



# Mountains Into Molehills

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Mountains Into Molehills aims to build understanding of self and others. It integrates relevant theory with practical step by step guides to coping with stressful situations, and handling difficult situations assertively.

## Chapter Eight – Difficult Conversations

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## The Keys To Successful Difficult Conversations

**Key Number One** You will find it impossible to have successful 'difficult conversations' unless you have the ability to control the angry impulses which you are likely to experience as you attempt to process the subject matter of any particular 'difficult conversation'. For this reason I suggest that you read Chapter Nine 'Anger Management' in conjunction with this chapter.

It's OK to feel angry – anger is a natural emotion from which no human being is exempt. However it's important to manage the release of anger in an appropriate way. These are the rules about anger release:

- With the right person
- In the right place
- For the right reason
- At the right time
- In the right way
- For the right length of time
- Without harming self or anyone else

Losing your temper when trying to resolve a problem using the techniques contained in this chapter is definitely to be avoided. Definitely not the right time or right place. It's vital that you stay in charge of you otherwise you will not get the result from the difficult conversation that you want.

Since first writing this chapter I have focussed on the problem of self control [impulse control] and have written a coaching guide which forms part of my Anger Management Programme. This is available on line at [www.angermanagementprogramme.co.uk](http://www.angermanagementprogramme.co.uk) and as printed version.

I strongly recommend you study my step by step anger management coaching programme if you have problems controlling your angry impulses.

**Key Number Two** If you are a prisoner of passivity you are going to need to develop your assertiveness skills in order to successfully handle difficult conversations so this chapter should be read in conjunction with Chapter Six 'Overcoming Lack of Confidence in Specific Situations', and Chapter Seven 'Assertiveness: How To Become More Self Confident and Assertive'

## The Decision

### To have the difficult conversation...

#### .....or not

- Sometimes you don't get a choice – the situation is unexpected, the initiative with the other person.
- If you are being criticised you will find using the model 'When on the receiving end of criticism' later in this chapter helpful.
- If the other person is angry you will find the model 'How To Calm An Angry Person' later in this chapter helpful.

### Assuming you are in control of the timing...

- The decision to have that potentially difficult conversation is where you need to start. Until you definitely decide that you are going to do it you may keep putting it off.
- Remember – you don't have to have that difficult conversation, don't have to face that difficult situation. It is your assertive right to choose not to. The key is to think about the pros and cons and to make a rational decision – not let it go by default, or let fear alone stop you.
- If you do decide not to go ahead you will feel better having made a decision rather than keep telling yourself you ought to but not getting round to it. A decision puts the power back in your hands. When you choose, even when you choose not to, its you who is in control – not fear or indecision. These rob you of personal power – damage your self esteem, sap your self confidence.

Do a balance sheet

YES Why I <u>should</u> have the conversation	NO Why I <u>should not</u> have the conversation

#### Completing The Balance Sheet

- I. For each item you put on the balance sheet give a score from nought to ten.
- II. The more powerful the reason **to have** the conversation the higher the score for the that item. Put each reason and your marking of it on the left hand side.
- III. The more powerful the reason **not to have** the conversation the higher the score for the that item. Put each reason and your marking of it on the right hand side.
- IV. **DON'T INCLUDE FEAR IN THE BALANCE SHEET.**
- V. Add each side up. Which side gets the highest score?

#### Make Your Decision

If it clear that on the pure logic of the Balance Sheet that you ought to have the conversation but fear is stopping you its 'make your mind up time'. You need to decide whether you are ready to face your fear or remain a prisoner to it. **If you do decide to go ahead it is essential that you prepare yourself thoroughly.** This will boost your confidence and help you be prepared for the occasion.

### **If the decision is 'NO'**

You have made your choice. Stop thinking about it unless and until there are new factors which you did not include in your Balance Sheet.

### **If the answer is 'YES'**

Start planning HOW to do it, and WHEN to do it.  
Unless you firmly commit to 'WHEN' you may keep putting it off.

