
What Are Hard Conversations, and Why Should We Have Them?

There are many people who think they want to be matadors, only to find themselves in the ring with two thousand pounds of bull bearing down on them, and then discover that what they really wanted was to wear tight pants and hear the crowd roar.

—Terry Pearce, management consultant

This book came into being when I moved from inside a classroom full-time to outside the classroom full-time. I was delighted with the new role of beginning teacher coach and trainer and took on the job with gusto. I wasn't naïve enough to think I could just "wear tight pants and hear the crowd roar," but I sure wasn't ready for a 2,000-pound bull, either.

In a new setting, with new "students," I had a steep learning curve. And I discovered something important: I had a credential in how to teach English to high school students, but I did not have a credential in how to work effectively and productively with other adults.

This adult learning work was, in many ways, a whole new ball game. I immersed myself in reading professional literature. I took coaching classes and workshops. I learned how to present staff development to adults, work collaboratively to design lesson plans, and move a teacher through a series of reflective questions. Yet one important—and very necessary—skill hadn't been taught to me at all: *how to have a hard conversation*.

Hard conversations come in all forms and degrees. They range from a formal evaluation in which you tell someone he won't be asked to return next fall, to the briefest comment to a colleague about being on time to a meeting. They occur in grade level meetings and in administrators' offices. The content can be about teacher behavior that negatively affects students or about not doing an effective job facilitating a department meeting. Hard conversations can occur when you talk to a colleague about a comment that hurt your feelings or an e-mail you found offensive. Whenever you feel uncomfortable, have second thoughts, or try to avoid saying what you need to say, what you aren't saying *is* your hard conversation.

Teachers come into the business of education to nurture. The best of us joined this profession to be able to work alongside students and support their academic and personal development. For some of us, support looks like praise— all the high fives and “Good job!” comments. Many of us appreciate the feel-good aspects of this form of praise. Support, however, can have a different face.

Many of us can recall a time when someone told us a truth that wasn't particularly pleasant in feeling or tone. Support came in the form of a few comments that asked us to step up, to rewrite, or to do our best work. The truth wasn't easy to swallow, but we knew in our hearts that it was accurate and supported our growth. We weren't doing our best, and we needed a reminder.

My personal challenge with having a hard conversation is that it is so awkward to tell a colleague who is your peer and whom you work with on an equal level something about her behavior. I would rather avoid dealing with it, but in this case it was a piece of gossip that was being spread, and it was affecting my relationships with others in the school. I couldn't have my reputation damaged. I needed to speak up.

—High school teacher

I was on the receiving end of a difficult piece of feedback just recently. I had been in a meeting where the topic was race and ethnicity. I was so passionate about the topic that I ended up speaking quite a bit. A colleague of mine, another white woman, found a moment to quietly suggest to me that I should be quiet and open the floor up to colleagues of color, who needed to have an opportunity to have their voices heard as well. The truth was hard to swallow, but she was right. I wasn't aware of my own behavior. It wasn't comfortable, but it was a necessary hard conversation.

As teachers, we know we must both support and challenge students to help them grow. We need to also employ a healthy balance of both support and challenge when working with our colleagues.

Many factors come into play as to why we don't like to have hard conversations with our colleagues, but for the most part, teachers just aren't a confrontational group. In our field, unlike banking, which is transactional in nature, we are about more than that. We are about helping people grow up to be good human beings, not just doing a deposit or withdrawal of funds. We are in schools to transform students and help them develop, not just do transactions and call it a day. Relationships are everything in this field. We actively shy away from causing bad feelings. We purposefully did not become litigators, ready to depose others on the spot. We get anxious if a little dander is raised. We worry a lot.

Yet telling the truth to one another, as coaches, as administrators, and as colleagues, is one of the most important ways that we grow personally and professionally.

Think about how often these true-to-life moments occur in schools where someone isn't speaking up.

- A veteran disgruntled colleague gets away with not attending grade-level meetings and as of yet, no one has said a thing. As a result, the teachers at that grade are not consistent in their instruction.
- A new teacher continually doesn't respond to a colleague's phone calls or e-mails. In an attempt to maintain trust and rapport, nothing is said. This new teacher's behavior not only keeps the two staff members from working together, but could extend to her not being responsive in her interactions with students.
- The principal makes fun of a school coach in front of the whole staff, and it begins to discredit the coach's ability to do her job, yet the coach doesn't speak to the principal about his behavior.

Having a hard conversation is a skill for which many of us have no training and little experience. To have hard conversations and do them well, we need some support and some challenge. We need models.

Consider this firsthand account from a high school department chair who had to face the truth to be able to do her job to ensure students' learning:

As the department chair, I have responsibility, along with the administrator, to supervise and evaluate new teachers. One teacher we worked with for two years is a sharp thinker, a kind person, and a team player. The trouble is that she isn't an organized lesson planner, and it is getting in the way of her being able to control the class and teach effectively.

