

COMMUNICATION

Fostering Courageous Conversation in the Workplace



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Experts in organizational theory have built careers on their beliefs that strategy or core processes or leadership makes the essential difference in organizational success. But focus on strategy and process often leaves the most essential ingredient—human interaction—unaddressed.

Without healthy interchange, even the most brilliant strategies evaporate, procedures fail, and leadership impact erodes. The ability to foster meaningful dialogue and the willingness to engage in courageous conversation is the genetic code—the business DNA—needed to ensure productive outcomes.

Even knowing that, many people avoid saying what they really mean or discussing high-stakes issues. We tell ourselves stories about what we believe will happen, and we let those stories control our behavior and our outcomes. But what if we changed our story, and learned how to manage a tough conversation so that all participants in it would feel safe and heard, and get the outcomes they need? It's possible—even likely—when we embrace and master the art of courageous conversation.

Courageous conversations are discussions that must be held, even when those involved are uncomfortable with the subject, because critical issues must be addressed. Without the ability to discuss differences, organizations lack employee commitment, engagement, accountability and attention to results.

You'll know you are facing a courageous conversation when:

- **Opinions vary** (You think it's time for a change; your client or boss does not.)
- **Stakes are high** (A disagreement threatens a relationship; you need cooperation to implement a strategy important to the growth of your company.)
- **Emotions run strong** (People are angry, sad or afraid for their jobs; you are unhappy or resentful about how an important relationship or project is developing.)

To turn challenging conversations into safe dialogues that yield winning results:

Assess your conversations. Which conversations do you or others in your organization avoid having or handle poorly? Which conversations, if you had them or improved them, would have the greatest impact on your life or career?

Assess your patterns. When it matters most, do you find yourself (or others in your organization) behaving badly or losing control? Do you hold on to negative thoughts and opinions only to have them tumble out as sarcastic remarks or “cheap shots”? Do you or others withdraw from conversations or become vague when discussions don't go your (their) way?

Human nature primes many of us to back away from discussions we fear will hurt us, or make things worse. We use all kinds of tactics to avoid tough conversations. Sometimes, nature pushes us to beat our opponent into submission so that we “win.” But, we can win the fights, and lose much more. So what's the solution?

Create a safe environment for discussion. Create a safety net by allowing them to honestly express their opinions—without fear of judgment or reprisal—even when views are controversial or not popular. Make sure those involved trust that you have their interests at heart, care about what they want, and respect their input.

Create shared meaning. Focus your discussion on points of mutual understanding based on shared goals. Enable constructive feedback. Demonstrate commitment to outcomes, and then account for results.

To learn how to foster courageous conversations and strong teams in your organization, contact Ellen Cooperperson's Corporate Performance Consultants at 631-300-0009.