

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Do you remember, back when you were a child, your parents telling you, “if you don’t have anything nice to say... don’t say anything at all”? This was good advice growing up, and many of us continue to obey this lesson throughout our adult lives. Not hurting people’s feelings has become a natural fundamental in the way we communicate, so it is no wonder that when we are faced with a difficult conversation at work or at home, it can pose a challenge.

Tough conversations are vital to success, and despite the earlier golden rule, giving direct and open feedback can be one of the greatest things you can do for someone – as long as you care personally and genuinely, while doing so. To help steer our difficult conversations in the right direction, we refer to the Radical Candor framework (Scott, 2018). This model reveals how challenging conversations can be great conversations when we “care personally” and “challenge directly”, or in other words, say what you think, while still caring about the person you are talking to. Without this balance, the communicator can sugar coat the issue or come across as aggressive, both of which misconstrue the important message we are trying to get across to our conversation partner.

1. NAME THE ISSUE

(Scott, 2002)

Name the behaviour that is causing the problem and identify how it is impacting you. If you have multiple issues with someone, find a commonality of all or most of your issues with this individual. By naming the main issue, you are highlighting the essential focus which keeps the conversation on a clear path.

2. SELECT A SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURAL EXAMPLE

Having an example is essential as it will add credibility to your conversation – however, to prevent your listener zoning out, ensure the example is succinct and accurate.

3. EXPLAIN THE IMPACT

Discussing how their behavior has impacted you or others creates a more personal conversation and assists with raising self-insight; so long as you deliver this message with respect.

4. IDENTIFY YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Before confronting someone’s behaviour, it is essential to first look at how you may have played a part. This is an opportunity to admit what you could have done better, and what you intend to do about it. A common example of this is when a leader recognises they may have failed to clearly communicate instructions or expectations to an individual. Note to future self: being clear upfront about what behaviours and results are acceptable, and which are not, can avoid many problems.

5. INDICATE YOUR WISH TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE

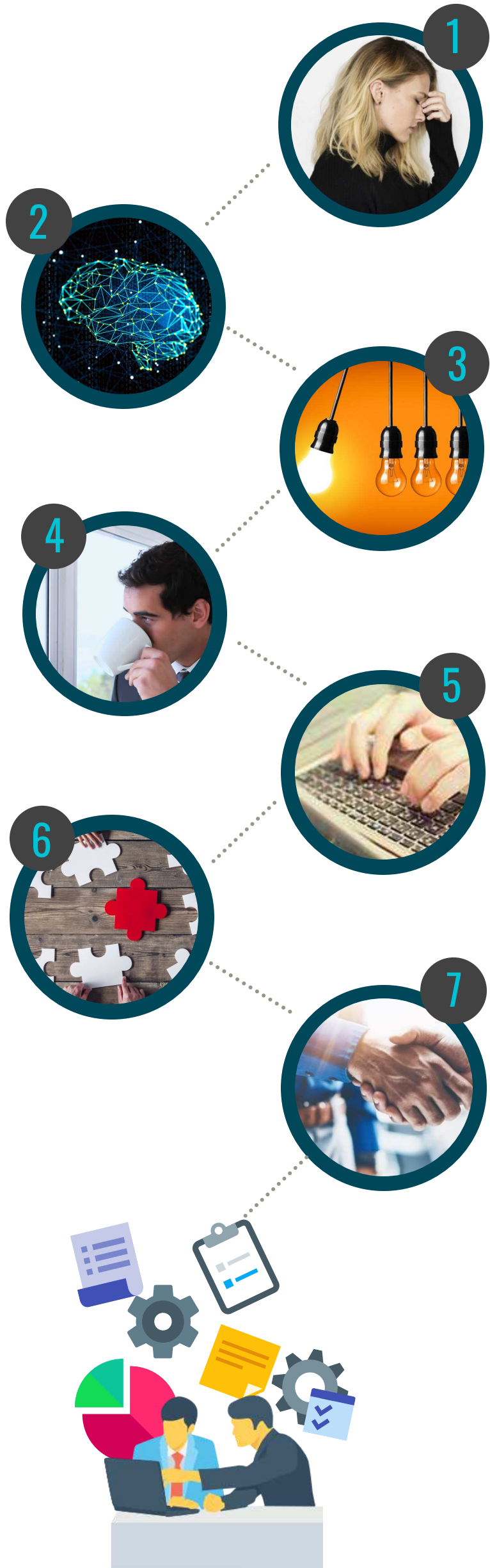
Using the word “resolve” reassures the listener that there is no termination looming around the corner, but rather communicates good intent on your part.

6. INVITE YOUR PARTNER TO RESPOND

This is where most of the conversation will take place, and you focus on listening to what they have to say. If they say something that you strongly disagree with, resist the temptation to retaliate. Ask questions so you have a deep understanding of their point of view.

7. RESOLUTION

Once both parties feel they fully understand each other’s point of view, focus on coming to an agreement about what happens next. Given your intent was to resolve the issue, it is important to identify what is needed for a resolution, and how to move forward from here. Ideally, you will be able to conclude the conversation with an agreed action plan.



Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce Conversations*. New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group.
Scott, K. (2018). *Radical Candor*. Retrieved from <https://www.radicalcandor.com>

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4-step guide to difficult conversations



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Preparation and planning

- What is the specific issue that needs to be addressed and why?
- What's my role? If I am part of the problem own it, and admit it up front at the beginning of the discussion.
- What is the goal of the conversation? What needs to change, how and why?
- What do I value about this relationship how will I honour that?



Precision

- Use precise, clear and direct language whilst at the same time being respectful
- Summarize the issue as you see it and state the goal
- Focus on one issue/goal and state it



Listen and validate

- Really listen and take on-board everything the other party says and validate them without question
- Don't expect another person to react, think or feel the way you do
- If a curve ball is thrown, change tack if you need to or pause the conversation to take advice, think through or process the new information



Restate the goal and make a plan

- I understand your position, how you feel, the problems you've experienced regarding XYZ. This is the goal. How are we going to achieve it and how can I support you? Make a plan.
- Finish with a positive.

When having intentional conversations, be respectful and responsible as you work through the six guiding principles.....

Guiding principles

Context



Be kind and never lie or deceive.

- Being unkind and dishonest in your discussions typically result unnecessary complexity and lose-lose outcomes



Demonstrate active listening.

- Try to understand before trying to be understood. Never assume.
- Use mirroring and ask open ended – calibrated questions.



Create the illusion of them being in control.

- Use the power of “No”
- Do not own their solution, ask them clarification questions, but never Why; something rather like "How do you suppose I am to do that"



Be responsible.

- Know yourself, when you are emotional, and how to use the emotion.
- Know the person, and then you will know how to respond.



Have a clear understanding on the outcome you want.

- Plan your conversation
- Map the decision pathway and deliberately use “pause” to re-calibrate and allow time to think and keep the conversation on the pathway.



Know something about them, they do not know you know, and use it wisely.

- This gives you leverage in the conversation, however your timing for using this must be perfect
- E.g. deadline date; relationship with their Supervisor.