

The Confident Conversations Toolkit.



Welcome to the Toolkit

Difficult conversations can be traumatic and stressful - yet the ability to manage them confidently is one of the cornerstones of effective leadership, clinical practice, employee relations and human resources management.

Effective communication is an essential part of our everyday lives. We are not only responsible for how we communicate our needs, but also how we receive and interpret the communication process as a whole. The purpose of this toolkit is to enhance communication skills and to provide effective approaches to help you manage confident conversations in all aspects of your professional life.

This toolkit has been designed by the conflict management experts from The TCM Group. The toolkit is designed to act as a resource and a reflective journal.



What is a Confident Conversation?

A confident conversation is anything you don't want to talk about: Conflict, personal hygiene, poor work performance, absenteeism, dismissal and so on...

Conversations are difficult because there is a fear of the consequences, whether we raise the issue or try to avoid it.

The costs of not having a confident conversation:

- Trust diminishes
- Motivation suffers
- Misunderstandings multiply
- Conflict escalates
- Increased stress
- Situations stays the same
- Situation gets worse
- The emotion builds until it explodes
- The smallest thing they do makes the manager erupt
- Loss of confidence as a manager
- Ineffective performance management
- Low individual and team morale because of the failure to challenge inappropriate behavior
- HR departments overwhelmed with employee issues
- Resentment builds up



The benefits of having a confident conversation...

- Focus on results and accountability
- Name and address issues truthfully and effectively
- Achieve higher levels of alignment, collaboration, partnership
- More timely resolution of tough challenges
- Improvement in leadership effectiveness
- Builds confidence
- Effectively confronts attitudinal, performance or behavioural issues
- Provides impetus for change and promotes learning
- Enriches working relationships



Blocks and Barriers to Confident Conversations

'Having a difficult conversation can feel like throwing a hand grenade. No matter how hard or soft you throw it is still going to have an impact' (Bruce Patton, 1999)

Fight or Flight

Someplace within ourselves there is a button, one that is pressed by this or that when it affects our senses. Most refer to this button as the auto fight or flight response. Our body detects something to be afraid of and all sorts of biological things happen. Breathing becomes shorter; the heart beats faster; our internal dialogue grows louder. We are ready for battle or to run.

Flight or Fight is **Fear and Anger**.

We either avoid or confront situations. Fear is the central emotion which underpins avoidance and anger. A fear of what might happen if you don't have the difficult conversation and a fear of what might happen if you do have the difficult conversation.



Internal voice

Our inner voice is what we tell ourselves, the visualisations we create in our minds and our body's reaction to thinking. The inner dialogue or voice can generate unhelpful feelings.

Negative internal voice

- I don't want to hurt their feelings.
- Now is not the right time to deliver this message.
- Everyone makes mistakes sometimes - besides, who am I to tell them?
- It is not a big problem now, I'll wait until they do it again.



Destructive thinking patterns

- Mind reading (untested assumptions): “He thinks my ideas are stupid.”
- Crystal ball gazing (projecting into the future): “This is going to be a total nightmare.”
- Over dramatising the negative: “She is destroying my credibility.”
- Over generalising: “She is always defensive whenever I raise concerns.”
- Being judgemental: “I’m such a doormat” or “They are so inconsiderate.”
- Blaming: “They created this problem.”

Assertive Communication

Assertive:	Be able to express your needs, wants, goals, opinions, feelings and beliefs in a direct, honest and appropriate way.
Non-assertive:	Expressing your needs, wants, opinions, feelings and beliefs in an apologetic, diffident or self-effacing way or not expressing them at all, or expressing them only to others.
Aggressive:	<p>Failing to stand up for your rights or doing so in such a way that others easily disregard or misapprehend them.</p> <p>Expressing your own needs, wants, opinions (which may be honest or dishonest) in inappropriate ways.</p> <p>Standing up for your rights, but doing so in a way that violates the rights of other people.</p>
Aim:	To be professional, consistent, fair, aware



Managing Conflict Effectively



"**Conflict occurs** when an individual (or a group of individuals), perceive that another individual (or a group of individuals) is preventing them from achieving their needs or goals; preventing access to the resources they need to achieve their needs or goals or preventing them from expressing their values or beliefs in a way which they consider to be reasonable."

