

"THIS IS GOING TO HURT A LITTLE"

HELPING TEAMS HOLD TOUGH TALKS

by Lynda McDermott



Whether you're part of a training team, a sales team, or a management team, one of the critical elements of your team's success will be its members' ability to communicate openly, honestly, and constructively. Conversely, bad or ineffective communications can lead to misunderstandings, tension, or open warfare within a team.

In fact, the ability to express oneself candidly is an important skill for personal and leadership development. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, in his most recent book, *Winning*, calls "lack of candor the biggest dirty little secret in business." He reminds us that truly great leaders encourage straightforward communication and have a willingness to talk about ideas that stimulate debate and dialogue. Jeffrey Immelt, Welch's successor at GE, recalls the most difficult trips he made to Welch's office, when he worked directly for Welch, were those where he had to report failing numbers with no upturn in sight. He took solace, though, in the fact that, no matter what, Welch would expect and respect hearing the truth.

People have a love-hate reaction to the idea of holding tough conversations with other people. For example, whenever I say to our young daughter, Carylyn, "Please come here—I want to have a talk" she immediately reacts defensively. "Did I do something wrong?" or she'll ask "Is this a good talk or a bad talk?" It's most usually just an opportunity I want to take to share an observation about her own or someone else's behavior, followed by a lesson that she ultimately seems to appreciate. The talks have never resulted in a punishment for her. But just the idea of a "serious conversation" throws her initially into a bad place. Should we as leaders or team members be any different?

WHAT ARE "TOUGH TALKS FOR TEAMS?"

In much of our work with all types of teams in pharmaceutical and biotech companies, we introduce the principles and skills of how to conduct "tough talks." What is a 'tough talk'? It's a discussion in which one or more team members openly and candidly dialogue about issue(s) that have previously been "off-limits" or remain unresolved. There is usually some emotion (anxiety, hurt, anger, etc.) associated with the issue itself. Perhaps the phrase 'tough talk' is too strong, but the intent of holding such a conversation is not to be cruel, threatening, or hurtful.

Chances are that almost every day as you work in your teams, you are forced to make a choice—first of all, whether you want to engage in 'tough talk' with one or more members of your team, and secondly, how you want to hold these difficult dialogues. What are some of the hard-to-talk-about issues within a team?

- Giving critical feedback
- Saying no to a request for assistance
- Confronting disruptive or irresponsible behavior
- Disagreeing with the majority opinion
- Saying the "emperor has no clothes," for example, arguing against a politically charged position.
- Delivering bad news about a client or customer
- Telling someone he or she is fired (unless you are 'the Donald!')

Not everyone finds each of these topics equally unpleasant. But anything you find hard to talk about could be labeled as "tough talk."

We become masters at avoiding these tough talks. Team members leave voicemails at off-hours. They email each other rather than pick up the phone or walk down the hall. Team members badmouth each other behind their backs.

Why do we avoid tough talks in our teams? Mostly it's because we fear the consequences: We don't want to hurt others' feelings, we don't want to get hurt ourselves, or we don't want to deal with the unexpected repercussions or fall-out that may come from confronting an issue.

And what are the costs of not learning how to hold tough team talks? The unresolved issue is like the pot on the back burner—it may not be a "burning platform" but it's sucking energy out of the team. Or, the unresolved issue is like the "elephant in the room" that will never go away and is causing tension in team relationships.

So, we are faced with the dilemma of whether to take the risk of confronting an issue—with the possibility it could lead to either improvements or deterioration in a situation or relationship—or avoid it—which whittles away at our self-esteem, because we fear we lack the courage for confrontation.

HOW TO ENGAGE IN TOUGH TALKS

We believe that avoidance of tough team talk, or ineffective tough team talk, results from team members' individual or collective inability to hold respectful and productive team talks. Therefore, we have developed a seven-step process for helping you to reduce the number of "tough talks" you avoid having with your team, and to help reduce the anxiety when you hold these talks, while increasing the possibility of positive results and relationships.

STEP I: PRIORITIZE YOUR TOUGH TALK ISSUES

There is a time and a place for tough talks, and not every one of them actually needs to happen. So the first order of business is to prioritize which tough

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talks really need to take place with another member of your team or with the team as a whole.

