

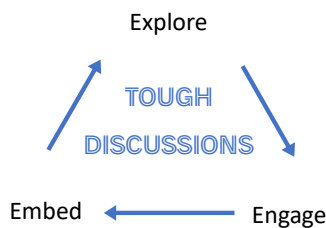
Tough discussions white paper

2 February 2024

“Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”

— Karl & Jeanetta Menninger, 1942

Tough discussions are an essential part of working life. Handled well, they can improve the performance of our organisations and the quality of our workplace relationships. But many people would rather suffer in silence than initiate a tough discussion. Thankfully a little preparation can make these discussions a lot less scary. This white paper shares a framework for conducting tough discussions and provides materials that teams can use for practice¹.



Organisations benefit greatly when employees have tough conversations: information flows more freely, better decisions are taken, motivation increases, relationships get stronger and less time is wasted on disputes. To improve tough discussions at work, organisations need:

- a common understanding of what they are (explore)
- an effective approach to having them (engage), and
- a shared commitment to having them (embed).

1. Explore: What makes a discussion tough?

Organisations routinely make decisions that have serious consequences for people. Redundancies, performance improvement and 360° feedback all require tough discussions. What most tough discussions have in common is they cover issues that (1) affect people deeply (they feel **intense**) and (2) come up **frequently** (you can't escape them).

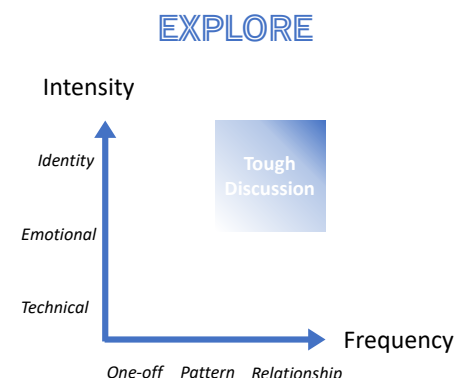
Issues can be ranked on a scale of increasing intensity from:

- things that are technical & easily addressed, to
- things that evoke strong emotions, to
- things that challenge your values and identity.

The frequency you experience an issue at can range from:

- a once-off issue, to
- a pattern of behaviour, to
- something you experience regularly in a relationship.

As the figure on the left shows, discussions are toughest when they deal with issues that affect your identity and that you experience frequently, for example in a relationship.



Early in my career, my company assigned me to lead an important team. A year into my new position, I was blindsided when the team's most senior member, who I'll call Hanna, announced she

would be leaving to join another organisation. During her exit interview with HR, Hanna said was leaving because she felt unappreciated. She believed that a new member of the team, who we'll call Rob, kept trying to position himself as the lead professional in her area. She worried that I did not trust her and observed that Rob was spending a lot of time with me, increasing her concerns.

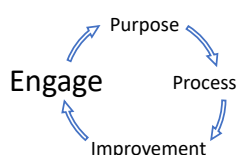
The debrief I received from my HR partner was certainly a tough discussion for me. I realised that Hanna's departure could have been avoided if I had initiated an earlier conversation with her. What Hanna believed she was seeing in Rob and my behaviour challenged her identity as the senior member of the team, and this feeling grew over time with increasing observation. I really appreciated Hanna's work, but I hadn't told her this often enough, partly because I was so focused on coaching Rob.

This example illustrates the **dynamics** that are often in play before a tough conversation. Hanna blamed me at least in part for her resignation. I blamed myself as well: if I had given her greater recognition she may have stayed. But Hanna was also feeling things that she never verbalised. She told herself a story that I was favouring Rob and this would have negative consequences for her career. She never checked in with me to confirm this story. If she had, she would have learnt new information that could have been helpful, particularly that I valued her work and that I was spending time with Rob because he needed my help.

I also had to think hard about why a favouritism story was credible in my team. Did I play favourites? Was I spending enough time with everyone? Did I neglect high performers, believing that they could perform well without my help? Was I unapproachable? I concluded that I had contributed to this outcome. I made a few changes to my leadership after Hanna left.

Storytelling plays an important role in tough discussions. In the next section we will discuss how mastering your own stories, and helping others see past theirs, can help take things forward.