### **Preparation for That Conversation**

Some choices – with the emphasis on ‘choices’

- ❖ Remember that the other person is, despite your problems with him or her a human being with similar basic needs as you. You will get the best out of the other person if you use the techniques in Chapter Five 'Listening Skills: The key to so many doors '.
- ❖ Try to take a more generous view of the other person. Because of your difficulties you may be blind to any good points [remember that we as human beings tend to notice only what supports what we already believe about someone]. Remember that if you don't like the other person your non verbal communication will have given this away and they may simply be reacting to you.
- ❖ Try being empathic and to see the situation from the other persons point of view. Empathy does not mean that you need to agree with the other person's point of view, only that you understand it so you know where the other person is coming from and, if you feel able, acknowledge their point of view.

### **Prepare thoroughly for the conversation**

- Write down what you would **really** like to say if you could throw caution to the wind and unload everything you are feeling.
- Then compose a more acceptable version which still contains the main issues but expressed in a more tactful way
- Plan what you are going to say to convince the other person that you know how they feel, that you understand their point of view.

- Rehearse what you want to say a number of times until you feel your confidence growing. Ideally get a friend or professional advisor to play the role of the other person in a rehearsal. You will find that an independent person will come up with some angles which the other person [the one you are going to have the difficult conversation with] may come up with and which you have overlooked.
- You don't have to have someone in the room with you when you rehearse – so long as the rehearsal is out loud, so long as you speak the actual words you intend to say.
- Write down some headings 'bullet points' in good size letters to take to the session with you. Headings can be very comforting and boost your confidence on the day! [remember to write big so you can easily see what you have written at arms length]

There are some powerful visualisation techniques to boost your confidence. See Chapter Six 'Overcoming Lack Of Confidence In Specific Situations. Remember: Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear [Mark Twain]

## Try Shrinking The Other Person

It may be that you have been exaggerating the power and importance of the other person. If you have watched The Wizard of Oz you will recall a scene near the end where the wizard is revealed for what he is – not a ferocious giant but a small kindly old man hiding behind a big scary front.

This is a powerful technique which you can experiment with. It will reduce your fear of anyone you do it to.

1. Close your eyes and visualise the other person. Notice everything about them – what they are wearing, their complexion, their features, their eyes, how they wear their hair. Notice all the colours and shades of colours.
2. Now imagine them stepping right up close to you, so close they are 'in your face'. You may feel more anxious.
3. Now imagine them back where they were before. Notice how your feeling changes.
4. Now imagine them stepping back until they are ten yards away. Take some of the colour out of the picture by making the colours paler. Notice your feelings.
5. Now put them thirty yards away and now see only shades of grey.

6. Now move them right away from you until they are no bigger than a child.
7. Now put them in a nappy with a dummy in their mouth

### **Not so scary now are they!**

#### On the day

- Be assertive Don't be afraid to take the risk of putting over your point of view. If the discussion goes pear shaped you can bring it to an end by saying how sorry you are it didn't achieve what you had hoped for. Don't get into an argument.
- Be open about how you feel. Don't keep it bottled up – but stay polite.
- Choose to stay calm! Although its difficult for most people to agree with when they first hear it, the fact is that no-one can make you react angrily. However angry you feel how you react is up to you – unless the other person has a magic wand of course! Does the other person have a magic wand? [please see Chapter Nine 'Managing Anger'].
- Reframe your thoughts into less provocative words Don't say things like – 'You criticise me all the time' or 'You dislike me and it shows'. Such statements are **accusations** and draw defensive responses. Instead try to talk about **how you feel** 'I get the feeling that you don't appreciate me' or 'I don't feel that my contribution is recognised'.
- Be clear in advance what you want from the discussion– and what you are prepared to give. Try to agree what each of you will do differently in future

#### **DIFFICULT PEOPLE – IS IT THEM? OR IS IT US?**

Very often its us but we can't see it. In my experience conflict is **never** wholly down to one party or the other involved in the conflict. In disputes which I mediate I use a rule of thumb that **the party least to blame for problems is at least 30% to blame**. Somebody may 'have started it' but once a poor relationship develops both parties fuel the flames. **Think of a relationship you would like to improve. Be honest with yourself – what are you doing to keep it a poor relationship?**

Please read Chapters One 'Self Awareness: Understanding Self And Others' and Chapter Four 'Why Conflict Occurs And What To Do About It'

## Complaining customers

The lifeblood of any commercial organisation is repeat business i.e. customer retention.

Customers who don't feel that their complaint has been dealt with properly will vote with their feet. What's more, research reveals that they will tell between eight and fifteen other people of their dissatisfaction.

