



Dear Friend,

My Hero

Think back to when you were younger. Did you ever have an older child whom you admired? Someone who, though only 1, or 3, or 5 years older than you, was your hero?

For me, it was Debbie. Just remembering her brings a smile to my face. You see Debbie was a very kind and self-assured high school senior when I was a lowly, goofy freshman. To my 14-year-old eyes, this sophisticated 17-year-old had it all together. (Okay, stop laughing; I told you I was only 14!)

What added to Debbie's luster was the way she used words. When there was conflict or confrontation, Debbie was the ultimate diplomat. This young woman could negotiate peace masterfully. I've got to admit, there was a mischievous side to her too. Debbie could tell someone off, and leave 'em smiling, only to have the person realize what she'd been called long after Debbie was safely off the scene. That...was...cool!

I got a Christmas card from Debbie this year, and it brought to mind fond memories of my youthful heroine and the communication lessons I learned from her. It also got me thinking about the work or personal situations we all face daily that prompt hard-to-face interactions.

So, let's bite the bullet and talk about difficult conversations. In this month's **EA Insights**, we'll address how to initiate and hold those conversations. Next month, we'll look at how to handle the conversation when you're on the receiving end.

I hope you find this information helpful as you seek not only to stay sane but also to improve results for yourself and the organizations of which you are a part!

All the best,

June

June Melvin Mickens
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"Quotes"

"The best way to escape from your problem is to solve it."

~Dr. Robert Anthony

"The better you relate the more you will make."

~Dan Brent Burt

"Two men talk and one may hear, but three cannot take part in a conversation of the most sincere and searching sort."

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Don't waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour's duties will be the best preparation for the hours or ages that follow it."

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

"It is best to be right about the big decisions, of course, but it is downright disastrous to let fear of being wrong keep you from ever sticking your neck out."

~H. C.

"The art of leading, in operations large or small, is the art

Difficult Conversations: How to Have Them

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One of our service offerings at **Executive Advantage** is executive and managerial coaching. Invariably, at some point in these engagements with leaders, we broach the subject of a situation that is just begging for a one-on-one conversation. Other staff members are waiting. Sometimes customers are waiting. Yet, the leader is stalling.

Interestingly, the reasons given by leaders for delay are often inconsistent. Busyness... Timing... Small, unprovoked improvements... Lack of backup... As we delve deeper, though, the underlying reason for delay -- usually fear -- becomes apparent. Now, the crux of that fear may look very different. It may be a fear of confrontation, of not being liked, of dealing with and/or having to refill the gap that would be created in the person's absence, of the

introspection that would accompany such a conversation, or of some other sort. Call it what you will -- apprehension, discomfort, hesitation, or something else -- it amounts to fear nonetheless.

So, how do you move forward, keeping your blood pressure under control, your team (family, club, etc.) engaged, and your outcomes reasonably predictable? Let me offer a few do's and don'ts about holding that difficult conversation.

Don't put it off. The idea of figuring out what to say, approaching that other person, articulating your thoughts, and anticipating a reaction all can be daunting to say the least. But, don't allow dread to deter you from doing what needs to be done. Deal with matters swiftly, when they are still in the "potential problem" phase, if possible.

Think of it like your physical health. If you begin to feel a tickle in your throat

and deal with it immediately, it's possible to prevent a full-blown cold. If you do begin to get a cold and take the steps to tackle it at that stage, you can prevent something more debilitating, like pneumonia. Well, you want to address bad behavior, poor performance, or conflict before it gets out of control as well. Many a workplace has seen morale and then productivity take a nosedive, many a relationship has been tainted, and many a customer has become dissatisfied and then lost when a detrimental situation was left to languish because dealing with it was too uncomfortable. The elephant is in the room and, quite honestly, everyone knows it's there. Don't wait; do something about it.

Do be conscious of location. We'll consider the conversation from the recipient's perspective next month, but keep the other person in mind as you plan. To improve your chances of being heard, it is best not to have the conversation in public, where the other person is more likely to go into defense or face-saving mode. Afford dignity to your hearer by holding the conversation in private.

