



# 10 Mistakes Leaders Make When Having a Difficult Conversation

Heads Up: A Special Report

# 10 mistakes school leaders make when having a difficult conversation

I've trained 1000s of school leaders in how to have more successful difficult conversations and you can see some case studies at <http://www.ukheadsup.com/free-resources/improve-difficult-conversations/case-studies-dc/> . As with anything we have repeated exposure to, I've noticed patterns, and so I'd like to share with you the 10 biggest mistakes I see people making in the hope that it will help you to avoid them.

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## One | Waiting too long to raise the issue with the person

Who likes conflict? Pretty much no-one! So it's no surprise that a lot of us will avoid having a difficult conversation. However, there might well come a time when we realise we have to and, at that point, we often regret not having it sooner; after all, it's very hard to tell someone that this has been an issue for months and that this is the first time they are hearing about it. Ouch! Just thinking about it makes me feel embarrassed. Imagine that was you, that you'd been doing something for a long time, and today I finally spoke to you about it. You'd have every right to be angry with me! And what makes this worse is that you've been dealing with the issue for all that time and so has everyone in your team - a double-whammy of problems!

I was training some head teachers on how to have successful difficult conversations and one head was working on a conversation she needed to have with her site manager. He often didn't do what was asked and, because they had a big building project coming up, she really needed him to do what he was asked to do, as well as effectively manage the project. At the end of the training day, she said she had been putting this conversation off for 3 years and now she was actually looking forward to getting this all out in the open and improving things for everyone; she had wished she'd tackled it earlier.

### Top tip:

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*Confess: When this happens, be honest, tell them why you didn't raise it with them before. There could be a range of reasons, such as you didn't want to hurt their feelings, you thought it was a one-off but now a pattern has emerged, you hoped the issue would fix itself and because it hasn't you feel you need to raise it, etc. Give whatever is the truthful reason for you not speaking about it before.*

## Two | Making excuses for why you don't need to have the conversation

*Almost everyone avoids difficult conversations and, when you do have these conversations, it would be normal for you to not look forward to them. There are several reasons for this:*

1. We don't want to upset the other person or be upset ourselves (which is very understandable)
2. We think the problem might resolve itself and giving time is the best thing (sometimes that's true)
3. It's an anxiety-inducing situation to give someone a difficult message or discuss a difficult topic and feeling anxious is not nice

*So we make 'excuses' - we all do (myself included!) - and this is what they can look like:*

1. Delaying - We'll discuss your performance at review time
2. Short-term overrides long-term - They actually taught a good lesson today/This isn't the right time to have this conversation
3. Blaming others - It's their fault they don't realise they're rubbish!
4. Delegating - Someone else in the team might tell them
5. Focusing on effect not cause - Your classroom is a mess, your papers are everywhere!
6. Harmony before integrity - I don't want to hurt their feelings
7. Side-stepping - We all make mistakes, who I am to tell them? I'm not perfect either

## These are not good reasons to avoid the conversation

*Now imagine applying these excuses to children:*

1. I don't want to hurt their feelings, so I won't tell them they were mean to another child/that they are capable of better work.
2. We'll discuss your performance at review time vs. We'll discuss today's work when it's parents evening.
3. Someone else might tell them.

These 'reasons' are bizarre when we think about applying them to children and yet we use them with adults all the time.

The fact is we need to talk to adults about behaviour more, just like we do with children, because, I don't know about you, but my behaviour isn't always as good as I'd like to think it is and I rely on those nearest and dearest to me to help me understand when that is the case so that I can improve it.

The problem with letting these 'excuses' win is that it's unlikely the problem will go away, and this means it's going to cause damage to you, to others and to your school.

A head once told me how they had used a ranged of excuses over a number of years to avoid having a difficult conversation with a member of staff until finally, one day, he knew he needed to have the conversation. It was hard, and far harder than it would have been had he tackled the issues earlier; by his own admission, the excuses he'd made had actually made the situation worse.

### *Top tip:*

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*Share these excuses with your senior leaders or someone else you trust and ask them to alert you and each other to when they think you might be using them.*

## Three | Thinking you can't raise an issue about behaviour

Talking about performance is one thing, but talking to a member of your team about their behaviour, well I can't do that, can I? I come across this all the time and I understand why: performance is far less personal, but behaviour is about their personality and they are who

they are and we can't change that. Yet I think you were a class teacher... am I right? And so with the children in your class, did you talk more about their performance or their behaviour? I know when I've been teaching I talk *far* more about behaviour and I think you would have too. So at what age is our behaviour something people don't talk about with us? 16? 18? 21? 40? 60? The fact is, improving our behaviour is a never-ending endeavour and, if we're lucky, the people around us will help by giving us insightful and well-delivered feedback about our behaviour. What do I mean about behaviour? Is there anyone in your school who wears their 'special face' in assemblies or staff meetings (you know the one I mean), or someone you think is lazy, or someone who is not a team player, or rude? Well these are all behaviour issues that need tackling.

'But what about the law', I hear you cry! In terms of the law, well, behaviour is called conduct, and the whole first page of teacher standards is about conduct. You need to be as considered, thoughtful and careful in conversations about conduct as you do performance, but you can have these conversations.

When I worked in business, I was developing some aspiring managers, and one of them was a great guy with lots of potential, however he was cocky. Now I'll admit, this was some pretty crunchy feedback to be giving him, but I wanted him to do well and knew he needed to understand what I believed was holding him back. I told him I thought he often behaved in a cocky way and gave him three specific examples of what had made me think that. He confessed to me that he'd been given this kind of feedback in the past but never understood it until now and then went on to rave about my feedback to his colleagues.