Complaining customers need to be dealt with in a way that placates them and retains their custom.

Think of the complaints you have made in the past. How were you treated? You probably have a model in your head of what not to do based on bad experiences of how you have been treated in the past. If you are fortunate an enlightened organisation or employee will have dealt with a complaint of yours in a way which has provided you with a model way of handling complaints.

Fortunately a customer complaint is not only a threat, its also a superb opportunity to win the customer's loyalty for life!

### **How do you turn the threat into the opportunity?**

**The key is an 'over the top' [generous] response to the complaint.**

This is illustrated by the anecdote of the approach used by an American car dealer. Asked the secret of his success as the Number One car salesman in America that year he said that he built customer loyalty out of the way he dealt with customer complaints. He said he even prayed that something would go wrong with the cars he sold to the Chief Executives of major clients. When it did he responded 'over the top' personally taking control of the situation, sending out a free courtesy car, tackling the problems with the vehicle decisively, apologising personally, and even sending an expensive gift.

The way we handle things that go wrong which is as least as important as a trouble free service or product.

### **Wouldn't it be great if ....**

.....the 8 - 15 other people the complainer tells are being told how brilliantly you responded to the complaint, instead of how crap the product after sales service was!?

## When dealing with a complaining customer

### **Don't defend the indefensible**

Loyalty to the organisation should not get in the way of fair play and accepting that the service or product was not what it should have been.

### **Don't argue. Let the door the customer is pushing be open**

You may disagree with what they are saying, and its OK to give them new information or remind them about the specification they bought – but don't argue. To them their perception is reality; by arguing you will imbed their point of view more deeply as they defend it. Apologise and switch to what you can do to compensate.

### **Personality Profiling**

If you have a say in who works in the Customer Services Department use personality profiling in the selection process. Some personality types are naturals at dealing with customers, but some types will never be good at handling complaining customers however hard they try.

### **Customer Facing Personnel Training Strategy**

Training should be primarily focussed on attitude to customers and attitude to complaining customers. Techniques training is a waste of money unless it is being overlaid on the right attitude to customers. On the other hand, once their attitude is right customer facing staff will be very capable at working out for themselves good ways to placate customers

### **Remember – A complaining customer is an opportunity to win long term customer loyalty**

## When the Difficult Conversation is to be with your boss

All the advice given above, about taking your decision and preparing for the conversation applies, but additional tactics can be considered when dealing with your boss.

- ❖ You will not be able to change his or her personality but you can try to get a change his or her behaviour. Follow the process described above in 'Preparation For That Conversation', and ask for a meeting to discuss the issues on a one to one basis.
- ❖ Consider asking someone trusted/ respected by both you and your boss to be involved in the meeting. AND/ OR
- ❖ Write **privately** to your boss outlining the problem, your desire to work things out, and requesting a meeting. OR

- ❖ Write **formally** to your boss outlining the problem, your desire to work things out, and requesting a meeting. OR
- ❖ Make a formal grievance complaint to your boss's boss. OR
- ❖ Ask for Mediation OR
- ❖ Involve a spokesperson, your Trade Union rep if you have one AND/OR
- ❖ Bide your time until you get another job offer. Improve your qualifications in the meantime. Don't quit without knowing what you will be doing next.
- ❖ If its starting to make you ill – consult your doctor

If you can secure an improved relationship by candid face to face discussion it will be best for both of you. If your boss is a bully you should never confront him or her on your own

#### HOW TO .....

- Use The Stuck Record to hold your position
- Say 'NO'
- Safely express The Way You Feel
- Ask Assertively For What You Want
- Calm Down An Angry Person
- Express your anger safely
- Handle someone who is angry with you
- Give Negative Feedback Positively
- Challenge what someone is saying
- Handle being criticised

## Using The Stuck Record

This is an essential technique in lots of situations and you will find it referred to several times in the following pages. **All you do is keep repeating what you said with only slight variations and no additions.**

Whether you are apologising to an angry person, ensuring that the person you want something from doesn't get away with sidetracking, dealing with criticism, or saying 'NO', and in many other situations, you will find the stuck record approach invaluable. If you want to see the stuck record in action just listen to kids trying to get mum to buy them something!

