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Navigating difficult conversations

Five strategies to lead with compassion



Janice Otremba is a Certified Executive Coach and an International Keynote Speaker with over 20 years of experience. Otremba supports leaders in mastering relationship intelligence to better their life, organization, and community by providing tools and strategies to confidently manifest strategic and desired outcomes. Otremba can be reached at info@janiceotrebma.com or 250-574-3734.

Over the last year we've experienced the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and an opioid epidemic, raging wildfires, political tension, global social movements, and economic hardships. Any one of these issues on their own could adversely impact our mental health, but the culmination of all of them threatens mental health on a global scale.

Enduring a prolonged state of crisis has radically shifted how we navigate daily life and communicate both personally and professionally. To some degree, stress is unavoidable. It's an innate physiological response designed to help us survive danger or perceived threats. But today's world features unique and more subtle threats along with increased daily demands and emotional strain unlike anything humans have ever experienced.

According to Health Canada, close to 11 million Canadians experience high levels of stress, with an additional two million being at risk for stress-related trauma due to COVID-19.¹ Another way to frame this is one in five Canadians are experiencing symptoms of depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

From those reporting a pre-existing mental health issue, 68 percent stated that their mental health has worsened since the pandemic.² Unsurprisingly, leaders are being called upon for more transparency, agility, and self-awareness as a result.

The Miscommunication-Stress Cycle

Chronic stress and tension are not isolated events and create a ripple effect over time. When

we are in a heightened emotional state, resentment, impatience, and indifference can bubble up to the surface and overflow into other areas of our lives. With no issue-specific containment, we experience a trauma response to what would normally be small everyday stressors. This persistent lack of containment ultimately has a severe impact on our interpersonal relationships and how we experience the world.

Compounding the issue is the tendency for stress and poor communication to go hand in hand, creating a vicious and frustrating miscommunication-stress cycle. The 2019 Dynamic Signal's Annual State of Employee Communication study found that 80 percent of respondents felt stress related to poor company communication and 70 percent felt overwhelmed by a lack of clear direction (likely due to poor communication). From those respondents, 63 percent noted that they were seriously considering quitting their job due to poor workplace communication.

These ongoing patterns can dramatically impact a company's bottom line. According to a recent study by Morneau Shepell (now LifeWorks), workplace

1 Statistics Canada, "Canadians' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic," *The Daily*, May 27, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200527/dq200527b-eng.htm>.

2 Statistics Canada, "Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health, September to December 2020," *The Daily*, March 18, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210318/dq210318a-eng.htm>.

conflict costs Canadian businesses over \$2 billion a year. A 2008 study by CPP notes a staggering 60 percent of employees never received basic conflict management classes or training.³ Taking both studies into consideration, it's safe to say that workplace conflict is a big issue getting little attention from employers.

Managing Conflict in the Workplace

With over half of the workforce not equipped to have difficult conversations, it's clear that developing these skills needs to be made a priority. Left unmanaged or

personal attack (conflict), productive and respectful communication flat lines, turning an already uncomfortable situation into an excruciating one. This last year has provided the perfect storm to escalate disagreement into heated arguments. Lingering stress, tension, and angst can influence how we navigate difficult conversations, especially when relating to complex issues. Remaining vigilant to these ongoing risks are essential in leadership.

Imagine that an employee hijacks a staff meeting by aggressively dominating the conversation, raising their voice, and belittling others. From the leader's

As leaders, you are integral to maintaining stability, leveraging collective strengths, and helping your team build trust and resilience. The more equipped you and your team are to navigate uncertainty and effectively manage stress, the more successful your communication will become.

To lead with compassion, apply these five strategies to navigate difficult conversations.

1. Stay genuinely curious

Reflect on how you perceive and react to new information. Consider what's working and what's not in how you

It's often surprising how much of what we react to is based on our own assumptions. Challenge what you actually know versus what you think you know and check your expectations before you engage.

unaddressed, the overall impact on our social interactions is the loss of ability to discuss, debate, and disagree respectfully, ultimately fracturing society – something we can see at play on social media.

Fixing the problem starts with understanding individual value systems and knowing where we stand in relation to others. Everyone is motivated by one of three positions: need, want, or don't want. Just like a book cannot be judged by its cover, a motive cannot be judged by a behaviour.

To gain better results from your interactions and collaborate effectively, it's important to note that people's behavioural responses change under two conditions: when things are going well, and when they are in conflict. If an interaction feels uncomfortable or confrontational, instead of reacting to the surface-level behaviour, consider what may lie underneath and what may be triggering the emotional response.

In healthy doses, opposition is essential for any relationship – it gives us an opportunity to gain clarity, build trust, and create channels for open and positive dialogue. Employing the right skills at the right time elevates a leader's ability to foster a psychologically safe culture. Conflict, however, can be a more serious issue.

When the focus shifts from an objective disagreement (opposition) to a

perspective, it's clear to see the negative impact this person's behaviour is having on the rest of the team (e.g., eye-rolling and side glances, disengaging from the discussion, or responding with frustration).

The leader's role quickly shifts from facilitating a collaborative and productive meeting to de-escalating the tension in the room. Implementing positive change or gaining forward momentum is all but impossible and constructive dialogue stalls out.

Five Conflict Management Strategies for Compassionate Leaders

Understanding what's driving a person's behaviour can dramatically change your experience with them and, ultimately, the outcome. It's through daily interactions that communication is either strengthened or strained. Needless to say, avoiding difficult conversations doesn't eradicate the problem, it simply prolongs stress and exacerbates the issue, resulting in a decline in morale, trust, engagement, productivity, and collaboration.

Here's the upside: while many aspects contributing to our increased stress levels remain out of our control, how we respond to the disruption is entirely within our control. We can be highly productive and thrive; it just won't happen by accident.

deliver new information to others. How might your own experiences shape your perception of the situation?

When opposition or conflict occurs, look at the outcome and dive deeper to try to understand the "why." Is there something you can do differently? Consider the other person's experience and whether they may also be experiencing conflict.

2. Avoid assumption

It's often surprising how much of what we react to is based on our own assumptions. Challenge what you actually know versus what you think you know and check your expectations before you engage.

Are you acting on facts and asking clarifying questions or drawing your own conclusion?

3. Lead courageously

Difficult conversations are messy, awkward, and uncomfortable. As leaders, it's your responsibility to have them and inspire others to do the same. By checking your ego at the door and being vulnerable, you remain open and willing to listen to and discover new solutions.

3 CPP (2008), "Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive," CPP Global Human Capital Report, p.14.

4. Promote a psychologically safe space for yourself and others

Arguably, the most challenging part of having difficult conversations is encouraging others to join you in the discomfort. One of the key components of creating a psychologically safe space is for people to feel free of judgement when voicing their opinions or feelings. Yet, according to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, less than a quarter of Canadians feel comfortable approaching their employer with mental health concerns.⁴

5. Be prepared

Just like avoiding conflict rarely solves the issue, neither does walking into a challenging conversation unprepared. Before stepping into a difficult conversation, consider the following:

- What might frustrate you in this conversation?
- What might be the other side of the issue?
- What would be a positive outcome for both sides and what can be compromised if need be?

- What could be an underlying cause of their behaviour?

The reality is that people are complex and difficult conversations are uncomfortable. That said, we are in this together. We are all human and are navigating these tumultuous times as best as each of us can. Every moment is an opportunity to contribute to chaos or compassion – that is within your control. How do you want to contribute and lead? [MW](#)

⁴ see Note 2.

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