2. Engage: How can you effectively prepare for and participate in tough discussions?

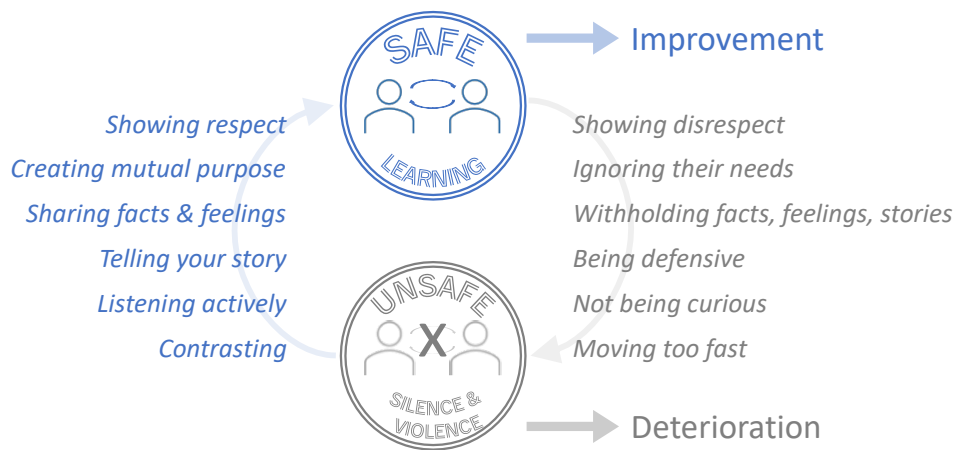


The most common strategy that people deploy when faced with an intense interpersonal challenge is avoidance. As we saw with my experience with Hanna, avoiding a tough conversation can be very costly. Once you can recognize that an issue is serious enough to warrant a tough conversation, how do you start?

First you need to know what you want to achieve and keep reminding yourself of this **purpose** no matter what distractions come up. Then you need to think through the **process** you will follow during the discussion, particularly how to keep the conversation safe and constructive. Lastly you need to agree on actions that you can take to **improve** the situation.

A clear purpose guides your behaviour in a tough discussion. These discussions always bring up many provocative issues and you will be tempted to respond to everything you disagree with. When this happens, ask yourself: does responding to this take me forward in achieving my purpose? If it doesn't, let it go. You will be amazed at how much faster things progress, and how inconsequential the things you let go of end up being.

The success of tough discussions depends critically on staying in dialogue which is hard when intense emotions are being felt. To create a safe environment for dialogue, partners need to proceed carefully. The graphic below summarises some key **process** guidelines, which are also outlined in the text that follows:



- Find mutual respect & shared purpose - If you don't respect your counterparts or care about their needs, don't bother having a tough discussion – it will go badly. Before starting, think about what you have in common and how this discussion can help you both. Introduce the discussion by saying that your intention is to address a potentially tough issue for your mutual benefit before it becomes a problem.
- Share facts, feelings and stories carefully but completely - If you've called the meeting you need to share what is going on for you. The approach you take will set the tone for rest of the discussion, so proceed carefully. Start by sharing some facts that you have observed and how these have made you feel. Here is an example of a common challenge:

John is unhappy with his colleague Rachel and asks her to meet him in a quiet corner of the company cafeteria. He thanks her for her time, and says he wanted to clear the air about something. Rachel says "of course" and John proceeds: "I notice that you spoke in yesterday's department meeting about a project I am leading. I feel uncomfortable about this and I am worried that the department might not realize that this project is my responsibility".

John asks if Rachel has any comments and she replies "Do you mean the market intelligence project? Yes, I remember talking about that and I am sorry if I caused you any distress. I was only trying to help. It's become apparent to me that most section leads aren't aware of the project so I wanted to inform them about it. I know you will need their support later".

This has gone well so far. At this point, John could move to end the conversation by thanking Rachel for her help and requesting that she raise these communication gaps with him directly in future rather than in a department meeting. Alternatively, John could take a risk and tell Rachel more of his story, like this:

"Thank you Rachel, I'm grateful that you are looking out for me and the project – I'm surprised the section heads don't know about it and that could have caused problems down the line. I want to tell you what was going on in my head when I heard you talking about the project. I automatically assumed that you were taking credit for my work. When I look back at it now, it seems like a petty response, but if I'm honest, that was what was going on for me".

Rachel responds: "I'm grateful for your candour John and I'm sorry that this has upset you. Let me start by saying I have the utmost respect for you and I would never

think of claiming credit for your work. It worries me that you came to this conclusion, and it gives me reason to reflect on my behaviour. As you know, I'm a fixer and I like nothing better than helping projects move along faster, especially ones that are important to the company like your market intelligence project. I didn't even consider how my intervention would make you feel."

Rachel continues: *"I would like us to start scheduling regular catchups if that's OK. I'm glad you had the courage to raise this with me, but we need to understand each other a bit better if we are to work effectively together."*

This is an even better outcome. John's gamble has been doubly rewarded. He has put a niggling concern to rest. He has information to reflect on about his own snap judgement and how this didn't serve him well. But most importantly, he has built a stronger alliance with a colleague who can help him be successful. Consider for a moment how this could have gone if John took a different approach to this discussion:

"Rachel, your announcement on my project at our department meeting was completely out of line. I'm the one busting my guts to bring our market intelligence capability into existence. So, if anyone is going to communicate about this project it will be me, understood?"

