Karen Summers, David Morgan & Bonnie Clarke Interview
How To Handle Difficult Conversations

Karen Summers – Business Coach, Strathdee Resourcing	In the workplace there can be a number of different reasons why difficult conversations can arise and I suppose it is a bit of a broad church, but the first one would be to say bad news. So, basically anything, whether it be a change, whether that be work-related or personal, that you think will land badly with the other person. So that, like I say, covers a multitude of sins. And then perhaps more specifically, there might be things like inappropriate behaviour that people might feel that they need to tiptoe round and maybe store up that difficult conversation. And possibly inappropriate performance as well, so something where somebody's performance is just not meeting the required standard and it has got to the point where somebody actually needs to intervene and say something about that.
David Morgan – Mediation Specialist, Burness LLP	Planning a difficult conversation is of paramount importance. Probably the most important aspect of the process will be clear planning in advance of going into that meeting. It could be a daunting situation of course for managers, particularly inexperienced managers to go into, so planning with a clear objective for what the manager wishes to achieve going into that meeting, by no means pre-judging of course what the outcome may be in terms of what the individual manager is meeting with might come back and say. It is of paramount importance for that manager to prepare in advance the line of questioning and indeed I suppose, the objective, what they wish to gain from that meeting.
Bonnie Clarke – Director, Badenoch & Clark	For me the number one step is preparation. I need to make sure that I know the full situation. I'm a great believer in preparing everything if at all possible, so I investigate before I accusate and I think that that for me in preparing for a difficult conversation with anyone is the key for a successful outcome.

Karen Summers	When thinking about handling a difficult conversation, there are certain steps that you can go through. I don't want that to sound like it's a process, kind of, driven thing, because I think the first step would very much be, put yourself in the other person's shoes. So really try to think about that other person, think about what would they appreciate in terms of the way in which you deal with the conversation. If you've not done it before, perhaps you could get some support from somebody else, role play it through with somebody in advance and perhaps you take the person that you are going to be having the conversation with, you take their part and ask somebody else to be you, because that really is a way of standing in their shoes and it might just flash up something that you've not actually thought about before.
Bonnie Clarke	One of the other important things when it comes to structuring a meeting, I really like to make sure that the person who is coming to that meeting and having that difficult conversation with me is really well aware of what they're actually coming in to. I think that they ought to be prepared as well and I think it's unfair for me to just launch into a conversation without any context.
David Morgan	You do not wish to go into the meeting starting with effectively something off tangent. I think it's important to be focused upon what you wish to discuss with the individual and to remain focused on that objective. Planning in terms of that will be very important and often times what we will do in my role as an adviser, as an employment law adviser, is script the structure for a critical or a difficult conversation for a manager. And that therefore has a very clear structure to it in terms of the introduction, in terms of an explanation for the purpose of the meeting and often times the outcome.
Karen Summers	There is a simple structure that I sometimes use. You might have come across it. It's called the AID model – A I D – where the A is for action, the I is for impact and the D is for do differently. So if we take an example of using that model we might be having the conversation and I say to you, 'When your mobile phone beeps through the day actually I find that quite distracting so going forward could we agree that you put it onto silent and perhaps just check it at coffee time or over lunch break rather than continuously through the day?'
David Morgan	When it comes to tears, when it comes to an individual who cries, which is often quite likely in terms of the difficult nature of the dialogue, whether that's a dismissal situation or whether that's giving some very bad news about one's performance, I think it is very important for the manager to show empathy, to take some time to take stock and to listen frankly as well, to take some time to hear the other side and maybe even to put themselves in the shoes of the recipient of the message that they are giving.

Karen Summers	Emotions in a conversation, often people would worry about that big time in advance. I think one of the things that I would say is name it. If it happens actually talk about it, don't ignore what's going on in front of you. And, you know, maybe you could even learn from at home if that was happening in your house, you would, you'd ask a question about it. So if it was a loved one in a home setting, you know, 'What's going on here? I'm perceiving that you are behaving in this way.' So don't be afraid to do that in the workplace. I can recount a specific example actually of where somebody asked me a really powerful question in the workplace. I was actually so pent up about something I was crying in the meeting and I was mortified about it and the other person said to me, 'I can see that you feel really passionate about this', and do you know what? I found that a really, really helpful refrain for me of what was going on. So I think that's something I would recommend to other people, just to say, 'Look, I can see that you're feeling really strongly or passionate', whatever phraseology works for you, and then just say, you know, 'What do you need to happen now?' So put the ownership in their court, you know, 'Do you want a short break? Do you want to go away and just have a walk round the block?' Give them a few options.
David Morgan	I think with the best will in the world having planned for a difficult conversation it is still very important to be flexible in the process that you set out in handling the meeting because no two reactions are the same from the individual that you are meeting with. I think with that in mind I often would say to organisations, it is important to leave some room for backtracking. So in the event that the meeting does not go well or does not go the way that the manager or the business hoped, leave some room, some wriggle room if you will, to move back from some of the more difficult messages.
Bonnie Clarke	Dealing with people it's vitally important to be flexible; it is a hundred per cent about adapting your style to the audience. You've got to make sure that you are going to deal with an individual on the individual's basis. I am not going to be a cookie cutter person and just say, 'This is how I deal with this situation and that situation and the following situation.' It's got to be appropriate to that individual. So flexibility is important, I am going to make sure that I understand the individual's situation, who they are, how they are, where they are in the organisation and for me, I want to adapt my style so that the person in that situation is comfortable so that I can get the best out of this conversation.

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