How and why do conflicts escalate?

According to research undertaken at TCM, we have identified 5 distinct stages to conflict:

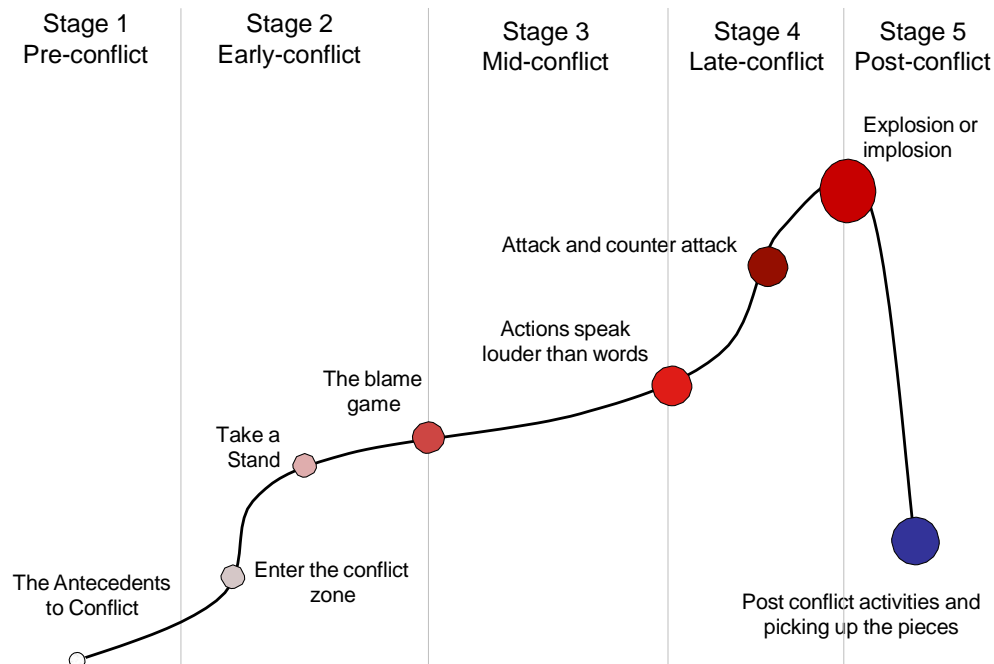


Figure 1: The 5 stages of conflict



Stage 1: The pre-conflict stage

This stage relates predominantly to the underlying or root causes of conflict. For instance change and conflict are inextricably linked and when we see one, we often see the other. Other factors include leadership action or inaction, functional factors, systemic and structural factors, cultural and political factors or factors relating to the distribution of resources or rewards.

Stage 2: The early conflict stage

This stage develops as the parties experience the initial stages of the conflict - often referred to as 'fight or flight'. The parties' positions may harden and communication becomes limited and disrupted. Alliances and cliques begin to form and the parties blame each other for the problem.

Stage 3: The mid conflict stage

This stage often sees the parties engaging in coercive and destructive tactics to 'win' the conflict (I win, you lose). Often this is a very challenging period for managers and HR and is typified by increased grievances, allegations absence and stress for all parties.

Stage 4: The late conflict stage

This stage can see the parties erupt and the conflict become all consuming. Alternatively, the conflict slowly 'eats away' to such a great extent that a previously well performing team begins to fail and implode. Either way, the cost of the conflict can be significant, extensive and often formal procedure or court action is the outcome.

Stage 5: The post conflict stage

Of course, someone has to meet the needs of the customers, deliver the services, heal the patients, drive the lorries, deliver the post etc. It is often up to HR and managers to pick up the pieces and to retain a balance between the needs of the parties and the needs of the business. This is never an easy task, yet it is made even harder when the parties believe that they are right and everyone else is wrong.