### Three Step Sequence In Saying 'NO'

**Step One** Express your desire to be helpful and regret that you cannot.  
[Its very important that you start in this way]

**Step Two** Offer an explanation if you feel it appropriate – you don't have to.  
[Don't give elaborate explanations – you will trip yourself up]

**Step Three** Use the stuck record

**Finally** Try to be part of the solution by suggesting other options

### Basic Principles For In Saying 'NO'

**Start with the decision** to start saying 'No' more often, and in specific circumstances.

**Decide in advance** the boundaries beyond which you will not go.

**Defend your boundaries**

**Use the 'stuck record'** technique in the face of persistence and pressure to say 'Yes'

**If you are really trapped** – buy time – don't agree there and then.

'Can I get back to you on that'

'I need to think about it, I wouldn't like to say 'yes' and have to let you down'

If you have no intention of helping don't – say 'Yes' just to buy time

**Use Future Prevention** 'I'll do it this time but it's the last time'

**Be powerless** Blame other commitments, pets or people to look after

'I have promised x that I will be there so I can't stay' 'I've got to let the dog out'

'Can't talk now, must get this stuff ready for the meeting in half an hour'

The Best Way Of Expressing How You Feel...

OR Ask For What You Want

The DESC model

**D**ESCRIBE factually the situation as you see it

**E**XPRESS your feelings about the situation

**S**AY what you would like to happen, or what you want [If possible suggest alternatives]

**C**ONSEQUENCE [Risky, so it's optional] Say gently what the possible consequences of not getting what you want might be

**The sequence is important**

- Don't blame them for the way you feel. This amounts to an accusation and may lead to denial and counter accusation. Instead say how you feel, say 'when you do/say that I feel...' This is much softer; your feelings are your feelings and cannot be denied by the other person. They can hardly say 'No you don't'
- Don't attack the person, concentrate on the what they **did**
- Don't attack in response to criticism – stay calm
- When they interrupt, attack, or go onto another subject use the stuck record

How To Calm Down An Angry Person

[To be read in conjunction with Chapter Nine Managing Anger]

When people are angry they are deaf to reason

Think of the bottle of champagne when first uncorked. You have to wait for the fizz to stop before you can pour it! Don't try to reason with an angry person before he / she has stopped fizzing.

The greatest need of an angry person is to feel heard

## THE BIG SIX TACTICS IN DEALING WITH AN ANGRY PERSON

**DO Ask for more information** Even though you might much prefer that they shut up. Ask them to 'tell me more'. Gently probe to understand better what they are upset about.

**DO Empathise** Try to put yourself in their shoes and see the situation from their point of view. Let them know you understand. 'I am not surprised you are angry - I would be too in your situation'. 'No wonder you are upset'.

**DO Find some way to complement them** Even though it's the last thing you may feel like doing! 'You are always so reasonable and helpful' 'You have been very good about this' 'I'm surprised you have put up with it so long'

**DO Find a grain of truth in what they are saying** Even if you feel that what they are saying is wrong, unreasonable, irrational, or unfair. 'Yes, that was bad and I am not surprised the way you feel'

**DO Try to find something you have in common** 'That happened to me' 'When that happened to me' 'We had the same problem'

**DO Use the stuck record technique**

## Other Important Tactics In Handling An Angry Person

**Don't try to defend the indefensible** Let the door they are trying to push be open

**Stick to the facts** Avoid expressing opinions unless they support the angry person

**Don't lose your cool**, or retaliate with sarcasm, however tempted.

**Use active listening skills** so they become convinced that you are taking their feelings seriously. See Chapter Five 'Listening Skills: The Key To Many Doors'

**Guard** against the stress of the situation impairing your ability to listen

**Get them onto the future** Even God cannot change the past

**Acknowledge how they feel** – remember acknowledging is not agreeing

**Think** 'This is not personal – I can handle it'

## Reconciliation: resolving issues you are angry about with someone who is also angry with you

Don't choose to discuss anything you are angry about while you are angry!