This is super aggressive and makes it clear that John believes Rachel is stealing credit for his work, which we know is not what's going on. He has given Rachel no opportunity to share her facts or story. A tough conversation like this is going to destroy a relationship that could have been valuable to them both and to their company. Finally, it's worth noting that saying nothing is probably just as bad for John, because the story about Rachel stealing credit will probably eat at him, and he'll start looking for more confirmatory evidence of this behaviour, further distorting his perspectives.

What this story illustrates is that there is always more going on than you realize with a difficult issue. If you are ready to be honest about your feelings and story it could transform the discussion into a powerful learning opportunity. There are risks with this because your counterpart might not engage. They might share nothing and use the information you have shared against you. If this happens, it will be their loss as well as yours. But there is unfortunately no other way of making real progress on difficult topics. The next step shares some techniques you can use to encourage a reluctant counterpart to participate fully in a tough discussion.

- Listen actively and patiently to get as much information out as possible – While you can control your own delivery in a tough discussion, it is much harder to manage the behaviour of your counterpart. This is important because the quality of a tough discussion depends on both parties taking risks and sharing things that make them uncomfortable. If your counterpart becomes aggressive or clams up, there are a few things you can do to bring them back.

The most important is showing a genuine interest in hearing what they have to say. You can do this by paraphrasing their points back to them and by asking good questions. It can also help to verbalise what you are seeing in their behaviour in a respectful way. Saying things like – "I think my last point might have been hard to hear – is that right?" or "I noticed you reacted strongly to the story I just told; is there anything you would like to comment on or correct?"

- Use contrasting to make discussions safer – A final technique to consider in making a discussion safe is contrasting. When I started leading teams, my reports told me that I was useless at giving

feedback. I talked too much which made the process unnecessarily long and painful. In one case, a subordinate thought he was about to be fired, and was confused when I left the room without giving him his separation letter.

When you need to give negative feedback in a tough discussion, contrasting is a useful technique to limit this kind of fallout. The idea is to put the recipient at ease, by placing the corrective message in a broader positive context. For example:

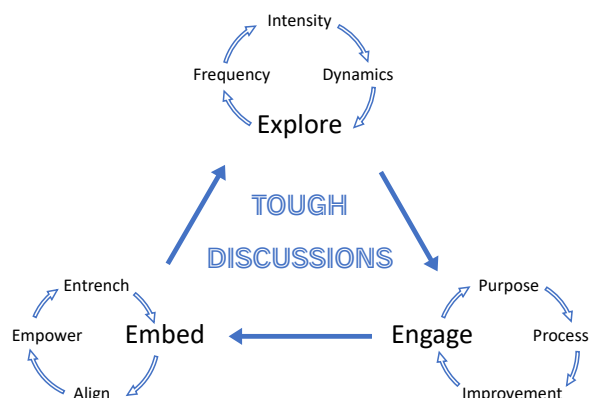
Ben, you have been such a great addition to the team and I don't know how we got anything done before you joined. I would like you to work on your punctuality, as its beginning to affect other people. In general, though, you've had a great first year here and I know everyone is happy to have you on board.

The last element of engaging in tough discussions is **improvement** – taking the learnings and agreements secured in discussion and turning them into actions that can improve the issue and relationship. This is a simple exercise but it needs to be done. Parties should agree to a list of actions, responsible parties and deadlines. They also need to decide how the actions will be followed up – for example, by scheduling a follow up meeting in a month.

3. Embed: How can you encourage more tough conversations at your workplace?

Tough discussions are unlikely to happen without active encouragement. Organisations can increase the frequency of tough discussions but making their workplaces safe and encouraging people to speak up. Specifically, there are 3 steps that leaders should take to do this.

- Firstly, there must be **alignment** that this is a good thing to do. The organisational leader must champion the idea and the senior leadership team should agree that they want to encourage tough discussions.
- Secondly, there needs to be **empowerment**. Training on frameworks like the ones presented here can help. It is also essential that senior leaders model the kinds of behaviours that they would like to see in others.
- Finally, tough conversations must be **entrenched** into the accepted way that things are done in the organisation. For this to take root, the senior leader and HR department can consider including metrics about tough discussions in quarterly scorecards or adding questions in employee surveys on whether staff can see that tough discussions are happening and generating good results.



4. Bringing it together

Hopefully this white paper has shown how powerful tough discussions can be as a way of improving the quality of an organisation's work and relationships. To bring tough discussions into their cultures, organisations must explore what they are, engage in them actively and embed them as a routine.

References & further reading

- Menninger, K. A., & Menninger, J. L. (1942). *Love Against Hate*. Harcourt, Brace.
- Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2022). *Crucial conversations*. McGraw-Hill .
- Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (2000). *Difficult Conversations*. Penguin.

ⁱ Two well-known books in this area are Patterson et al., 2022's *Crucial Conversations* and Stone et al., 2000's *Difficult Conversations*. Both provide brilliant insights and guidance but they are very detailed and focused mainly on individuals. Drawing from my leadership experience, this white paper tries to provide a simple approach to tough discussions that can be deployed at an organisational level.