So, what can managers and HR do?

An effective conflict management or dispute resolution strategy should take into account the 5 different stages of conflict and should enable managers and HR to recognise the nature of conflict at each stage.



What is Your Conflict Management Style?

These styles have been adapted from the Thomas Kilman instrument. For more details, including a self-assessment and detailed explanation of each approach, please visit www.opp.com/en/tools/TKI



The Turtle (Withdrawing)

Turtles withdraw into their shells to avoid conflict. They give up their personal goals and relationships. They stay away from the issues over which the conflict is taking place and the people they are in conflict with. Turtles believe it is easier to withdraw (physically and psychologically) from a conflict rather than face it.



The Shark (Forcing)

Sharks try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept their solution to the conflict. Their goals are highly important to them and their relationships are of minor importance. Sharks seek to achieve their own goals at all costs. They are not concerned about the needs of other people. They do not care if other people like or accept them. Sharks assume that one person winning and the other person losing settles conflicts. Sharks want to be the winner. Winning gives sharks a sense of pride and achievement. Losing gives them a sense of inadequacy and failure. They try to win by attacking, overpowering, overwhelming and intimidating others.



The Teddy Bear (Smoothing)

To teddy bears the relationship is of great importance while their own goals are of little importance. Teddy bears want to be accepted and liked by other people. They think that conflict should be avoided in favour of harmony and believe that if the conflict continues, someone will get hurt and that would ruin the relationship.



Teddy bears give up their goals to preserve the relationship. Teddy bears say “I’ll give up what I want and let you have what you want in order for you us to get along.” Teddy bears try to smooth over the conflict and avoid causing harm.

The Fox (Compromising)

Foxes are moderately concerned with their own goals and about the relationship with other people. Foxes seek compromise. They give up a part of their goals and persuade the other person in conflict to give up part of his or her goals.

Foxes seek a solution to conflict where both sides gain something- the middle ground between two positions. They are willing to sacrifice part of their goals and relationships in order to find agreement for the common good.



The Owl (Collaborating)

Owls highly value their own goals and relationships. They view conflicts as problems to be solved and seek a solution that achieves both their own goals and the goals of the other person involved in the conflict. Owls see conflict as an opportunity for improving relationships by reducing tension between two people. They try to begin a discussion that identifies the conflict as a problem. By seeking solutions that satisfy both themselves and the other person, owls maintain the relationship. Owls are not satisfied until a solution is found that achieves their own goals and the other person’s goals. Owls are not satisfied until the tensions and negative feelings have been fully resolved.



Reflections on Active Listening

Have you ever wanted to be heard and no one was there to listen? How did it feel?

Have you ever had someone listen to you, really listen to what you are saying without judging you, evaluating you or blaming you – how did that feel?

That's the power of active listening!

Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They are often distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else. When people are engaged in a conflict, they are often busy formulating a response to what is being said. They assume that they have heard what their opponent is saying many times before, so rather than paying attention; they focus on how they can respond to win the argument.

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. The listener must take care to attend to the speaker fully, and then repeats, in the listener's own words, what he or she thinks the speaker has said. The listener does not have to agree with the speaker - he or she must simply state what they think the speaker said. This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener really understood. If the listener did not, the speaker can explain some more. Often, the listener is encouraged to interpret the speaker's words in terms of feelings.

Thus, instead of just repeating what happened, the active listener might add, 'I gather that you felt *angry* or *frustrated* or *confused* when...' [a particular event happened]. Then the speaker can go beyond confirming that the listener understood what happened, but can indicate that he or she also understood the speaker's psychological response to it.

Active listening has several benefits. Firstly, it forces people to listen attentively to others. Secondly, it avoids misunderstandings, as people have to confirm that they do

S.O.L.E.R.

Five steps to attentive

listening:

Squarely face the person

Open your posture

Lean towards the speaker

Eye contact maintained

Relax while attending



really understand what another person has said. Thirdly, it tends to open people up and get them to say more.

