

To Tell the Truth, Part II

So, last issue's "assignment" was to have an honest and direct conversation with one of your colleagues. How did it go? What did you learn? Very quickly I learned how much leaders value talking with each other about the challenge of difficult conversations. Within an hour of mailing the newsletter, a reader sent me an email which said, "You know, I am struggling with having such a conversation with one of my direct reports and this newsletter really helped!!!!" It was great to receive this instant feedback.



As promised, **To Tell the Truth, Part II** is about the conversations that do not go well. Here are three common scenarios where, despite the best of intentions and careful planning, conversations derail.

Your colleague reacts in the totally opposite way from what you expected.

Several years ago, I worked with a woman who was exceptionally competent: managed her staff well, maintained terrific relationships with our numerous clients, always submitted paperwork on time. Her one skill gap: she was almost always negative and her usual target was me. And I was her boss! Not only did she criticize my decisions directly, but she shared her opinions with her peers and her direct reports. In the interest of getting her to stop this behavior and to understand what was going on with her, I mustered my resolve, prepared my "opening statement" in advance, took a deep breath, and initiated a discussion with her. Before the conversation, I assumed her reaction would be the usual negative one. The last thing I expected was that she would start crying! But that is what happened. She had little awareness of her critical comments and she was upset to learn that her accomplishments were overshadowed by her attitude. My learning that day: **never** assume what another person will say. Be prepared and be open to surprises.

Your colleague blames everything on you. There are three reasons for this. One, you didn't convey your expectations clearly and often enough--and at least half of the responsibility does lie with you. Two, your colleague does not take accountability for his actions and is an expert at the "**blame game**." It's never his fault and always the responsibility of someone else. Third, your colleague is a very sensitive person and cannot hear the words that you are saying. He can only feel your displeasure with him and he finds this intolerable.

In these situations, your first challenge is evaluating where the source of the problem lies--and it may be somewhere in the middle.

Your colleague immediately agrees that she is wrong and that she will do

better. When this happens, do not feel instant relief. Do not stop the conversation too quickly. Consider several possibilities. In the best of situations, you have a competent employee experiencing a bad patch who appreciates the message that she needs to get back in the game. But you may have an employee who hates conflict so she wishes to get out of your office as quickly as possible without having a substantial conversation that would reveal her displeasure with you or the situation, her lack of understanding of the assignment and/or her lack of ability to get it done. In this situation, you need to be a **detective** and determine the course of the problem. Could you have been more clear in explaining the assignment? Did she not understand the assignment? Is she overwhelmed with the work load and didn't understand this task was a high priority for you? Is something personal happening in her life that is interfering with her work? Is she in the wrong job? It is impossible to prescribe a solution without diagnosing the issue at hand. These conversations call for patience and fact-finding.

The value of these conversations, even when they are difficult and sometimes take wrong turns, is that they move the process forward. In the best of conversations, you are identifying an issue for discussion, signaling your intention for a good outcome, and proceeding with mutual respect. As you become better in managing these conversations, you will delay and obsess less and schedule these discussions more quickly. Here is the basic recipe for a conversation that will be successful for you, your colleague, and your organization:

- Select a time and place that is convenient for both of you. Allow enough time for a full discussion.
- Begin with the end in mind. What would be a successful outcome?
- Express your best intention for the meeting.
- Identify issues and give a few examples.
- Engage your colleague in a dialogue. Be curious about their view of the situation. Ask questions. Listen to your colleague. And listen to yourself.
- Commit to next steps and agree on a date for a follow-up meeting.

As Susan Scott wrote in [Fierce Conversations](#), "...there is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us, who do not pamper us or offer compromises but, instead, describe reality so simply and compellingly that the truth seems inevitable, and we cannot help but recognize it."

I welcome your feedback about this newsletter and your suggestions for future newsletters. Please send a message with your comments to me at sharondougherty@prioritycoaching.com.

-Sharon Dougherty, CEO, [Priority Coaching](#)