

When the going gets tough, get your strengths going

Difficult conversations are inevitable – and the workplace is no different from other areas of life. To ask for a pay rise, let someone go or resolve a dispute are tough issues to talk about – and to do so effectively means having the right approach. At 10Eighty, we believe that understanding and playing to your strengths is an essential underpinning to not only surviving, but also thriving through having difficult conversations.

So what is a difficult conversation? We are indebted to the excellent book “Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most” by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project for the answer. A difficult conversation is basically anything that we find hard to talk about. As the authors put it: “Anytime we feel vulnerable or our self-esteem is implicated, when the issues at stake are important and the outcome uncertain, when we care deeply about what is being discussed or about the people with whom we are discussing it, there is potential for us to experience the conversation as difficult.”

Every difficult conversation is in fact made up of 3 different conversations interweaving simultaneously. These are the:-

The Actual Conversation. This comprises the ...

- Truth assumption: It is tempting for us all to feel that we are right and others are wrong.
- Intention invention: We believe we already know the other persons’ intention, based on our feelings (i.e. you’ve made me angry).
- Blame game: The assumption is all about the fault of the other side (i.e. you did something wrong).

The Feelings Conversation. This is because ...

- Feelings are at the core of difficult conversations.
- How you manage your feelings will define how the conversations go.

The Identity Conversation. This raises 4 key questions ...

- What is the conversation saying about me?
- Does the conversation match how I see myself?
- How will this conversation impact on me?
- How do I feel about myself?

How we use our underlying strengths will define our success in reconciling these 3 strands. This is because playing to our strengths allows a more positive mind-set in the face of difficult conversations, which means more constructive conversations and more positive outcomes. [The Strengthscope tool used successfully by 10Eighty](#) with clients shows us that strengths that are directly applicable to having successful difficult conversations. These are:-

- Thinking: Where we apply your intellect, as well as how we go about gathering and using information to make decisions at work.
- Emotional: Where we make sense of, express and manage our emotions in the way we perform our work.

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- Relational: Where we establish and maintaining productive relations with others for personal need satisfaction and/or to achieve our work goals.
- Execution: Where we focus on how we deliver results, including both what is delivered and how it is delivered.

The positive psychology of playing to our strengths in the face of difficult conversations makes for better relationships in work, as well as in life. The research evidence is clear. When employees are encouraged to play to their strengths, an organisation enjoys: a 73% improvement in employee engagement; a 44% increase in customer retention scores; and a 90% of employees feeling more positive and solutions-oriented.

Difficult conversations are inevitable. So when the going gets tough, let's get our strengths going.