1. Preparation: Write down what you would **really** like to say if you could throw caution to the wind and unload everything you are feeling.
2. Next: Compose a more acceptable version which still contains the main issues but expressed in a more tactful way.
3. Then: Plan what you are going to say to convince the other person that you know how they feel, that you understand their point of view even though you may not agree with it. People are often deaf to your point of view until they feel you understand theirs!
4. Write out what you plan to say in the following format:
  - The facts which have led to your feelings of anger
  - Your feelings about the situation.
  - What you would like to happen, what you want.
  - The possible consequences of not getting what you want
5. Rehearse what you want to say a number of times until you feel your confidence growing.
6. Write down some headings 'bullet points' in good size letters to take to the meeting
7. Tell the other person that you need to talk and arrange a time and place convenient for both. Choose a place where you won't be interrupted, overhead, or on show.

### **At The Meeting**

[Remember to take your script – it may throw you if you suddenly find you haven't got it]

8. Say why you want to talk – the facts as you see it. Don't move on until facts agreed
9. Ask them to put their point of view first – Don't interrupt or lose your cool. Let them vent
10. When they have got their feelings out, and not before, explain your feelings about the situation. If they interrupt or go off at a tangent wait patiently then use the stuck record technique and repeat what you were saying before they interrupted. You may also try to stop the interruption by pointing out that you listened to them and ask if they will listen to you.
11. Listen to what they have to say in response

12. Ask what they need, what they want from you.
13. Tell them what you need, what you want from them
14. Say [if safe] what the consequence will be of you not getting what you want
15. Try to agree what is to happen in future

**It is important to try to stick to the sequence above**

Please also re-read the sections from earlier in this chapter 'Handling An Angry Person', 'Expressing Yourself Assertively', and 'Preparing For That Difficult Conversation'.

### How To Give Negative Criticism Positively

The feedback sandwich has become a bit discredited as people have learned that often when someone says something nice it may be because s because they are about to say something not so nice. The structure of the feedback sandwich is as follows:

1. Open with positives
2. Make your point
3. Close with positives

I think its OK not to strictly follow this format when giving feedback so long as you make sure that there is sufficient positive comment to counterbalance anything which may be taken as criticism.

**The key is to focus on the behaviour not the person**

Its NOT OK to say 'You p\*s me off'.

It IS OK to say 'what you did p\*s me off'

Example: 'I love you dad, but sometimes you act like a total a\*\*hole'  
[Film: Meet The Parents]

**Remember stick to things they can change if they choose to – behaviour, not personality**

## CHALLENGING GENTLY

- If sarcasm is used you draw attention to it, 'Are you being sarcastic?'. You may know damn well they are – its just a way of challenging by pretending you are not sure – a way that gives you a get out compared with a straight accusation.
- Being bossed about? Try 'Is that an order' or 'Yes SIR'
- Feelings hurt? Try just saying 'ouch'
- Admitting to a mistake? Try 'Sorry' or, if the atmosphere is right, 'Oops!'
- Say 'I feel' not 'You make me feel' which is an accusation which may be disputed and lead to a sidetrack. No one can challenge how you feel only why you feel.
- Trying to make you feel guilty? Use 'You aren't trying to make me feel guilty are you' – said with a smile .

**Make sure you never challenge in a way that humiliates the other person.  
It may help you to feel good but its not going to achieve anything positive**

When on the receiving end of criticism...

...Depends whose criticising!

- Stay calm, keep your dignity
- Change to relaxation breathing
- Listen carefully
- Ask for specific examples
- Don't try to justify the unjustifiable – if you are in the wrong admit it and apologise
- Don't retaliate by counter attacking with unrelated stuff

- If appropriate, and most times when its your boss who is criticising, ask for time to consider what's been said and the opportunity to discuss the criticism at another time in the near future. Fix a further session to discuss your considered response
- Discuss what has been said with someone you trust. Ask their advice on how to handle the situation
- Prepare a point by point response.

**Alternatively Don't defend. Instead –**

Dismiss the criticism with the simple statement, 'I'm sorry you think that' or 'I'm sorry you feel like that'. This does not accept the criticism and leaves the critic nowhere to go. If the criticism continues use the broken record technique simply repeating , 'I'm sorry you think that' or 'I'm sorry you feel like that'.

**Reading**

Getting To Yes: Negotiating an agreement without giving in  
Roger Fisher and William Ury      ISBN 0 09 92484

Difficult Conversations  
Douglas Stone & others      Penguin   1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Successfully Dealing With Difficult People  
Brian Slater & Naomi Langford Wood   ISBN 0 340 72076 X