A way to start might be to brainstorm a list of frustrations you are having in your work with the team. It may be with a process that is not working smoothly or with a relationship that has become tense. Review the frustration list and pick the top five tough talks that, if the issues were to be resolved, would have the highest pay-off for the team.

Then, get honest with yourself about the issue and emotions surrounding it. For example, why is your “nose out of joint” that one of your colleagues does not invite you to meetings that you think you should be attending? Is she intentionally keeping you out of the loop? Are you feeling threatened and

excluded? In other words, why does this issue matter?

STEP II: IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE AND IDEAL RESULTS OF YOUR TOUGH TALKS

Once you have selected one of the tough talks you want to have, you need to do some initial planning before the conversation. Answer these questions:

- Why is this talk necessary? What are (may be) the costs of the issue remaining unresolved?
- What are your perceptions and assumptions about the issue, about “what is going on?” about others’ intentions?

- What have been and are your emotions about the issue?
- What are the ideal results you hope will come out of the discussion? What do you want to accomplish—what would you presume the other person wants to accomplish? Remember though, with all of this self-

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talk you are making many assumptions that need to be tested at the beginning of your conversations with others.

STEP III: PLAN YOUR APPROACH TO THE DIALOGUE

As the time for the tough talk draws near, spend some time to think through how you want to conduct the dialogue. It might be helpful at this stage to remind yourself that what you want to engage in with your team member is a “dialogue,” which is defined as “the free flow of meaning between two or more people.” The operative word here is meaning. If you are going to understand what each one “means,” you will need to prepare yourself to learn.

To maximize the dialogue, it will help if you prepare yourself and frame your mindset with some “ground rules:”

- I will remain respectful.
- I will remember to listen to understand before talking to be understood.
- I will be honest about my opinions and feelings.
- I will look for win-win solutions.

We have witnessed many situations where teams entered into tough team talks with the best of intentions only to see the discussion derail because these ground-rules were not followed. For example, one training manager arranged for an off-site meeting with his team

for the purpose of allowing them to “air their grievances.” Apparently, the team took him at his word and began tentatively to suggest some areas that they wanted to see improve (for example, increased access to the training manager, less weekend travel time, etc.) At each request, the training manager began giving “reasons and excuses” why the issue was not or couldn’t be addressed. The meeting derailed and the team sat in silence as the training manager turned the tables and began telling the team what he wanted to see improved in their performance!

Again, the structure of your team tough talk should be a dialogue, with each team member trying to understand and learn from the other(s). You should not enter into the dialogue determined to see who can win the blame game. Don’t focus back on affixing responsibility for problems but focus forward on sharing accountability for finding solutions.

STEP IV: CONFRONT AND QUESTION RESPECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CURRENT REALITY

I’m sure you’ve seen the Rorschach picture of the old woman and the young woman who appear in the same drawing. Some of us see the old woman and can’t see the young woman until someone points out the contour of her neck or the feather in her cap.

As you start and continue the difficult dialogue with your team member, remember that we all view life through a different set of eyeglasses that reflect our knowledge, experiences, and values. What you pay attention to and think is important may go unnoticed by others. You may have initiated the team tough talk over an issue that has importance to you and yet it may come as a surprise to others.

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Also, remember that your version of the story, what you think about the issue or what you assume the intentions of the other person is not necessarily the Truth (with a capital ‘T’)—it is based on your perceptions and assumptions. Your goal is to uncover the “Truth” from the other person’s perspective.

In our previous example about the team member who didn’t invite his colleague to meetings, some of the questions to be asking are: Does he know she should be invited? Does he know what she could contribute? If so, why is he not inviting her?

STEP V: EXPLAIN AND SEEK TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF THE ISSUE

I’m always amazed when I hear people at work say “oh, don’t take it personally, it’s

only business.” Everyone who shows up for work is a person—with brains that record information as well as emotions.

The reason you have initiated a tough talk with your team is because an issue is having an emotional impact on you—it has caused a feeling or situation that you are choosing not to ignore. While it may cause more anxiety to talk about your feelings—you will not get at the core of the issue unless you talk about the emotions: frustration, hurt, anger, embarrassment, distrust, etc., that the issue is causing for you, and you are able to acknowledge the feelings of others as well.

