

How to Enable Candid Conversations in *Your* Workplace

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Individuals faced with difficult issues frequently choose to ignore them entirely or to discuss them only indirectly. The failure to honestly and directly confront poor performance or unwise courses of action, for example, becomes the proverbial elephant in the living room – or in this case, the workplace.

How can you avoid or minimize the toxic results of the elephant's presence? More importantly, how can you create a healthy work environment in which people at all ranks and levels regularly engage in productive, realistic, and candid conversations? Here are four suggestions to get you started:

1. Teach people the skills required to engage in honest, direct conversations. For example, teach them to:

- View confrontation as an opportunity for a constructive conversation. My favorite definition of confrontation, which comes from a program called *Influencing Options*, is “a respectful request for a new behavior or a change in behavior.” Handled effectively, confrontation can be a healthy, positive experience that results in stronger, better thought-out decisions.

- Focus on behaviors. This approach prevents people from addressing personalities or characteristics, which have nothing to do with performance.

- Be specific. Don't make others guess your meaning because you are vague. Tell them what's on your mind.

- Provide constructive feedback.

Offer actionable information.

- Receive constructive feedback

positively. Few things kill candid conversations faster than people who are unable or unwilling to listen to others' legitimate comments.

2. Establish a culture in which legitimate questioning behavior is supported and actively encouraged. Reward candid behavior. Recognize people who take the risk of raising an opposing concern or argument, regardless of whether they ultimately are right or wrong.

3. Emphasize the benefits of a workplace in which there are no elephants. People's actions generally are aligned with their self-interest. When there are consequences for being less than candid, people will change their behaviors.

4. Identify what's in it for each individual to engage in candid conversations. For example, list some of the natural personal consequences of indirect, non-candid communications.

5. Give people time to adjust. Just as with any other skill, learning to engage in candid conversations takes time and practice. Don't expect results overnight. But do make it clear that candid workplace conversations are here to stay.

What actions will you take today to begin to banish the “elephant” from *your* workplace?

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