Do make this conversation a part of an ongoing pattern of providing feedback. If the only time you interact with folks individually is when you're reading them the riot act, it's time to reconsider your management or communication style. To foster an environment where people are growing and results are being met routinely, it is important to interact on a continual basis -- applauding successes, collectively assessing and refocusing activity, and meting out discipline when appropriate. Seek to make your involvement with people a part of a cycle, an everyday occurrence, not an event.

Don't just fuss. I like the sandwich approach to conducting difficult conversations. That is, it helps to start off with something encouraging. Next, clearly address the problem. Then, end by reinforcing the value of the person and an interest in seeing the matter resolved. Consider this brief exchange:

Lead-in: *Sally, you're a valued member of this team, and I've come to rely on the skill you have brought to your role.*

Problem: *In the past month, though, you have missed three project deadlines, and your missed deadlines have negatively impacted our ability to stay on target for the project as a whole. In one case, your delay caused the team members whose work followed yours to have to work overtime in order to get us back on track. That overtime was an unplanned cost that we can't pass on to the client in good conscience. So, it reduces our bottom line, and we have less to reinvest in the company.*

Tell me, what's changed recently that's contributing to your repeated delays? [Allow for a discussion of the reasons for the problem.] How can you turn this around? [Allow for a discussion of possible solutions.]

Wrap-Up: *Well, Sally, I believe that this situation can be turned around, and I hope you are as committed to making that happen as I am. You're an integral part of this team and the high-quality support we give our clients.*

Do stick to the facts. Notice that in the problem portion of exchange above there was no communication of what the speaker thought or felt. As in the old Dragnet TV show, relay "[j]ust the facts." Keep it short; make it direct. It's easier to communicate in difficult situations when you're conveying simply what happened and its tangible impact. Sticking to the facts also helps to resolve your personal tug-of-war over whether this is a necessary conversation or whether you're being overly critical. If you don't have sufficient or weighty enough facts to convey, then some soul-searching about the real reason for your frustration may be in order.

Don't let the person avoid responsibility. Once you've had your say, pass the hot potato back into the hands that heated it up. Notice in the scenario that Sally was expected to explain what was behind the delays and to offer possible solutions. There may be a process or organizational problem that extends beyond Sally and that needs to be addressed. There may be a personal problem that warrants some temporary accommodation. Remember, though, it is critical to engage the other person in both owning and helping to solve the problem.

Don't forget to document (in the workplace). Your Human Resources office will love you to pieces, if you take this tip to heart. Document, document, document. I can share gray-hair producing stories of being an incoming manager who inherits an underperforming staff member only to learn that, although the situation had gone on for years, I would have to start anew because the personnel file contained only satisfactory annual performance reviews and no problem-related file entries from my predecessors. Or, I can share the frustrated visits to my office from managers, complaining that HR wouldn't let them fire someone for whom that manager had failed to document any past performance deficiencies or failed improvement efforts.

So, along the lines of providing ongoing feedback, keep notes that will facilitate informed feedback discussions. Jot down reminders about achievements and challenges; keep track of when you meet with a staff member, what you discuss, and the follow-up you each agree to take. Creating this type of regular practice will help you engage in a more fact-related way generally, and it will prepare you for difficult conversations, for more formal reviews, or for disciplinary action if that becomes necessary.

of dealing with humanity, of working diligently on behalf of men, of being sympathetic with them, but equally, of insisting that they make a square facing toward their own problems."

~S. L. A. Marshall

"When the only tool you own is a hammer, every problem begins to resemble a nail."

~Abraham H. Maslow

"A single conversation across the table with a wise man is worth a month's study of books."

~Proverb

"A great way to open a conversation -- even business -- is to notice an item that relates somehow to the person you are speaking with."

~Unknown

"Leadership is the ability to hide your panic from others."

~Unknown

"The secret of success in conversation is to be able to disagree without being disagreeable."

~Unknown

"Lettuce is like conversation: it must be fresh and crisp, and so sparkling that you scarcely notice the bitter in it."

~Charles Dudley Warner

About Executive Advantage

At **Executive Advantage**, we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

To learn more about **Executive Advantage**, contact us **online** or at **(301) 280-5950**.

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