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That difficult conversation

By Naomi Shragai

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A young entrepreneur owns and runs a thriving company. His job involves taking enormous financial risks, which he tackles with confidence and even excitement.

Yet it is the prospect of having a difficult conversation with a colleague that keeps him awake at night. He has to tell one of his partners that their Amsterdam office is going to have to close, leaving her without a role in the business.

However rational the decision, he is terrified of having to face her sadness and anger as well as his own guilty feelings. He rehearses the conversation in his head and the imagined scenario makes him panic. As a result, he keeps putting it off.

Many executives have risen to their positions because of their work performance, and not for their capacity to conduct such conversations that are charged with feelings, or to deal with the possible fallout. Giving someone negative feedback, warning a staff member who is not pulling his or her weight, or having to make an employee redundant are all circumstances of high emotion that can leave managers feeling overwhelmed.

Any number of uncomfortable feelings may arise: guilt, frustration, anger, embarrassment and fear. It is not only their own feelings they have to contend with, but also the other person's reactions – shock, disappointment or seething resentment – all directed at them.

Many managers lack confidence they can cope with such potential conflict or strong emotions, and instead opt to put off or avoid the issue until it grows out of control. An alternative is to choose to hand it over to the human resources department or even to a business coach.

Jeanie Hodder, an executive coach who works for London Business School, describes a particularly destructive pattern: "Many executives typically swing between two extremes. Initially they avoid the conversation and take a passive position. Over time the issue begins to boil up inside them, until they can no longer contain it, at which point it is often expressed in a way that is messy, defensive or aggressive. When they see the damage they have caused, they feel remorseful, even guilty, and so go back to a passive position of managing, anxious of saying anything again that may cause harm. And so, the cycle repeats itself."

There are other reasons that may inhibit an executive from holding such conversations. They may be concerned about the risk to their image. Others may worry about their accountability and responsibility for what emerges from the conversation if it goes badly wrong. There are also factors such as the complexity of employment law, which can stop a conversation before it begins.

However, the consequences of not holding such difficult conversations are far worse both for the individuals concerned and for the company. "Getting through difficult conversations is often what moves a business on, and avoiding these issues is often what leaves them stuck," says Lara Greenfield, talent management director for Energizer, the battery and lighting company. "The manager's credibility goes down among the staff and trust is lost. Staff can become disillusioned and stop bringing up problems because they're convinced they won't be dealt with anyway."

If issues are avoided and trust breaks down as a result, staff can retaliate through poor job performance. An example is a woman who learnt through office gossip that she was being transferred from the department that she had headed for six years. As a result, she was justifiably angry, and began coming in to work late, leaving

early and taking sick days whenever possible. "Had my manager explained it to me directly, at least I would have felt treated with respect and continued to be a dedicated employee," she says.

Another chief executive, who heads a medium-sized internet company, spent months avoiding a difficult discussion with his two directors. They had appeared to lose interest in a television marketing campaign they had all previously agreed on, making his job unmanageable. His frustration was not expressed, however, and instead emerged in moody and unpredictable behaviour on his part. "I was miserable," he says. "My sleep pattern was absolutely shot. I was waking at 3am and thinking about everything. I was really on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I felt very isolated and unsupported in my role."

Eventually he came to realise "that the elephant in the room was how myself and the directors related to each other, and until I tackled that I was never going to be effective in my job".

With the help of a psychotherapist and an occupational psychologist, he came to recognise that what inhibited him from confronting his directors was rooted in his early family life. "What stopped me from saying anything was wanting to be seen as a nice person. In my family, conflicts were never really raised or dealt with. I was the youngest by nine years. It was up to me to make my parents happy after everyone left home. I never wanted to stop making everyone happy. At work I was very much following my role in my family."

Fear of the situation is often the overriding feeling and this can paralyse one's thinking and action. The problem can be far worse in one's mind than in reality and it can be the imagined outcome that feels overwhelming. As a result, managers can end up feeling victimised by the situation. The opposite can also be the case, where the issue is minimised in one's mind, and the situation is brushed over rather than dealt with directly. Often managers simply hope the problem will go away without them doing anything or, in extreme cases, pretend it does not exist.

Not all obstacles to communication can be explained by lack of emotional awareness on the part of individuals. There are also larger factors at play, within both an organisation and wider society, which influence conversations at all levels.

Earl Hopper, a London-based psychoanalyst, group analyst and organisational consultant, has an interest in the unconscious life of organisations. He offers the following examples: "Someone in the hierarchy is about to be replaced, or there is a loss of market share, or there can be an issue in the board room which is not being addressed. All these situations are casting a shadow on mini-discussions throughout the organisation. Consequently, insecurity becomes structured in the company."

Dr Hopper also believes that during the prolonged recession of recent years, which has brought much uncertainty and change, executives have feared more for their jobs. This influences both their performance and how they relate to staff. "In the last five years, survival and security have become uppermost in the minds of chief executives. They know that their performance is being scrutinised and they have to hold back. This creates a situation where people's intelligence and personalities are not really being used. Instead they become distortions of themselves. It's like a racehorse being asked to walk. People who are not risk-averse become risk-averse in order to survive."

Managers, then, would do well to appreciate all the personal and wider factors that play themselves out over difficult conversations, and which make such discussions feel more dangerous than they actually are.

The writer is a psychotherapist and this article is based partly on her clinical experience. People not named have asked not to be identified.