When people are in conflict, they often contradict each other, denying the opponent's description of a situation. This tends to make people defensive, and they will either lash out, or withdraw and say nothing more. However, if they feel that their opponent is really attuned to their concerns and wants to listen, they are likely to explain in detail what they feel and why. If both parties to a conflict do this, the chances of being able to develop a solution to their mutual problem become much greater.

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION	Gestures	Eye contact	Nods
ENCOURAGING	Please tell me more... You were saying earlier... Could you explain how you felt...		
ACKNOWLEDGING	I understand...	I see...	That sounds important to you...
SUMMARISING	So what you're saying is.....		
CHECKING	You seem to be angry... Am I right in thinking that you said...		
CLARIFICATION	I am not sure that I understand... Did you mean...		
AFFIRMATION	Thank you very much for meeting with me... I know that it is not easy but you are doing well...		
EMPATHY	It sounds like it has been a difficult time for you... I realise that you are getting impatient/upset/angry...		
ASKING A VARIETY OF QUESTIONS	What, why, when, who, where, how Use of open questions to elicit a full response.		
TIMING	Questions and answers should be at an appropriate pace which makes the parties feel at ease.		
BALANCE	Good balance between each party as well as balancing the need to explore the past along with moving forward		



TONE OF VOICE

Be considerate to how your tone of voice may be interpreted. It's not what you say, it's how you say it!

REFRAMING

Employee: Sam is so indifferent towards me; he/she never listens.

Manager: So you would like Sam to take more interest in your work and to take time to listen to you?



Problem-Solving as Part of the Confident Conversation

Below are some useful techniques for problem-solving:

Board storming or star bursting – encouraging free thinking

First focus the party on quality not quantity- encourage them to be creative first and then evaluate which solutions are realistic and most useful.

If you had a...magic wand or a time machine

If you had a magic wand to remedy the situation, what would you change?

If you had a time machine, what would you go back and change?

Hypothetical questions

e.g. What will this look like on Monday morning? Imagine you are at work, what will the agreement look like?

List two key things to change

For themselves and the other.

Empathetic questions

How do you think X will feel about that?

Stop – Start – Continue

Something to stop, something to start and something to continue for themselves and the other.

SMART

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound



The Confident Conversation - Key Tools

- **Agreeing psychological boundaries/ground rules.** These relate to the creation of a safe space where dialogue can happen. Ground rules may include:
 - Remaining calm
 - Being respectful
 - Respecting confidentiality/privacy
 - Not interrupting or speaking over each other
 - Being willing to listen to each other's point of views, feelings and needs
- **Opening meeting & building rapport.** This is an opportunity to break the ice and put the other person at ease. It may include:
 - A warm welcome to the meeting, being positive
 - Some small talk - enquiring about the person
 - Offering tea/coffee/water etc
 - Be empathetic – put yourself in the other person's shoes- how would you feel if you were them?
- **Knowing yourself.** This is about your own levels of self-awareness and mindfulness. How are you feeling, are you stressed or anxious or tired? How will you ensure that you can remain calm and authentic during the meeting?
- **Active listening and summarising.** This is about asking open questions, and inviting the person to open up and share their experiences with you. Summaries frequently to ensure that the speaker knows that you are listening. See section on active listening in this toolkit.
- **Identifying needs.** This is about helping the other person set out their needs and a chance for you to do likewise. We often think that we are setting out our needs but in reality we are talking about what we want to happen. Needs are more fundamental and are often shared. Talking about needs opens up possibilities for consensus and collaboration.
- **Assertive communication** – this is about stating your case clearly and calmly. It is about making clear statements without putting people down or being aggressive or hostile. It is OK to be emotional but you don't let your emotions



take over. Assertiveness is about making sure that the other person feels safe in your presence. Aggression means that they feel unsafe. Check out how the other person is feeling and adapt your communication style to meet both yours and their needs.

