

4 Key Questions to Ask Before Having a Hard Conversation

BY JENNIFER ABRAMS

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We all struggle with challenging conversations in the workplace. Performance reviews, teachers not meeting standards, classified staff snafus, parent calls. The conversations are awkward, difficult, and emotional. And, the conversations have to be had. If something is educationally unsound, physically unsafe, or emotionally damaging and you don't think coaching or inquiry will be the best way of communication to get the point across, you need to have a hard conversation. If you want to be effective as a leader, you need to not only have hard conversations, but to make them humane and growth producing ones as well.

Four top questions that make a difficult conversation more professional and more humane are:

Question 1: Is this a hard conversation or a clarifying conversation?

We think we have been clear. So, it makes sense that we should be able to speak up and express our concern, but warning. Take pause. Did we actually make it clear from the get go what is and isn't part of the job or task? Are the standards evident? Did the job description get reviewed and discussed? Have we revisited the group norms for how we work together? Often times we think everyone is on the same page, and yet clarification hasn't happened.

I worked with one new leader who was frustrated that the team leads at his program "weren't doing their jobs" and then discovered there was no job description. We need to be 'two feet in the present' and clarification conversations need to take place before hard conversations. Clarity before accountability.

Question 2: Have I thought about how what I want to say can be professionally stated and tied to job descriptions?

Saliva moments happen. I often made them happen. A saliva moment is when something is said too pointedly; it is too generalized and too opinionated. The other person grimaces, sucks in a breath, and saliva is heard. It is the moment of the 'too harsh' statement. When we get frustrated, we go emotional with our language. "Too" or "Very." "Always" or "Never" – adverbs that inflame. Do I know how to say

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what I want to say but in a professional way? And can it be tied to language of the job description. The standards. The expectations.

One leader said, “This teacher needs to be told she just doesn’t care and she isn’t supporting the children.” We brainstormed a more professional way to speak to the teacher. Moving away from the global and the inflammatory to a specific standard about creating an inclusive environment in the classroom and language to support that standard. Moving out of the emotional isn’t easy, but it is the more mature way to voice a concern. Know your standards and expectations, and be mindful of your language.

Question 3: If asked, ‘What do you want me to do about it?’ do I have an answer?

Many a leader has been infuriated with me because I ask them to consider responses to the question above. Haven’t we hired a professional? Doesn’t the adult we have in our employment know how to do the job? Why do we need to spoon-feed them by giving the staff responses to this question?

It is understandable to be frustrated, but at this moment in time, the person is looking for some takeaways and you want to see a different behavior. They want to get a more specific sense of what the actions should be to have you see them as effective in their role, and it is a humane and growth-producing thing to do to have a few answers at the ready that are doable. Consider the frustration one might feel when they are told they aren’t collaborating effectively and yet the person sharing this with them can’t describe one action they could take. Many times we are too broad with our suggestions. “Engage more.” “Infuse more technology.” “Be a better colleague.” Instead it is better to say, “Here are some behaviors that indicate what I mean by engagement.” “Here are some ideas of what collegiality could look like.” Being prepared with some answers is the growth-producing thing to do.

Question 4: Have I been too suggestive in my language when I actually need to be more direct?

Baby Boomers have traditionally been known for having hard conversations in very diplomatic ways. Asking folks to “consider” or telling them “just something to think about when they have time” or “just a thought to keep in mind” when what one really means is DO IT is read by some of other generations as too fuzzy or even a bit passive-aggressive. Many Boomers are just being kind in their approach and expect you to appreciate the suggestiveness of the language but still ‘get the hint.’ Not all generations read between the lines in this way. If you have an expectation, a non-negotiable, a must, a ‘this is how we do things here,’ state it clearly. It isn’t mean or too blunt to be clear in one’s expectations. Xers and Millennials will thank you and the hard conversation you won’t need to have as a result of your clarity will make you thankful too.

Becoming more ‘communicationally savvy’ and being more ‘linguistically flexible’ is stretch for many and a good reach for us all, especially with regard to having hard conversations. Working on making those

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conversations more humane and growth-producing will benefit all who learn, teach, and work in and with early childhood programs.

Jennifer Abrams is the author of Having Hard Conversations (also available as a 30-hour online course), The Multigenerational Workplace: Communicate, Collaborate & Create Community, and Hard Conversations Unpacked: the Whos, the Whens and the What Ifs. She can be reached at jennifer@jenniferabrams.com or on Twitter [@jenniferabrams](https://twitter.com/jenniferabrams).

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