

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Rock climbing. If any of you have ever tried it, you know that on most climbs, you will likely reach a point where you find yourself stuck. It's usually the toughest move of the climb. It's called the crux. It demands that you step out, respond differently, and go beyond what you thought possible. When you get to it, you face a choice: you either turn back, unable (or unwilling) to tackle that challenge you are facing, or you go for it.

The crux is the turning point in the climb. If you get through it, the rewards are big. You see an entirely different view. You have the chance to stand on the peak.

Organizations face numerous challenges every single day. In our work with many businesses, we see valiant efforts in tackling these daily hurdles. High-performing organizations do more. They see the crux, they tackle it, and it shows in the bottom-line results.

The crux for most organizations today is having difficult conversations.

One of the most significant features that separate great organizations from good ones is the willingness of individuals at every level to engage in tough conversations. In our work developing leaders, coaching executives and enhancing teams, we usually end up helping people skillfully and courageously say what no one seems willing to say.

How do you know if people in your organization are avoiding the tough stuff? What needs to be talked about and how do you go about doing this? What are the benefits?

Ground Truth versus Official Truth

You know that people in your organization are avoiding difficult conversations whenever there is a difference between the official truth of the company (slogans, speeches, and mission) and the ground truth.

The ground truth is the reality. It is what is not being said in meetings and what is being said around the water cooler, parking lot, the lunchroom. It's what people say to their friends and spouses about work. The ground truth may also tell you something about your culture.

One organization that we are working with is struggling with having difficult conversations because of a culture of kindness. When you walk in the door, you are struck by "nice". People appear respectful, aware of not hurting each other, considerate. Unfortunately, this culture of kindness keeps people from digging in and talking about the most important issues. People don't want to hurt each other.

When there is a significant difference between the official company truth and the reality in the organization, companies flail.

When do you have a tough conversation? Whenever anyone feels it's necessary. If your organization is adept at developing leaders, then people will know when it's time to speak up about an issue. They feel it.

Having tough conversations begin with, as Jim Collins would say, confronting the brutal facts. It's your job to get the conversations started. Ask the following: What has changed since last time we met? Where are we succeeding? Where are we failing? What have we learned recently? What is required of us now?

Someone needs to step up to the plate and decide to look under the carpet where everything has been swept. In quantum physics, we've learned that as soon as you begin to look at something, the thing that you are looking at changes. Commit to taking a look.

It's easier when we remember that nobody owns the truth about the organization, not even the person at the top. When we start here, there is less room for defensiveness, turf wars, and other dynamics that keep us stuck. There are numerous valuable perspectives waiting to be tapped.

"Profitability requires an ongoing interrogation of reality, of ground truth." Susan Scott

Having Difficult Conversations

From our perspective, there are three main components of having difficult conversations: asking powerful questions, really listening, and being bold. Leadership makes this possible.

To ask powerful questions, we need to let go of thinking there is one, right answer. Powerful questions open doors to examining reality. These do not elicit yes/no responses and they do not lead people towards a particular response. Here are some examples:

- What do we need to be talking about?
- What are we pretending not to know?
- What are three or four perspectives on this issue? (Break out of either/or by going beyond two.)
- What would scare us most to talk about right now?
- What part of our responsibilities are we avoiding right now?

Developing leadership at every level will result in people coming out from behind themselves into the conversations. People will begin talking about what needs to be talked about: the most important issues that you are facing.

Listening. Real listening begins with curiosity. If we are able to drop our attachment to a particular outcome, and get curious about what the organization looks like from others' perspectives, then we can begin to know the brutal facts. The tough part is getting out of our own heads, where we are busy planning what to say next. Tune into what the other person is saying, and not saying. Be sure that issues, solutions, and feelings are getting expressed. Notice what is happening behind the words, within the group.

The listener and the speaker both need to be bold if they are to engage in important, difficult conversations. We need to put our ego aside, the part of us that wants to be right, to be liked, to be clever and popular and different. Being bold requires that we speak the truth as we know it, for the sake of the organization.

When organizations commit to having difficult conversations, when each person steps up and becomes a leader within his/her own sphere of responsibility, you can be certain that the view will change. The most valuable thing that any of us can do is to find the courage and skill to say the things that can't be said. Going for the crux will make all the difference.

Tips for Organizations

- Begin by asking yourself some tough questions:
 - What are my goals when I converse with people?
 - If I were guaranteed honest responses to any three questions, whom would I question and what would I ask?
 - What are the conversations you have been unable to have?

- Next tackle questions for the organization. Involve people who can share perspectives that will challenge you and that you might not want to hear:
 - What is the economic, emotional, and intellectual cost to the company by not identifying and tackling the real issues?
 - If nothing changes, what are the implications?
 - What's the most important thing that organization needs to be talking about?
 - What are leaders throughout your organization pretending not to know

- Hire a coach to help you get clear about your own blind spots, who is not directly involved in the organization.

“In any situation, the person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge as the leader, whether designated or not” Edwin Friedman