- **Delivering difficult messages.** This is about not personalising a problem. Rather describe the problem and its impact. Describe the consequences of the situation continuing. Beware of your body language – its best to be sat down and in a calm frame of mind if you need to deliver a difficult message. Make sure that you prepare your message in advance and think about what you want to say and how you want to say it.

- **Reframing** – this is about helping people to alter their mind-set and their language from negative and destructive to positive and constructive

E.g. 'she never listens to me' could be reframed to 'I need her to listen to me'

- **Non-defensive responses to criticism.** This is about inviting the other person to give you feedback and when they say something that you don't agree with welcoming that feedback rather than defending yourself. This can be particularly difficult to do when we feel that we are being attacked or unfairly criticized. However, it can alter the tone and the nature of the meeting – for the better. It also sends out a clear message that this meeting is not about attacking and blame.
- De-escalation of strong emotions. This is about helping people to express their emotions in a calm and moderate way. One de-escalation technique that can be helpful is the 5 As
 1. **Acknowledge** the other persons feelings and name the feelings, I hear that you feel sad, betrayed, angry etc.
 2. **Affirm** that it is OK to feel sad, betrayed, angry etc
 3. **Ask** questions about why they feel that way. Try to understand the root cause of the emotions
 4. **Alternatives** – if the person wasn't feeling sad, betrayed angry etc, how would they like to feel?
 5. **Act** – agree a series of steps and actions to deal with the emotions and secure a positive outcome for them and for you.



The Accidental Mediator



Mediation may seem like something that has to be done incredibly formally through the correct channels within a pre-agreed framework; a job for the highly trained, highly qualified professional. But in reality that's not always possible or even desirable. Sometimes conflict is either in its very early stages or a small organisation doesn't have the resources or systems to enable a 'formal' process. Sometimes a conflict can flare up so quickly that no amount of forward planning can help. So what then?

Then it is up to the mild-mannered manager or director to step up, don the suit of diplomacy and save the day. Sometimes it falls to the Accidental Mediator to be the hero.

So if you find yourself in that position, how should you handle it? What do you do if you walk into the office one morning and find two of your employees engaged in a battle? Here are a few guiding principles to help keep things calm while the situation is resolved.

1. Acknowledge what's happening. Recognise that a difficult conversation is going on and ask the parties if they would like help to resolve it. If they say no, you need to respect that as long as it's not impacting on others. Be ready to offer your assistance again if the situation doesn't improve.

2. Talk to them individually. Take the issue out of the workplace. A local cafe or park might be a good spot. Somewhere away from the problem itself where the individuals will feel safe having an honest conversation. Ask them what happened and what they **observed**. Encourage them to talk about it in a depersonalised, non-



blaming way. Be an active listener – don't interrupt and don't offer suggestions. Summarise what you have heard.

3. Joint meeting. When you have heard from both sides separately, bring them together in a neutral place. Agree a basic set of rules for the conversation with key points like a commitment to uninterrupted speaking and confidentiality. Invite them to talk one at a time while the other listens. Let both have their say and allow them to have an open and honest exchange. **Reflect** what they are saying back to them to ensure everyone is understanding what is being said in the same way.

4. Future focused. Once they have both spoken, focus on what both individuals need to happen next. Encourage them to talk about the future and not just the past. Not what they want to happen but what they **need** to happen to be able to move on amicably. This often really focuses the mind on practical solutions but remember – the solutions have to come from the individuals, not you.

5. Handling flare ups. Accidental mediators, like professional mediators might experience the odd flare up - a walk out or a heated exchange. Keep calm and check in with the parties. Use my *4 As model* to de-escalate the situation:

- **Acknowledge** the situation and name any strong emotions
- **Affirm** that it is OK to feel worried/angry/upset etc
- **Ask** question to find out more - what is driving the emotion?
- **Seek Alternatives** - if you weren't feeling angry, how would you like to feel. How can you achieve that objective?

6. Check in. Once a solution has been agreed, make sure you keep checking in with both sides over the next few hours, days or weeks. Offer support if they need it and check that the individuals are both content with the outcome. If you see problems reappearing it may be worth having another round of individual meetings and another joint meeting. It doesn't need to be a long process – perhaps a 5 minute chat will get things back on track.

