little cost, in the work place.

In a previous Think Paper⁴ we demonstrated the value of the coaching approach to managing others. This style of management advocates choosing the time when it is more productive to be non-directive rather than directive. In informal conversations this can be a useful tool in the manager's repertoire. For instance if a manager asks to talk to a colleague they've noticed is having repeatedly fractious conversations with team members, a directive approach may stoke the frustrations. Saying 'why aren't you being more positive?' forces the colleague to reply with a defensive answer. However, asking a question in a coaching tone could open up a discussion about the real issue, e.g. 'How have you found working with your team this week?'

The way in which informal conversation is conducted by a manager can dictate whether the personality clash is heightened or reduced. One common approach *Know+Do* have noticed that gets great returns is the art of listening well. Few people realise that conversations with colleagues can often be disjointed and more like mutually related statements. Managers who instigate conversations about a personality clash need to heighten their listening skills. To be attuned to the style, tone, pace and subject enhances with the effectiveness of the interaction.

Even in a conversation between two people a whole raft of different issues, thoughts, expectations and assessment are being processed (see 'Communicating Clearly'⁵). If for example, the manager is nervous they may be so focused on what they say, they do not fully understand what the other person is communicating. Add into the mix the pressures of work, perhaps a lack of appropriate space to hold the conversation (i.e. background noise, interruptions by people, phones and email, etc.) and the informal chat can re-enforce entrenched views or even escalate a problem.⁶

Ultimately, the best way for a manager to get better at tackling such issues as personality clashes in the workplace is to do it. Any new manager will make mistakes (many older ones still do!) but "craft comes from graft" and this topic is the same. However, listening skills can be honed and practiced away from stressful circumstances. If a manager improves their ability to listen, it will free space in their workplace conversations to focus on the root causes of a personality clash.

To try out your listening skills find another person whom you trust and feel comfortable with. Sit facing them and complete this 4-step exercise:

⁴ Coaching for Change. Think Paper No. 2; Series 2: Managing Change <http://knowanddo.com/archives/1102>

⁵ Communicating Clearly. Think Paper No 2. Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier <http://knowanddo.com/archives/2256>

⁶ A good resource for any manager to have to hand for ideas and practical prompts is the *Tackling Difficult Conversations Pocketbook* by Peter English

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Step 1 - Label each person A or B. Person A will speak first, Person B will listen.

Step 2 - Person A may speak for a maximum of 2 minutes on any subject they wish Person B to understand. Person B cannot take notes and must not interrupt; simply listen.

Step 3 - After listening, Person B now has their own two minutes to reflect back what they have understood Person A said to them. Person A cannot interrupt or write notes, they must listen.

Step 4 - Person A now has two minutes to respond, sharing if they think Person B has understood the issue and adding any detail. Person B must again listen only.

This pattern of explaining and then reflecting is repeated until Person A is fully satisfied that Person B understands the issue. You can then reverse the roles if you wish.

The value of this exercise is not the issue you discuss but the listening that is encouraged in both parties. Interruptions are a normal fact of human conversation but in delicate situations one party's opinion can easily be lost and the flow of thought disrupted.

The exercise helps attune our ears and minds to listening; to giving the other person space to speak. This skill can then be used with colleagues experiencing a personality clash.

Remember, we identified above that the outward issue for the clash is often only the symptom not the cause. To discover the source the manager will have to question, reflect, analyse, clarify and assess. Often by giving other people space to speak we give them permission to relax and share more; it builds trust and can increase understanding. These attitudes reduce disagreements and build harmony in a team.

Know+Do can provide practical coaching and training interventions that build communication skills within managers quickly and provide lasting techniques they can use in the workplace. **In November 2013 we have two half day masterclasses in Manchester which are now open for bookings. To find out more and claim a reader's discount visit our Eventbrite webpage at <http://bit.ly/1a6lhLK>**

- **Recruiting and Retaining Staff Well, 6th November 2013** [discount code: RRW113]
- **Difficult Conversations Made Easier, 19th November 2013** [discount code: DC113]

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