

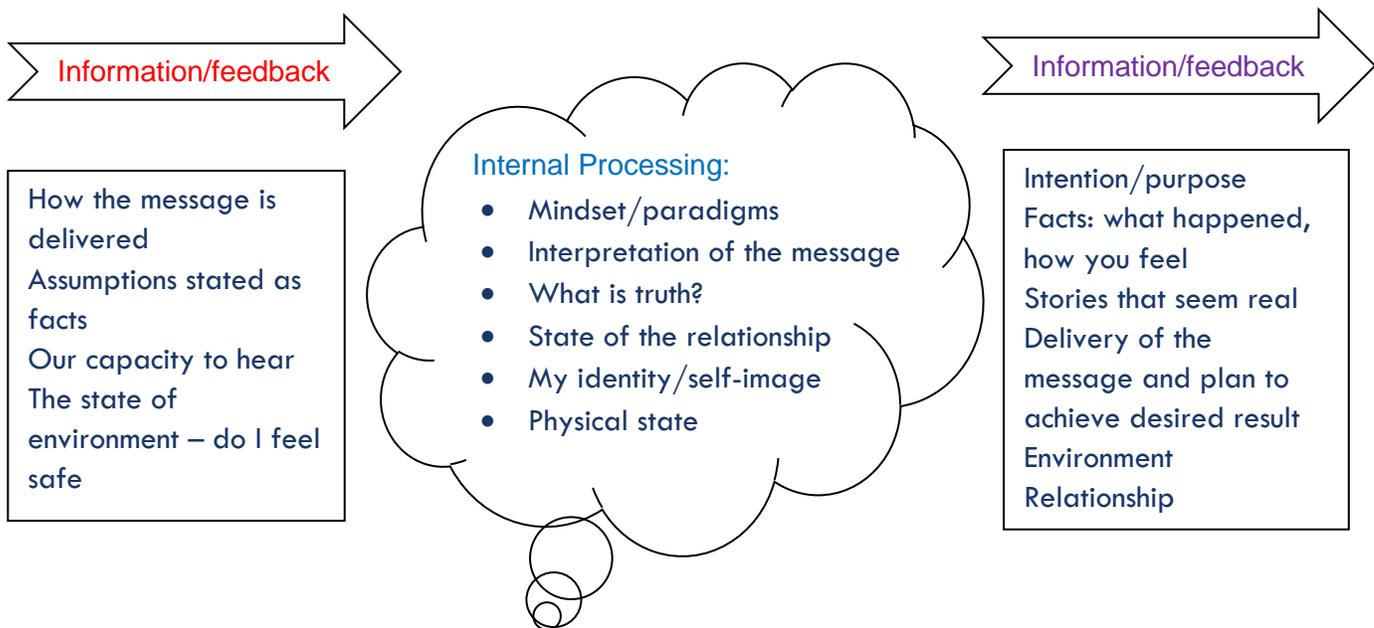
# Developing skills for managing challenging conversations, building tolerance and respect

## A deconstruction

In its absolute form, interacting with people is simple. You receive information from someone, process it and then respond. Sometimes you initiate the conversation, they process what you are saying and respond. In reality, however, some of these those interactions prove to be a lot more complex than expected.

**Facilitator: Invite participants to reflect on why this is so. What reasons do they think could contribute to making conversations challenging?**

The diagram below reflects some of the factors that potential disrupt, change or bend the process of spoken words becoming interpreted meaning. At any one time during a human interaction, all of these may be at play. And so often can change depending on our circumstances and the people we are interacting with.



# Why is it so important that we get better at conversations? Why is it inevitable that conversations will be challenging?

1. It is inevitable because we humans are complex beings, we all have a different outlook on what is right and wrong, and this differs from person to person. This is especially so in conversations covering challenging or contentious topics where opinions and experience may differ widely.
2. We do not live in isolation. Whatever we do, we need to rely on interactions with other people. In our ever-changing world, the people we are relying on often come from a variety of backgrounds... diversity exists and it impacts how we hear, what we interpret and what it means.
3. It's important to develop the skill to understand, and even to embrace managing challenging conversations because of the growing importance of teams (families, communities) as critical communities to support our wellbeing and growth.
4. If you are striving for high performance, you need to be able to push and stretch your boundaries. This requires both the ability to challenge yourself and others and to hold each other accountable. While many people fear conflict and try to avoid the uncomfortable, it is worth remembering that conflict and discomfort does not have to be negative. It is often essentially to empathy, compassion and growth – personal and relational.

## Difficult conversations

### EXAMPLES

1. Confronting problems in relationships with our spouse
2. Giving feedback to someone who is clearly underperforming, but not very forthcoming
3. Having to fire someone as they weren't meeting the standards expected of them
4. Opening up about beliefs and views on the world when you know they are different to others in the room
5. Making people aware of their blind spots
6. Opening up and being vulnerable about personal struggles

**EXERCISE: What are your challenging conversations? Write down some of the areas of difficulty that you experience?**

## LET'S GET DECONSTRUCTING...

### Initiating the challenging conversation

It can be so difficult to initiate a conversation where you need to give bad news, negative feedback, a tough message... And that is because there is a lot to consider. What is your mindset towards this discussion, organising your thoughts about what you actually want to say, and then there is the art of delivering the message. So let's deconstruct these moving parts to initiating a challenging conversation.