While the above 6 steps won't qualify you as an international diplomat, they should get you through the most basic conflicts, and the principles will serve you well at any level. **Remember:** stay calm and keep it relaxed and safe for everyone involved. Ask open ended questions and actively listen to all sides. And most importantly of all remember that the Accidental Mediator's real superpower is *never* taking sides.



Appendices

Barriers to Confident Conversations

ORDERING

Causing parties to feel under pressure to act in a particular way and implying they are less valuable “don’t ask why – just do it!”

THREATENING

Forcing or trying to elicit a particular response based upon what you want to hear. Can cause fear and/or anxiety: “You’d better change your attitude, or else!”

PREACHING/MORALISING

Taking a ‘holier than thou’ approach will turn the other person off and make you appear arrogant. Employees should be encouraged to help develop their own solutions. “Any decent employee wouldn’t have to be reminded to polish his shoes.”

DISTRACTIONS

Includes external noise or trying to do multiple things at the same time, e.g. checking phone/email while in a meeting.

COMPARING

No two stories are the same; individuals want to feel valued and unique, not just another employee clone: “Look at Jenny; she’s never off sick.”

CRITICISING

Can induce guilt and lower self-esteem, “You’re hopeless at arriving for meetings on time.”

MIND READING

Try not to look for hidden meanings; attempts at mind reading can become mind bending; “I know what you’re thinking but...”

PRAISING TO MANIPULATE

Using praise to get people to change their behaviour or for ulterior motives can create an atmosphere of judgement or deceit, “You’re faster than anyone at putting out stock so from now on that’s your job.”

REHEARSING

It’s impossible to listen if one is busy rehearsing what to say next.



NAME CALLING/LABELLING and SARCASM

Can create feelings of resentment, frustration, victimisation: “That’s just about the level of reliability I’d expect from a Pisces.”

JUDGING

This will invariably be based upon individual experiences, background and culture and can be plain wrong, “You ought to know these prices by now!”

BLAMING

This closes down problem solving and causes defensiveness, “You’re losing us money!”

ARGUING

Although it’s fine to disagree, it is more effective to use assertiveness and active listening skills to elicit fuller and more detailed responses for better results.

EXCUSING

Excusing can require assumptions to be made about who is right and wrong or can imply the excuser has the moral high ground, it can also indicate favouritism and inconsistency: “I’m in a good mood, I’ll let you off this time.”

REASSURING

Can be a barrier if feelings are ignored, can be too optimistic/unbelievable, “Don’t be nervous, you’ll be fine.” “I’m sure it will get better by morning.”

PROVOKING

Provoking employees is a dangerous route to go down. It encourages a lack of self-control in the other person and can show a lack of control on the part of the manager, “Go on then, take one more World Cup sickie day off.”

INTERROGATING

A constant barrage of questions can feel like an interrogation. Balance and discretion are important factors together with letting people speak freely (they often provide more information that way). Check how pressurised people are feeling; “What time did you set off? Who saw you arrive? Are you sure?”

PLACATING

As with excusing, if an important issue needs addressing then it should be addressed, however hard it may seem at first, “Don’t worry, I’m sure the others won’t mind.”

ADVISING

Can lead to dependency or ‘yes, but...’ and implies a lack of confidence in the employee’s own ability to problem-solve, “The way to deal with that problem is to...”



LOGICAL ARGUMENT

This can be infuriating when a person is under stress because it focuses on the facts and not on the feelings; “According to the figures you have nothing to be upset about, it’s all completely straightforward.” If they feel upset, they feel upset!

DIVERTING

Shows a lack of respect by diverting attention to you, “You think I’m a difficult boss, let me tell you about my first boss...”



With special thanks to

The TCM Group

Unit 235, Business Design Centre
52 Upper St. Islington
London
N1 0QH

Tel: 020 7404 7011

info@thetcmgroup.com

www.thetcmgroup.com