For example, a member of your team is continually delinquent in completing expense reports and as the manager, you are put in the position of having to continuously nag her to turn them in.

What emotion does this generate in you? Probably frustration. You must be willing to describe that to your team member.

In addition to the personal impact the issue is having on you, there is likely an organizational impact that also must be communicated. Why do organizations require expense reports to be turned in on time? There is a reason and when someone is delinquent, it has consequences to financial and reporting systems and processes. This impact should be communicated, as well.

STEP VI: ENGAGE IN MUTUAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

Earlier in the conversation you may have each stated your ideal results. At this stage, they should be reviewed and clarified as the goals to be achieved from this difficult dialogue.

SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR TOUGH TALKS FOR TEAMS

- Think critically about who should take part in the “tough talk.” Is it a one-on-one conversation? Does the issue affect more than one person? Do you need an interested or objective contributor or observer?
- Whenever you engage in a communication with someone, you leave and are left with an “emotional wake.” How do you want people to feel after an interpersonal encounter with you? The approach and words you use in your conversation will determine the size and nature of that wake.
- Practice whole-body listening, paying attention not only to what is being said, but to the nonverbal language that is being communicated, which often speaks to the emotions. In addition, continuously paraphrase and summarize to ensure there is an ongoing effort to clarify the communications from all perspectives.
- Active listening also includes the skill of asking questions to probe for greater understanding.
- Whenever you start to say “but,” that’s a sign that you are into blaming or disagreeing, and potentially focusing on win-lose solutions. Instead, think and look for win-win solutions.
- Let silence do the talking. Sometimes after you’ve expressed a tough sentiment or observation, just be quiet and let others have time to digest it and react.
- Focus on facts, not opinions. Post facts where everyone can see them and continuously summarize areas of agreement.
- Write down a brief “agenda” for your difficult dialogue so that you can keep on track.
- Pick the right time and place to hold the conversation. If it is likely to be an emotionally charged conversation, you don’t want to hold it in a public place or at the beginning of the day.
- Avoid these common mistakes:
 - Not talking about emotions
 - Not allowing enough time
 - Allowing interruptions
 - Withholding information and perspectives
 - Talking more than listening
 - Assuming the conversation is over when the meeting is over.

With these shared goals in mind, the team should explore options and alternative steps for resolving the issues with mutual actions and accountabilities. Like the phrase “it takes two to tango,” rarely does the source or cause of an issue rest squarely on the shoulders of only one person. Consequently, the resolution of an issue is rarely the responsibility of only one team member.

Work very hard in the conversation to identify action steps required from

TOUGH TALK DEAD ENDS*

Armed with this seven-step model and principles, you still may not succeed in mutually resolving issues with your team. Maybe you blew it or maybe your team member isn't ready to work with you.

So then you face another dilemma—do you let it go or do you escalate and ask for someone else's help in resolving the issue—a boss, a colleague, or a third-party coach?

Before doing anything, recycle again up to Step 1 and ask yourself what are the relative costs of taking the tough talk to another level, versus the costs of just letting it go. Now would be the time to look beyond

the personal impact that the unresolved issue is having on you, to the issue's impact on the larger organization, to help you make your decision.

One thing is for certain: the more skilled you become in engaging in tough talks, the more comfortable you will become and better able to judge whether letting go of an issue is truly avoiding it or recognizing that, in the greater scheme of things, it probably doesn't matter and you need to “get over it” and move forward.

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everyone. If they are not immediately obvious ask the question: How could I (or team member X) support you? End the tough talk with a plan of action including what actions will be taken, by whom, and by when.

STEP VII: CONDUCT CRITICAL CHECK-INS

There most likely was much preparation and work, and possibly anxiety, which went in to holding your team's tough talk. Don't forget the final step, which is to check in on the progress made in resolving the issue or rebuilding team relationships. The check-in doesn't need to be formal—it could be in the format suggested by Ken Blanchard in his book, *The One-Minute Manager*. It could be a quick and informal recognition for progress made or a question about when next steps will be taken.

The intent of Step VII is to keep the dialogue going so that the issue is resolved and the relationships continue to improve.