

# The Art Of Mastering Challenging Conversations At Work

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Time after time, senior management executives face challenging workplace conversations that they may feel ill-equipped to handle.

A challenging conversation is one in which we are out of our comfort zone, but also has the potential to make a significant impact for the better organization-wide. Examples of these types of interactions might involve providing developmental feedback, addressing poor performance, turning down an employee request, handling a complaint or disciplinary process, or meetings in which it is necessary to raise issues that potentially result in conflict, such as addressing critical and difficult organizational issues.

Understandably, initiating a challenging conversation can feel overwhelming, and there's a natural tendency for leaders to postpone taking action in the hopes that the issue will get resolved quietly – and without their intervention.

However, this is seldom the case. In fact, procrastination rarely results in issues fading away. If specific problems are disregarded, they can escalate and become more challenging to resolve down the road. As a result, negative consequences not only arise for those team members directly involved but also for the greater company.

It's much better to face issues head-on at an early stage as it can help nip issues in the bud, preclude a situation from worsening and maintain healthy working relationships, as well as have a developmental impact for individuals, teams and the entire company.

## **Unlock Your Potential And Assert Yourself With An Integrator Mindset**

To be prepared to embrace challenging dialogues, it's essential to first understand that these types of conversations can actually be a creative way to generate innovative ideas and development. In my research, I've realized that those leaders who use an "integrator mindset" tend to see better results, often achieving and exceeding organizational goals. The integrator mindset allows us to appreciate that there are many different ways to achieve success and that we must understand context and ensure that we adapt our approach accordingly.

With an integrator mindset, you encourage a trust-based, engaging, creative work culture in which all team members feel accountable and are open to challenging feedback, as well as empowered to contribute to discussions.

So how does this relate to challenging discussions? When you approach potentially challenging conversations with this mindset, you look to engage others non-defensively and with a constructive outcome as the goal. This enables personal self-confidence in stress-inducing situations.

In other words, it's how you show up to confront a situation that will ultimately influence others' behaviors and reactions.

## **Testing Out The Integrator Mindset: A Real-World Example**

One executive I worked with several years ago was a newly appointed CEO of a well-established IT services company at the time. The company's founder was beloved by employees because he had created a strong values-based culture.

At the time of the appointment, the tech-based company was struggling in a strong competitive environment, so changes had to be made urgently. Instead of just working with his personal team, the executive engaged with a large number of middle and senior leaders to share details of the company's situation and to discuss solutions – he knew he needed their full engagement if the company was going to transform successfully.

Unfortunately, the initial reception he received was hostile – many people yelled and even cursed openly. However, rather than withdraw from this very challenging situation, the executive approached the discussions with an integrator mindset, trusting that people would engage as they heard the facts. Team members could see he was truly listening to them with understanding and empathy – despite their behaviors – embracing the company's values and asking for a collaborative approach to the solution.

As part of his approach, he demonstrated that he would support employees to cross organizational boundaries, in line with the values, to achieve a higher level of collaboration. At the end of a very long and intense discussion, one particularly hostile and influential individual said he would temporarily agree to give the integrator mindset “a go,” and if it didn’t prove successful, he would resign.

In the end, the CEO not only supported his originally disgruntled employee but also welcomed him to become fully engaged during the transitional process. This employee also jump-started an innovative project in collaboration with team members – a win-win for all involved.

### **Avoid Brushing Awkward Conversations Under The Rug**

While it’s easy to brush an issue under the rug, avoiding these conversations can make things worse. And the longer you wait, the more it can impact the workplace environment and productivity.

Here are some key factors to keep in mind when it comes to challenging workplace dialogue:

- **It’s more than managing poor performance.**

We are all occasionally faced with challenging conversations. They are challenging because they can take us out of our all-too-familiar comfort zone. Whether it’s a one-on-one discussion or group dialogue, when handled well by focusing on the issues at hand, and not personalities or conflict, there’s greater potential for innovation and development.

- **We are often afraid to engage in difficult conversations.**

How often have you found yourself in a meeting and wanted to speak your mind, but avoided doing so? What stopped you? Perhaps it’s the fear of what you say and how it will get received that instills this hesitation, especially if you anticipate being ignored or getting a hostile response. Or, in other cases, we introduce our points inappropriately, so the real meaning of what we are trying to express sounds like an attack or too passive-aggressive. Instead, view difficult dialogue as a chance to influence for the greater good of your organization.

- **Embrace the discomfort – it’s an opportunity to have a positive impact.**

Take an integrator mindset and relate to others as peers (rather than relating hierarchically). Trust that if you approach employees without hostility and with empathy and listening, that the debate may in fact become passionate, which handled constructively, can have positive

results. Engage team members in a dialogue of exploration around both yours and their ideas. In my experience, I can attest that this strategy not only encourages others to better engage, but allows them to feel more comfortable with innovating and feeling motivated.

## **The Bottom Line**

It can be difficult to face frustrated or aggressive employees. As leaders, we must be able to tackle challenging conversations head-on. Developing this talent can serve any organization well, and lead to better business outcomes.

Your approach – with an integrator mindset, demonstrating appropriate supportive behaviors and being prepared to challenge employees to think critically – is the key to success.

Remember, as a leader, your mindset ultimately drives your behaviors. If you are an autocratic leader, you will tell people what the issues are and prevent them from having a voice. And if you view the world hierarchically, you may constrain yourself from speaking up clearly or see others as inferior.

The integrator mindset is an essential ingredient to successful outcomes. Embrace your next challenging conversation using an integrator mindset and unlock your own, and your organization's, potential.

As seen on [Forbes Coaches Council](#)

Check out my other contributions to the Forbes Coaches Council:

["How to Give Constructive Criticism That Doesn't Offend: 15 Tips From Expert Coaches"](#)

["15 Ways To Prepare For Your Company's Next Generation Of Leaders"](#)

["Getting Client Buy-In: 13 Approaches Coaches Can Use"](#)

My research studies with many hundreds of leaders over the last 10 years suggests that results achieved by leaders who develop an integrator mindset are demonstrably better in achieving and exceeding organization goals. This is the only mindset that enables us to see there are many different ways to achieve success, we just need to understand the context and ensure that our approach is adapted to this.

Here are some steps successful leaders took to change their behavior that you can practice to become an integrator:



1. *Lead with an Integrator Mindset* by developing good self-awareness; actively listening to and empathizing with others; seeking cooperation and reaching out to help others succeed; promote trust by acting transparently and modeling accountability. Remember that for others to be accountable, they need you to be a good delegator and coach.
2. Encourage *peer-to-peer relationships* recognizing differential roles and responsibilities and relating without pulling rank.
3. *Form a supportive network* to connect the organization.
4. Foster a *learning organization*, providing broad developmental opportunities, so that the organization remains motivated and adaptive – ready for the next stage.

If you want to learn more about how you can change your mindset, Percepi can help you do this. Our workshops are based on how to develop this mindset. Tell us what you think on our [page](#), and feel free to share this post.