

## Strengthening Relationships Through Having Tough Conversations By Suzanne Black

How many times have we ruined our weekend by stewing over a conversation we needed to have on Monday when we got back to work? If you are like me, that pit in your stomach is unmistakable. Although we try to avoid it, there is no getting around the fact that something needs to get communicated, discussed and resolved.

While most of us do not relish this challenge, there are positive outcomes available. What if you could approach this conversation opportunity with the possibility of actually strengthening your relationship? What must the conversation include in order to leave both parties satisfied and progressing with their work? How will you handle it if the conversation gets heated?



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President

### First, however, what is your current style?

Are you:

**RoboCop** – Mowing down anyone who gets in your way. Obviously the only way to handle this is with a direct hit!

**Scarlet O'Hara** – “Oh we’ll think about that tomorrow!” putting off those conversations hoping it will get better without having to address it.

**Henry Kissenger** – Well once we have weighed all of the pro’s and con’s it looks like you will need to change and stop doing the thing you’re doing that bugs me to death.

**Mom** – Just give them a dirty look and that will convey the message.

**Clint Eastwood** – Make my day ... Start the communication peacefully enough and then when any resistance comes up – mow it down. (closely related to Robocop.)

Having applied the above approaches, you undoubtedly will be avoiding any tough conversations in the future.

### Is it a tough conversation or a person that’s tough to talk to?

Sometimes the person that you need to speak to is someone you don’t feel comfortable with. What makes a conversation tough is the fear of the reaction and whether that reaction will hurt us in some way. If you can minimize the reaction – you’ll develop more confidence in having the conversation.

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Preparing yourself for a tough conversation can help you raise your confidence and your openness to having the interchange.

1. **Disentangle your feelings from the facts.** Get clear on your behavioral requests. Hurt feelings can make you be retaliatory vs. straight with your partner.
2. **Try to imagine the situation from their point of view.** Attempt to take on the point of view that if you were in their shoes at this time in your life you would see things the same way.
3. **Plan your opening** and be willing to stay in the conversation until it's complete.
4. **Breathe, lighten up and include some humor**, especially about yourself. If you don't take yourself so seriously there is less to find issue with.
5. If you don't come to a resolution, acknowledge the understanding that the dialogue has allowed and **see what each of you think is the next step.**
6. **Do not gossip about the person with which you had the conversation.** The gossip damages any safe environment you may have created. It also diminishes the possibility that you can work effectively with the challenging person since you have demeaned them through gossip.

### **Breaking the Ice**

In the **Dental Boot Kamp**, we teach a couple of ways to begin to break the ice on a tough conversation.

1. **I need your help.** All of us want to be helpful in some way – even those of us who may be crustier on the outside. Asking for a person's help gets you started off on the right foot. For example – "I need your help. At the end of the day, we get really backed up on instruments and if you could take care of ops 3 & 4 and I take care of 1 & 2 we'd have it handled. How does that sound to you?"
2. **Asking permission.** "Would it be ok if we spent a few minutes talking about a challenge that I/we have?"
3. **Apology.** "I must apologize. Obviously I misunderstood your comment to me. I know you want this to work out well for both of us. Did I do something to cause you to be upset with me."

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**I learned from Walter Hailey that a great way to have a conversation is on a walk.** During the walk we are both looking forward so that it is less confrontational, we are breathing deeply which allows for more endorphins to feed our sense of well being. In fact, Walter had a tough conversation with me on a long walk. I'll never forget it. He was making some pretty tough statements about how I was leading in the organization. At the end of the walk, I knew he cared and I knew I needed to make some changes.

**The most important aspect of having a tough conversation is to do it the NIKE way – Just do it!** The withholding and suppression of the conversation can lead to reducing your confidence around the person, causing health concerns and eventually losing that person as a partner.

The human mechanism is to justify ourselves and find fault with another when we have withheld communication.

### **Setting the Practice Up for Healthy Communication**

In a busy practice it may seem like it's not a priority to take time for communication. But not communicating with the team can exact a heavy price. A communications gap doesn't only undermine morale and performance, it can ultimately impact the bottom line:

- Over a five-year period, companies with higher scores on information sharing had a higher return on investment and higher return on sales than companies with low scores, according to a University of Michigan survey.
- An analysis of data from employee attitude surveys at Hewlett-Packard and GE found a strong correlation between improved two-way employee/supervisor communication and increased productivity and employee retention.
- At Sears, analysts found that a five-point improvement in employee attitudes – a factor often tied to information sharing – will drive an increase in customer satisfaction and improvement in revenue growth, according to "The Employee-Customer-Profit Chain at Sears" – Harvard Business Review, January 1998.

In the dental practice, we all know the toll it takes on patient relations, case presentation and team work when either the dentist is dissatisfied with an employee's performance or team members are at odds.

In one very successful practice we instituted regular team meetings during office time. Productivity increased by 35% in less time. I have seen this time and again. Take the time to communicate – the time invested will pay off.

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### **Setting up a Safe Environment**

In your team meetings, establish a safe environment by asking each person use the team meetings:

- To communicate fully.
- To communicate honestly and respectfully.
- To promise that there will be no retaliation as a result of what is said in the meeting.
- Once every six months have one on one time for every team member with each other. 15 minutes each is sufficient. In that time ask 3 questions: What could I do to improve my performance?; What would I like from you to have things work better?; What I want to thank you for is\_\_\_\_\_?

If you think about it, anything you accomplish requires communication. Here at the Coaching Center we believe (and have evidence to support) that there is no conversation too tough, and no one too difficult to have a powerful, empowering relationship with. Although, obviously, not all conversations are tough, being able to have tough conversations skillfully is key.

If we can help you in any way with your tough conversations do not hesitate to contact us!



With a Masters Degree in communication, Suzanne began her career helping build one of the largest personal development training company's in the world and later became a protégé of the late Walter Hailey. Today, as President and CEO of The Coaching Center Suzanne has over 20 years experience consulting and training over 300 different businesses and leads the most qualified case acceptance team in dentistry. Having successfully dealt with every challenge imaginable in the dental office, Suzanne speaks around the country on topics such as Leadership, Case Presentation and Stopping Cancellations and is a keynote speaker at Dental Meetings and Conventions. Her on-stage style, humorous anecdotes and ability to always deliver a relevant and personal message makes her a winning, engaging and unforgettable seminar leader. Suzanne

is one of the main faculty for the Dental Boot Kamp Continuum, which has proudly been delivered across the United States and Canada for the last 20 years, graduating over 35,000 dental professionals. Suzanne can be reached at [suzanne@thecoachingcenter.net](mailto:suzanne@thecoachingcenter.net)