Tackling difficult conversations

Is there a conversation you've been putting off? Mark Topley explains how to build a culture of open communication

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You know that conversation you've been putting off for three weeks? The one about the receptionist who keeps undermining the triage system. Or the associate who's consistently running late. Or the dental nurse whose attitude is starting to affect the whole team. It's still there. And it's getting louder.

Spend some time with this: how many difficult conversations are you currently not having?

Not the ones you've scheduled and keep postponing. The ones you've quietly decided aren't worth the risk. The feedback you're holding back because you don't want to upset someone. The tension you're hoping will just settle on its own.

I ask because this is the most common leadership struggle I see in dental practices. Not strategy. Not systems. Communication. Specifically, the ability to say what needs saying when it feels uncomfortable to do so.

The cost of staying quiet is higher than most leaders realise.

What actually breaks down

When difficult conversations don't happen, stress builds on both sides. The leader carries the weight of unresolved issues. The team member continues a behaviour they might not even know is a problem. Everyone else watches and draws their own conclusions about what's acceptable.

Eventually, something gives. What could have been a calm, contained conversation becomes heated and messy. The kind where emotions run high, defences go up and trust takes a big hit. The 'showdown at the OK Corral' – and that's exactly what it feels like when avoidance reaches breaking point.

But here's the other cost: your good people notice. They see that certain behaviours aren't being addressed, and they realise nothing's going to change. And quietly, over time, they start looking elsewhere.

The real block

When I ask leaders why they're not having these conversations, the answer is almost always the same: 'I don't want to upset them'.

That sentence sounds kind and feels protective, but it's not. Because what you're actually saying is: 'I would rather tolerate ongoing stress, erosion of standards, and the risk of losing my best people than sit through 20 minutes of discomfort'.

I understand it. These conversations are hard. Especially in small teams where relationships matter. Especially across generational divides where communication styles differ. Especially when you genuinely care about your people.

But avoidance isn't kindness. Clarity is.

Understanding open communication

Open communication isn't about being blunt or harsh. It's not about 'radical honesty' or airing every frustration. It's about trusting each other enough to speak uncomfortable truths in a respectful, constructive way. It's about being willing to push through the discomfort those conversations cause in order to reach an outcome where everyone can move forward together.

That's the skill. Not the speaking itself, but the ability to tolerate discomfort without backing down, without softening the message into meaninglessness, without making it everyone else's problem.

Great leaders train themselves to move through discomfort gracefully. They breathe. They choose who they want to be in the middle of stress. They don't settle for dissatisfactory compromises that let everyone off the hook. They push through conflict to get to real collaboration.

The one thing to do differently

If you're recognising yourself in this, here's what I'd suggest you do on Monday morning.

Don't start by having the difficult conversation you've been avoiding. Start by naming the pattern.

Call a team meeting. Keep it short and say something like this: 'I want to talk about how we handle difficult conversations as a team. I've realised I sometimes avoid raising things because I don't want to upset people.



And I'm wondering – is it just me, or does everyone find this difficult?'

That's it. You're not solving it yet, you're simply opening the door.

What you'll likely find is that your team has been feeling the same way. That your team members have been holding back too. That the culture of avoidance isn't serving anyone.

From there, you can start building something different. A team where feedback flows more freely. Where issues get raised early, when they're still small. Where people trust that difficult doesn't mean hostile.

Building the muscle

This won't change overnight, but you can get better at it.

You can practise staying present when a conversation gets tense. You can learn to breathe and choose your response instead of reacting. You can build the muscle that lets you sit with someone's disappointment without immediately backing down.

Because if you develop only one leadership skill this year, make it this one: the ability to tolerate discomfort without throwing a tantrum, without looking for an easy way out, without pretending everything's fine when it's not.

Your team doesn't need you to be perfect. But it does need you to be honest. It needs you to care enough to have the conversations that matter, even when they're hard.

So, start with the question: is it just me, or does everyone find this difficult? And see where the conversation takes you. D