I have tried to be explicit and concrete in my feedback about her management, lesson planning, and instruction, giving very detailed suggestions to her about how she can engage students more effectively by writing on the board a certain way so her back isn't to the students, how clear she needs to be in terms of her directions so she doesn't lose time transitioning, etc. These small, discrete actions, as well as many other explicitly recommended lesson planning techniques, haven't been applied to her teaching.

At the end of the semester, I decided I had to tell her that I would be opening the job up in the spring. The teacher's response was discouragement, and I heard apologies for days. "I know you're right. I'll try. It's just so hard. I am so sorry." All of these comments are excuses you can hear only so many times. She feels bad and I feel bad, but her being upset isn't helping. It is time to find someone to do the job.

This department chair had to get to a place where she knew she needed to speak up, and she ultimately did. Hard conversations are about being true to oneself, doing what is right for students, and shaping an environment that supports learning. We need to learn to do them well.

READY—AIM—FIRE

As I said before, many of us haven't had much support and study on this topic. And while the concept of ready—aim—fire can be a bad metaphor when dealing with people, it vividly describes how, without support, individuals might inappropriately handle having a hard conversation.

Like the department chair above, who at first spent months avoiding the conversation she knew she needed to have, some of us try the "Ready—aim—aim—aim—aim" approach. We just can't muster the courage to say the words directly to the other person. We hem and haw. We talk to our spouse about it, to other colleagues in the parking lot. We complain—a lot. We just don't speak up.

Others of us try the "Ready—FIRE" method. We don't aim. We don't talk the idea through with someone before we speak. We seize the moment, and in doing so, we often cause tears, bad feelings, and unfortunately, sometimes also cause a ripple effect of subtle revolt.

There *is* a better way to have the hard conversation, whatever the conversation needs to be.

GET CLEAR, CRAFT, COMMUNICATE

Let's move past the uncomfortable metaphor of ready—aim—fire toward a new way of framing the work of having a hard conversation. The new approach is based solidly on the three principles of *clarity*, *crafting*, and *communication*.

Get Clear

- How can we get to a place where we feel ready and comfortable sharing what needs to be said?

This concept will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 as we think about why we haven't yet spoken up and what questions we need to ask ourselves before we do.

Craft

- What will we talk about with our colleague? What explicit behaviors are we focusing on? And once we share our thoughts, what next steps do we suggest to fix the problem?

This concept will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 as we think about which professional behaviors we are talking about and what our action plans are for supporting our colleagues once we begin communication.

Communicate

- How might we write up our first few talking points or sentences? What language will work for this conversation and what words might just trigger a defensive reaction within the individual and thus stop her or him from listening?

This concept will be discussed in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 as we learn scripting tools for a variety of hard conversations as well as specifics around the *wheres* and *whens* of having the conversation.

Mastering these three principles will make the hard work of hard conversations easier. If you've picked up this book, chances are you already know you need to prepare to have a conversation with someone, or you have avoided a conversation in the past that you now know you ought to have.

WHO SHOULD BE READING THIS BOOK

This book will emphasize conversations with teachers no matter your role in relationship to them—colleague, coach, supervisor, or administrator. And while the focus of this book isn't on having hard conversations with parents, students, or support staff, there are many tools in this text that will assist you through those challenging moments as well. My experience has been primarily with teachers, and those are the awkward conversations I know best.

As we move forward, one point about protocols and organizational systems in relation to having hard conversations: In every school or organization there are chains of command and hierarchical systems in place for who is and who isn't to speak about certain topics. In many situations, the policies of your school or district help you to determine what to say and what not to say. Being mindful of those policies is critical both legally and politically.

Yet there are so many times when the choice of having the conversation is one you can make. You are the administrator, supervisor, or mentor, and it is part of your job description to say something. This book will help you have that hard conversation more effectively.

What about talking colleague to colleague? Peer to peer? Both on equal ground? In these situations, things get a little fuzzier, the water murkier. Does that mean one shouldn't speak up? Not necessarily. There are many times when you *are* the right one to have the conversation. You are the facilitator of the professional learning community, you are the grade-level partner, you are the colleague teaching the same course, or you are the colleague next door. Regardless of not having the formal authority, the behaviors exhibited by your colleague affect you and the students you work with. The question or challenge now is to become

more skilled at determining the manner in which you'd like to speak. This is where the tools in this book will come in handy.

Hard conversations in schools are essential, not only for our own growth, but for success—our own and that of those around us whom we impact. The issues we don't confront every day—the behaviors we see and the asides we overhear—are visible to us, yet we don't act. We can suffocate under the status quo, and our students will not get the education they deserve because we are not courageous enough to speak up and ask each other how we can be our best selves. To be more authentic and more truthful in schools every day will allow us not only to survive, but to thrive. Yes, the conversation isn't going to be easy, but the fact that it is hard isn't license to not have it.

The goal of this book is to help you have that hard conversation or bring up that uncomfortable concern. The 2,000-pound bull isn't looking that large when you view it from this angle, is it?

SUMMARY

We have discussed to whom this book will be helpful and some of the reasons we as educators at all levels should learn how to have hard conversations with our colleagues. The next chapter will address the reasons why we avoid speaking up, and what wins out when we don't.