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Daily Briefing

4 steps compassionate leaders take before a tough conversation

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Strong leadership requires difficult conversations that push you out of your comfort zone, writes Joseph Grenny, a social scientist for business performance, for *Harvard Business Review*.

How we confront tough conversations "predicts the magnitude of our influence, the health of our teams, the consistency of innovation, [and] the strength of customer relationships," writes Grenny, who has spent three decades studying how leaders should handle tense moments.

Nevertheless, we often avoid these conversations because we're nervous that we'll say the wrong thing. But Grenny argues that when it comes to "moments of emotional or political risk," what you say during the conversation matters less than how you prepare for it beforehand.

To ensure tough workplace conversations go smoothly, he recommends four preparation tactics:

1: Think long term

When preparing for tense conversations—such as letting someone go or providing negative feedback—we often worry about how we'll come across: What will others think of me? Will what I say create conflict?

But these short-term motives prevent you from seeing the long-term implications of avoiding difficult conversations, Grenny points out. For example, if you have a low-performing employee you know you need to let go, it's usually easier and less awkward in the short term to postpone the conversation. Yet avoiding the difficult conversation not only hurts your team's morale, but also prevents your employee from finding a job he or she can really succeed in.

To get your motives straight, Grenny recommends asking the following questions: "What do I really want? What do I really want for me? For the other person? For the relationship? For other stakeholders?"

Once you reflect on these questions, you will begin to see that having a difficult conversation now will solidify your role as an ethical and caring manager in the long term, writes Grenny.

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2: Empathize with the other person

Before tough conversations, we often tell ourselves stories about ourselves and those involved, writes Grenny. For example, if we have to let someone go, we may magnify how supportive we've been and how lazy or unmotivated the employee has been.

But when we tell ourselves a biased story, we enter the conversation defensive, angry, and hurt. We also miss an opportunity to see how we contributed to the situation and where we need to improve.

Instead, challenge the stories you tell yourself and recognize the humanity in both parties involved, Grenny recommends. You'll feel more engaged and less frustrated if you view the other person as reasonable and rational, rather than a villain. After all, "our emotions have less to do with what the other person is doing, and more to do with the story we tell ourselves about what they are doing," he writes.

3: Outline your conversation

Difficult conversations inherently involve opposing viewpoints, writes Grenny. Without the proper preparation, you'll spend the conversation in a back-and-forth argument over who's right.

To have a productive conversation, gather all the data and facts you used to come to your conclusion, suggests Grenny. And rather than beginning the conversation with your conclusion, explain the logic behind your decision and build your case in a "patient, honest, and vulnerable way," he adds.

4: Bring an open mind

"The most important attitude to bring to a crucial conversation is a blend of confidence and curiosity," writes Grenny. Though you need to be confident in the merit of your position, you should still remain open to what the other person has to say. "When you listen deeply and sincerely, others feel less of a need to resist *you* in order to be heard," he adds (Grenny, *Harvard Business Review*, 1/22).