**What is your mindset** towards initiating a difficult conversation? Do you see the benefit and need, or do you prefer to avoid because you see it as negative? Some principles to help you approach challenging conversations in a more mature manner

- a. **Care personally and challenge directly** – people want to develop and they want to be loved for who they are right now
- b. **Think AND, and not BUT** - you can have both people be right, and still need to change
- c. **Think win win** - this is not about beating others or being better than them. This is about helping, shedding light on what might be a blind spot and improvement. Be open to learn from the experience as well.
- d. **Think long term** - you don't have to resolve everything once off... this is a process of building relationships, trends, the bigger picture

Ok now you are in the right frame of mind to tackle challenging conversations. Next **prepare and organise your thoughts**. To do this, establish what happened and why you feel the need to have the conversation?

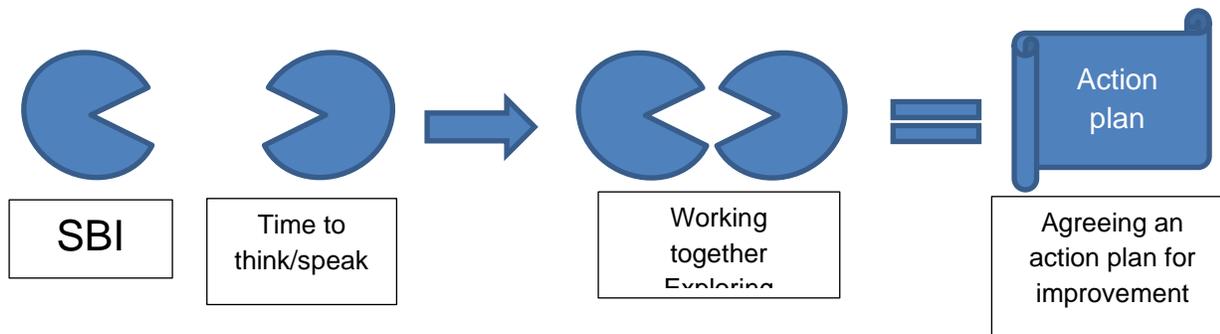
- a. What are the facts/data/stories (reminder of the ladder of inference)
- b. What feelings are you experiencing and why do you think that is?
- c. What is your relationship with the person? How might they respond to you?

Then clarify, what is your intention? Why do you need to have this conversation? What are you hoping to achieve by raising this challenging conversation?

Time to **initiate the conversation**... what do you do?

- a. First decide on the appropriate method of approaching the convo
  - i. Email vs phone vs face to face?
  - ii. Should you do it or is it better coming from others?
  - iii. Team meeting or one on one?
- b. Assuming a conversation is in order, how do you deliver your message?
  - i. Check the environment - have you created a safe environment?
  - ii. State the situation(s) that you are referring to
  - iii. What is the behaviour that you observed

- iv. Explain the impact of this and why you are raising it
- v. Allow them to contribute to the conversation
  1. Asking for clarity
  2. Working through triggers
  3. Explaining things from their perspective
- vi. (perhaps a need to reassure that you care and that this is a safe environment)
- vii. Explore options for improvement – keep eye on the prize... what is the desired result?  
What is most important?
- viii. Agree a way forward



## Receiving a difficult message

Being on the receiving end of a difficult conversation can be really difficult and possibly something you want to avoid. But what if opening yourself up to hear the other person could lead to better results for you and a stronger relationship with the person giving you feedback? Douglas Stone and Shiela Heen, in their book, *Thanks for the Feedback*, help us to develop our resilience when we find ourselves in this situation.

First there is your **capacity to hear**

1. **What is your mindset towards conflict?** do you see the positive/potential for improvement and engage, or see it as negative/personal attack or pointless and avoid?
2. **What is the state of the environment?** if you feel threatened chances are you won't really hear what is being said. Some tips to help you create safety for yourself:
  - a. Maximise by seeking out the information – this puts you on the front foot and therefore more prepared to receive feedback.
  - b. Ask for time if you need time to process the information.
3. **What is your physical, mental, and emotional state?** how resilient are you? You need to keep working on this so that you are developing your self-image and self-esteem.

**How do you interpret the message?** the quality with which the feedback is given may be cryptic. So before you react to the feedback, first establish what is the purpose of the conversation is.

