

Going from good to great: Embracing the hard conversations

Interaction Opinion – Brigid Hardy



THE GOOD TO GREAT SERIES

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INTERACTION



Leadership isn't always about providing answers. It is also about having the courage to confront tough issues, ask the right questions, and encourage open dialogue, even when it's uncomfortable.

Leaders who want to go from good to great need to master the art of having hard conversations, using them as a tool for growth, alignment, and clarity within their teams. Avoiding difficult conversations may keep the peace in the short term, but over time, it leads to unresolved issues, lowered trust, and missed opportunities for improvement.

Here's some ways to tackle these conversations effectively.

Get comfortable with discomfort

Great leaders understand that fostering growth often means pushing team members out of their comfort zones, even if it creates temporary discomfort. By setting challenging expectations and encouraging honest feedback, leaders help employees build resilience, learn new skills, and unlock their potential. However, this push for growth must be balanced with a strong duty of care, ensuring that team members feel supported and that their wellbeing remains a priority. When leaders pair growth focused challenges with empathy and support, they create an environment where employees are motivated to stretch beyond their limits while knowing they are valued and cared for.

Prepare, but don't script

Appropriate preparation is a part of the process. Take time to clarify the purpose of the conversation and the outcomes that you are seeking. Preparation is a helpful anchor to stay focused and manage emotions. Avoid scripting every word as authenticity is critical. Team members know when you're speaking from a script versus when you're genuinely engaged. Instead, set an intention for the conversation that's based on honesty, mutual respect and good intention.

Stay curious

Hard conversations can trigger fear and defensiveness. A great leader approaches these conversations with genuine curiosity, asking questions to understand the other person's perspective and a willingness to learn. By listening actively, withholding judgment and checking your assumptions, you create a space where people feel safe to be honest. This not only keeps the dialogue constructive but can reveal underlying issues you may not have been aware of.

Address the behaviour, not the person

A common mistake is making hard conversations about the individual, rather than focusing on the behaviour or the issue at hand. Instead of saying, "You are always late," try, "I've noticed that you have been arriving late and missing important meetings with your peers, and I'd like to understand why." Separating the person from the problem and highlighting the impact encourages accountability without creating a sense of personal attack. It signals that the goal is improvement, not punishment.

Be direct, but empathetic

Dodging the real issue dilutes the message and confuses the recipient. Effective leaders are both direct and empathetic. Address the issue head on but do so with kindness and understanding. A statement like, "This is a difficult topic, but I want us to have an open and honest conversation," sets a tone that's firm but also supportive. This approach strengthens trust, showing your team that you're invested in both their development and the team's success.

Wear your coaching hat

Leaders who adopt a coaching approach to problem solving empower their teams to think critically, develop their own solutions, and build confidence. Rather than providing direct answers, these leaders ask thoughtful questions and guide team members to explore options, uncover insights, and make informed decisions. This approach not only fosters growth and skill development but also encourages ownership and accountability within the team. By focusing on coaching over telling, leaders cultivate a collaborative, resilient work culture where team members feel valued and are better equipped to tackle challenges independently.

Keep it live

Hard conversations shouldn't be a one off event. To truly make an impact, follow up on what was discussed. If actions or changes were agreed upon, check in on progress and offer support if needed. This reinforces your commitment to their growth and accountability, transforming a difficult conversation into a pivotal moment of growth.

Remember – its ok to not be perfect

Sometimes it doesn't go as planned. Or you might stumble on a word or two. That is totally ok, and it doesn't matter. What matters is that these conversations are approached with good intention, opportunity, empathy and curiosity. That is what will be remembered.

In the journey from good to great, hard conversations are not obstacles to avoid but opportunities to embrace. By tackling challenges head on, leaders can foster a culture of transparency, trust, and continuous improvement – qualities that define truly great leadership.

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