

Creating Mental Breakthroughs

Uncomfortable conversations can initiate positive change

 By Marcia Reynolds

The following case study looks at how the leader initiating the conversation was able to break through well-established defense routines that were keeping her manager from making changes or handling situations in the most productive way.

Background:

The senior manager, Martin, had been transferred to the region six months prior to the conversation. He had worked successfully as a manager in three other parts of the world and had worked for the company for fifteen years. In casual conversations, Martin was warm and amusing. When asked what type of leader he thought he was, he said he was definitely a people person and attributed much of his past success to his ability to connect with people.

The problem emerged not long after Martin arrived in his new position. Performance measures were mediocre in the region. People got their work done and not much more. He described the problem as cultural. The work ethic was low. Loyalty to the company was non-existent. All they cared about was punching the clock and going to the pub before dinner.

Theme and patterns:

Confusing task management with leadership is common with even experienced, caring managers. Being a *people person* because you are approachable and an easy conversationalist is not enough. Outgoing managers often assume their direct reports will come to them with problems and will be naturally motivated to give their best efforts because they create a pleasant work environment, attempt to know something about their employees' personal lives, and they are patient when doling out goals and directions.

What's missing from this picture? Martin showed no curiosity about what his people need to feel inspired to give more time and energy to their work. Focusing only on finding ways to make it more enjoyable for people to work avoids the core of the problem – no one wants to work harder. You can't solve emotional and motivational issues by politely giving direction, bestowing praise, and knowing whose kids play soccer and whose play baseball. Nice managers can still entrench *the lieutenant and his plebes* mentality.

The pattern for this Discomfort Zone conversation starts with the manager either asking for support from his or her leader to exchange the old for new people or trying to get the leader to agree that the problem is unsolvable because of cultural or situational factors. It is possible the manager hopes the leader will provide a magical solution that will resolve the problem, but usually the manager wants acknowledgment for doing everything right in a bad situation. This is the presenting situation whether the manager is a *people person* or an *efficiency expert*. The assumption is that the people are wrong and the manager, who has tried everything, is right. If there is a solution, though the manager doubts one exists, it is external to the manager. If only the people worked harder and cared more, everything would be okay.

Challenge for the leader holding the conversation:

The desired outcome is always owned by the person in front of you, not by anyone else. The stated request was to find ways to motivate unmotivated employees. Yet the cynicism in the manager's voice reflects surety that the situation is cultural and impermeable with the current work team. Regardless if this is true or not, the leader needs to listen for the block to success as the manager tells the story. The focus of the conversation should not be on the manager's employees; it should be on the manager's blind spots. Therefore the reflection and exploration would focus on what the manager is doing, who he thinks he is in the situation in terms of his role, and what he might be doing to actually intensify, not alleviate, the resistance the workers are demonstrating. Otherwise, no solution will produce significant and long-lasting results.

Allow the person to vent to help create safety. Even if you have seen this problem a hundred times before, you need to acknowledge the disappointment and anger your manager feels. The truth about what is creating the difficulty will surface inside the complaints. Often a good dose of reflection—allowing the manager to hear his own words—will shine a light on what is wrong with his approach. Then you can address the conflict in how his current approach contradicts how he wants to be seen by his direct reports.

In this situation, as the manager described the work habits of his people, his disdain grew. The angrier he got, the more he revealed his pattern for constantly giving directions and explanations about how work should get done, which also implied that many of his conversations with his reports were focused on what people were doing wrong. He wasn't the light-hearted, praise-giving person he described himself to be.

When you sense anger and frustration, listen with your heart. When explaining the situation, the manager expressed both disappointment and frustration because his direct reports didn't appreciate what he thought he was doing for them. In turn, the hearts of his employees were hardened from neglect. The questions that emerge from listening with your heart could provide the key to what the manager needs to shift the situation.

As a result, Martin realized that his employees did not see him as a caring leader. If he wanted them to listen, he first had to listen to them. He committed to meeting with each of his team members to talk about the significance of their work and what they hoped for in their careers. He also clarified the new mindset he would use while having these conversations. **LE**

Adapted from The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations Into Breakthroughs (Berrett-Koehler, October 2014).



Dr. Marcia Reynolds works with clients around the world who seek to develop effective leaders. She understands organizational cultures, what blocks communication and innovation, and what is needed to bring people together for better results. She is the author of *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations Into Breakthroughs* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, October 2014).

