

7 Tips for Growing Teammates Through Critical Conversations

By Linda Sasser

In my previous articles about critical conversations, I discussed how to avoid dropping a bomb on teammates by hinting at the tone of an upcoming critical conversation. By setting the tone of the meeting *before* the meeting, you can give others the opportunity to mentally prepare for the conversation.

Today I'm sharing "the rest of the story," as Paul Harvey used to say, on how to *conduct* and *follow up* on a critical conversation. And take care not to confuse critical conversations with confrontations. I love coaching others, and I believe that every conversation, especially a critical one, is an excellent coaching and learning opportunity.

Now, let's dig into the guts of pulling off a successful conversation with these seven suggestions.

1. Set the Environment - I'm not much for using small talk to begin a critical conversation. If you set the tone for the meeting, your teammate or teammates attending the meeting will probably feel a little anxious, so small talk is meaningless.

However, I do encourage lightening up the environment. That's not meaningless small talk. For me, lightening things up usually includes humor. I typically use myself as the victim of the humor because I don't mind laughing at myself. Laughing at myself also helps to create more of a balanced playing field, so I'm not intimidating whoever I'm conversing with.

Now, if you're not a funny person, don't use this approach. It would probably be awkward. My point is to find a way to set an environment that is open and not intimidating. This shouldn't take more than a couple minutes.

2. Get to the Point - Once you've set the tone and the environment, move the conversation firmly to the critical issue. I say firmly because if I've started the meeting with a little humor, I want to make sure I balance that out so it's clear that it's time to be serious about our topic. I may say, "I'm glad we're able to laugh together because it will help us with this tough conversation I need to have with you..."

3. Coaching Mindset - Establish in your mind that you're having a coaching conversation; you're not creating an argument or being the bearer of bad news. EVERY critical conversation is a great coaching opportunity. My best performing teammates are often the ones I've had the most critical conversations with because through those conversations, I've been able to coach and we've both grown. They know I'm "for them."

4. Allow a Conversation to Take Place - Let the person respond so they feel they have the opportunity to give their viewpoint. Even if there is NO WAY the person was in the right, allow them to express their stance. Ultimately, as the leader, it's your call how you steward the team. It's okay to put your stake in the ground and be firm with your decisions.

5. Set Expectations – How you end your conversation is just as important as how you start it. Set the tone again. Make sure everyone leaves with expectations and clarity on how to move forward. It could be as simple as asking, “How will you handle your emotions the next time you're in that situation?” or “How are you going to change the direction of the failing marketing plan?”

6. What Did We Learn? - This is my favorite part. Make sure you stop and reflect with the other person on what was learned. This helps everyone prevent some of the same mistakes from happening again. The follower starts to understand the leader's stance and philosophy on things, and the leader learns how to better communicate and connect with the teammate.

7. Reinforce - When you see actions taking place that reflect a positive adjustment to the critical conversation, make sure you go out of your way to recognize it. Let them know you've noticed, and you like it!

Remember, you're the leader, not the boss. And as the leader, you must use critical conversations to your advantage. Why? Because it's an opportunity to grow those you're responsible to lead.

Linda Sasser is the founder and CEO of Impacting Leaders, a leadership development and organizational growth firm. Connect with her on Twitter, @LindaSasser, on LinkedIn, or on her blog at www.leadershipwithsass.com.