Is the person's intent to harm or belittle you? Probably not actually, however it can feel like that. Try to explore what their intention is. Avoid conversation if it is toxic. More likely though, the person just is not that skilled at giving feedback, what they are trying to convey, perhaps poorly, is likely one of three things:

- a. They want to coach you to help you improve
- b. They are trying to give you perspective of where you are in your development journey, how do you compare to others
- c. They are trying to appreciate you and/or what you are doing

**Processing the information.** When processing the information you have been given, there is a lot of room for many triggers to go off. Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen talk about three main triggers that are likely to go off when receiving feedback, that then turns a normal conversation into a difficult conversation. They are:

1. Truth trigger:
  - a. Problem: you do not believe that what the person is saying is true
  - b. Antidote: Allow yourself to explore what is being said. Ask questions to better understand what the person observed and in what situation, why they have raised this, what they think needs to be improved... this will put the feedback into perspective and shed light on potential blindspots. You can start by asking them to state the situation, behaviour they observed and impact, if that is not clear.
2. Relationship trigger
  - a. Problem: For whatever reason, you struggle to receive feedback from this individual. You don't think they are credible, the timing is wrong, there is something that they have done that you believe has impacted the outcome, or your relationship is currently weak.
  - b. Antidote: Realise that there is more than one conversation at play here. One is about the feedback to you. The other is feedback for them. Acknowledge and separate the conversations. Decide whether both conversations need to be had and in which order. If both conversations are needed, communicate this to the individual. If not, choose to put the other conversation to one side, and focus on the feedback that could help you improve.
3. Identity trigger
  - a. Problem: You have distorted the feedback. Someone has identified a development area, and you have blown it out of proportion.
  - b. Antidote: 1) Get to know your self-image/self-esteem. Strengthen it where you can. 2) put things into perspective by look for other sources of information.

**EXERCISE: Thinking of your difficult conversation, identify whether you are needing to initiate or receive feedback, and then start by deconstructing your conversation using the information above. Overleaf is a one-page summary page if you prefer to use that.**

## TURNING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS INTO LEARNING CONVERSATIONS – SUMMARY

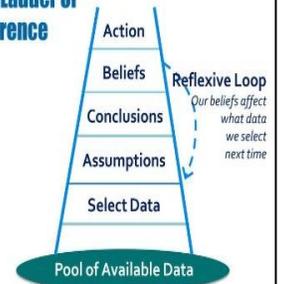
### What makes conversations difficult?

- Difference facts people *know*
- Assumptions and paradigms people have – the lenses through which they see the world
- Strength of the relationship
- The environment/mood
- Self-esteem issues
- Ability to articulate and initiate a conversation
- Complexity of the problem needing to be discussed

### Ladder of Inference

This shows us that we tend to have an inferring way of thinking. If we want to engage in difficult conversations, we need to learn to challenge our assumptions and force ourselves to look for new data

### The Ladder of Inference



### Deconstructing conversations:

In any given conversation there is someone initiating a topic and someone is responding to that topic. To initiate the topic in order to have a learning conversation think about your **mind-set, preparation** and **delivery**. To engage fully with the topic, maximise your **capacity to hear** and keep an eye on your **triggers**.

### Initiating conversation

**Mind-set:** Before you start, remind yourself to...

- Care personally, challenge directly
- Think AND, not BUT - *both views can be correct*
- Think win win - *what does a win look like for both*
- Think long term - *relationship building and growth happens over time, and requires patience*

**Preparation:** Instead of jumping straight into an argument, take a moment to clarify...

- What happened as you know it
  - Fact/data/stories - *test your ladder of inference*
  - Feelings - *what was triggered in you and why*
- Intentions - *what are you really wanting to gain from having this conversation?*
- Approach - *email, call, speak, get someone else to speak on your behalf... what will be effective?*
- Environment/mood - *threatening or rewarding?*

**Delivery:** When you are initiating the conversation have a structure you can follow to ensure both parties are on the same page and can engage in a learning conversation

1. Start the conversation using SBI – explain **situation** for context, **behaviours observed** to clarify what it is that you want to discuss, and the **impact** those behaviours had (*this should also help to mitigate truth triggers*)
2. Allow other person to talk – work through their triggers
3. Explore options for improvement
4. Agree to a way forward – bridge the gap and move the relationship/team to a higher level of performance

### Receiving feedback

**Capacity to hear:** To optimise your chances of having a learning conversation, consider what might be blocking you from hearing the other person

- **Paradigms** – *what paradigms do you hold about conflict?*
- **Charitable mind-set** - *The quality of the delivery may not be great, but that doesn't mean that it's toxic*
- **Environment** – *if you are feeling intimidated (look up SCARF by David Rock), what can you say or do to get yourself off the back foot and part of the conversation*

**Triggers:** It is inevitable that in some conversations we will be triggered. Stone and Heen have identified three triggers that are likely to derail a learning conversation

**Truth** - What is said doesn't appear to be true. To overcome:

- Identify the purpose of the conversation
- Ask for clarification
- Allow yourself to see your blind spots

**Relationship** – How or who has delivered the feedback/difficult conversation triggers you. To overcome:

- Disentangle what from who/how
- Understand how both of you are contributing to the problem, and the dynamic between you

**Identity** – You have distorted the message that was delivered. To overcome

- Understand your biological make-up (your Baseline, Swing, and Sustain/Recovery – google bias)
- Dismantle the distortions – gain perspective

### Recommended readings:

**Ben Zander – The Art of Possibility:** Mind-set. We can choose how we want to see the world and address problems

**Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen - Thanks for the Feedback:** We all get triggered. Triggers fall into three categories - Truth, Relationship or Identity. Understand and manage pain to enrich relationships and to start learning faster

**Kim Scott – Radical Candour:** Care personally and challenge directly