Difficult conversations

We have conversations all the time at work and most of them will be anywhere on a range between energising and harmless. Some conversations, however, stop us in our tracks for all the wrong reasons. They make us anxious about the outcome, our ability to control our own emotional reactions or handle the other person’s response, making the situation worse or maybe ending up in some kind of formal process. It’s tempting to avoid these conversations. The problem is that if we do, the thing that needs to be said doesn’t get voiced and the thing that needs to change probably won’t. Leaving change to chance is risky. If you want to turn a difficult conversation into a collaborative dialogue, then here are seven tips. Alternatively, try our difficult conversations online resource.

The first thing to recognise is that yours is not the only point of view here. Your reality is yours. The other person in this conversation has theirs. You might think that the thing you want to see changed is blindingly obvious, but if it isn’t happening that’s probably because the other person would find it problematic to do, or they don’t see the change in the same way as you if at all.

So, we begin a difficult conversation by becoming genuinely curious about the other person’s point of view. We do that by neutralising our assumptions. Our first three tips are:

1. Write down or rehearse EXACTLY what you would say if you wanted the other person to be in no doubt of your meaning.
2. Strip out the assumptions that may be leading you to make a judgement before you begin
3. Start the conversation in neutral

Imagine you want to talk to your assistant about checking grammar before handing work over. The temptation might be to say something like, “It’s an easy thing to do, run a grammar check on a Word document. It’s careless not to do it before you email it to me! It means I have to do it for you and it’s something I expect my assistant to do…”

If we strip out the assumptions and judgements (it’s an easy thing to run a grammar check, it’s careless not to do it) what we’re left with is, “I’d like you to run a grammar check on Word documents before you send them to me.” It’s much easier for someone to hear an opening statement like this that doesn’t contain a judgement that they are careless and an assumption that grammar checks are easy to do.

There’s another assumption here: does your assistant know that you expect them to do this for you? If you haven’t made it explicit then they might be making their own assumption that you’re happy with their work. Wading in with an accusation gets most conversations off on the wrong foot, so it’s worth learning how to find a neutral start.

4. Say your opening statement and then STOP TALKING

The next tip is to learn to stop talking. This may sound odd in a piece on conversations, but hogging the air time and depriving the other person of the opportunity to be heard will undermine any difficult conversation. We’re often tempted to go on talking, to repeat our opening message in the hope that we’ll find a magic way of making the other person accept what we say cheerfully. Furthermore, as long as we are talking, the other person isn’t and we stay in control.

So, voice your opening statement and stop talking so that you can listen. When you listen (are you truly listening or are you waiting to speak?) you show the other person respect and you give yourself the opportunity to understand their perspective.
When you listen to your assistant in this situation, you might hear something like this.

“Oh. It’s just that I used to use the grammar checker in Word, but my last boss didn’t agree with some of the corrections that the online tool suggested. She was annoyed with me for following the checker’s rules instead of hers. I ended up getting confused and lost a bit of confidence in my judgement I suppose.”

5. Listen and play it back to make sure you understand and show the other person you’re trying to understand

It’s worth resisting the temptation to respond with another judgement, “But that’s ridiculous!” or another assumption about your assistant’s confidence, “You should have told me before!”

Try playing it back so that you have listened and want to ensure you understand. If you can, acknowledge how the other person feels. Acknowledging doesn’t mean you agree, it simply says that you hear. Something like, “That sounds tough. So you would write a document, use the Word grammar checker and then be criticised for accepting its suggestions? Have I got it right?”

In doing this you are acknowledging that your assistant’s reality is significant for them.

6. If there is any common ground, acknowledge it and suggest that you both look for options on a way forward

Now that you can see how and why your assistant is reluctant to do something that you see as an essential, you can find the common ground and look for options to resolve. Looking for options instead throwing a solution at the issue can achieve a better buy in to whatever you both decide, because you both own the outcome.

The problem here seems to be confidence. The thing that needs to happen is a grammar check. Your assistant knows how to use the online checker. You could try saying, “What I’d really like is to have documents sent to me that have been checked for good grammar so that I don’t have to correct them. I can hear you’re worried about being criticised. What do you think we could do?”

7. Agree a way forward

Your assistant might say, “I can use the online tool. What if you disagree with the result?”

You could do a bit of playing back at this point, “You mean if I have a personal, style issue that I would like you to follow?”

“Yes. My last boss didn’t explain them to me. I was just expected to work the rule out myself.”

You could try another option, “So let’s say that you use the online tool and if I prefer something to be written differently, then I explain what it is and why. How would that be?”

“I think that would be all right.”

“What else would help?”

“I suppose I could keep each one as an example to help me next time.”

“Sounds good. So shall we just recap?”

“OK. I’ll use the online tool to check the grammar in every document I write for you and if you prefer a different style, you’ll explain it to me and I can build my own list of examples to follow.”