### Top tip:

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*If you're not ready to start addressing behaviour issues with your staff then ask some of them for feedback on your behaviour, this will help break down the wall which stands in the way of talking about behaviour.*

## Four | Not having specific examples to back up what you're saying

Whatever issue you are tackling, you have to make sure you have examples to back this up. If you don't, then simply don't have the conversation until you do. If you never have examples then either you're focused on the wrong issue or there is no issue.

I've delivered some pretty tough feedback as a leader and I'm grateful that this has led to the person thinking kindly of me; even the guy I told was 'cocky'. The reason I could do this was because I always made sure I had evidence for what I was saying. Whatever issue you are

raising, make sure you have specific examples, don't talk in generalities, talk in specific, concrete examples, it might just be what you saw and how you interpreted it, that's ok and it opens up the discussion.

A deputy head I was working with was trying to figure out how to have a conversation with a member of the team she thought was lying to her. Through our conversation, she was able to tell me what had happened to make her think this; for example, the deputy thought she and the teacher had agreed certain interventions would be put in place to support a child in class and yet she hadn't seen any evidence of this, but the teacher insisted they were in place. She didn't have any concrete examples that the teacher had lied to her and it sounded like there had been some mixed messages, with several good examples to illustrate this to the teacher.

### Top tip:

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*If you think someone is lazy or rude, or some other behaviour you need to address, work out what makes you think this and **find three really good examples which will illustrate this to the other person.***

*So often I've seen people, 2 - 3 minutes into a conversation, thinking they have told the other person the issue when they haven't, even when they have been crystal clear on the issue themselves. In their head they have, but they have not explicitly (and kindly) told the other person.*

## Five | Not being clear on the issue

This is the single biggest mistake I see. Ever get to the end of a difficult conversation and think to yourself, 'I don't think they understood what I was saying'? This is usually because we've not been clear in our own mind on what the issue is and it's a mistake for two reasons: firstly, the conversation is going to be a lot less successful if you both aren't clear, and secondly, it's unfair on the other person who is left guessing, or even guessing incorrectly, what the issue is. If we're not clear, how can we expect the other person to be? Clarity is king.

A deputy head wanted a member of her team to 'lead better'. This was not clear enough as we needed to understand what 'lead better' meant and we must know, otherwise, why would we say it? For this deputy head, it was about the person leading on planning by leading the planning meetings, improving the quality and timeliness of their own plans and supporting others to improve their planning. See how much clearer this is?

### Top tip:

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*Talk to a colleague and ask them to check if the issue is clear.*

## Six | Not telling people what you want in place of the problem

This relates to #5 in that we need to tell people what we want to happen, so in the example above that would be for:

- Your plans to be in on time
- For them to be of a high quality, which means...
- To help other staff improve the quality of their plans and therefore lessons over the course of this year
- To lead planning meetings, which means...

If you know what you want, be explicit about it. Here we're not telling the person *how* to achieve this, just what the end goal is. Another example I've seen was around supporting a teacher to make their lessons more exciting. What does 'more exciting' mean and what outcomes would we expect to see? Children enjoying their lessons? How would we know this? It is definable, we just need to define it.

### Top tip:

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*When preparing for a difficult conversation, or you find yourself in one, try to answer this question: **If they were to make the change you wanted tomorrow, what would be different?** Describe this in detail.*

## Seven | Thinking you know the best way to fix the problem

Most of us like to solve problems, and so when faced with an issue, we need to have a difficult conversation about thinking of ways to solve it, but we only know part of the story about the issue and so there's a good chance our solution won't solve the problem in a way that works for the individual.

A head needed to have a difficult conversation; in his own mind, he knew what the problem was and how to solve it, so he started to talk about that with the teacher. The problem was that this wasn't the best way to solve it; the teacher's body language gave that away pretty

fast! Once he moved away from his *theory* as to how to fix the issue and moved to having a conversation about it, the conversation was far more successful.

### Top tip:

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*If you think you know how to fix the issue, try to tell the other person after they have shared how they think it can be fixed. If you find this hard (and lots of people do), try writing it on a piece of paper to help you manage your desire to tell them; it sounds silly but it works.*

## Eight | Not thinking about how you deliver the message

Some people will think about the words, some will think of clever ways to back people into a corner, to charm the other person, to deflect the issue, to make it seem like a favour if the other person does it, but what they don't think about is their non-verbal communication which carries a lot of information in these conversations and can be the difference between turning a difficult conversation into a successful one.

A deputy head was role-playing a difficult conversation, and whilst her body language wasn't bad, it wasn't helping to make the conversation more successful. She would sit in the same position regardless of how the other person sat which affected the non-verbal communication, so to help her improve this, she simply changed how she opened a meeting: she would respectfully wait for the other person to take a seat and then sit like they did. This not only made the other person feel more comfortable but had the same effect on her, relaxing her more. She couldn't believe the difference such a simple, seemingly innocuous, change could make to the conversations.

### Top tip:

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*Sit like the other person sits and if they change how they are sitting, you can change yours as well (although wait a few seconds first).*

## Nine | Thinking that having a difficult conversation damages relationships

It's common for people to worry about damaging a relationship by having a difficult conversation, but often these conversations make relationships stronger because the best relationships are ones where you can all share your views, even the hard ones.

After working with a head, he understood how he could speak to his team about their behaviour as well as their performance. He had a really constructive conversation with a member of staff who, in his and her words, 'was a bit of b\*\*\*h', she was negative, no-one got on with her and he, like pretty much everyone else, struggled to work with her. He had a constructive conversation with her, allowing her to share her thoughts and feelings as well, and they completely turned the situation around and had a far better, respectful relationship.

### Top tip:

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*If you're worried about damaging your relationship with someone but know you must have a difficult conversation, **explain your concern for your relationship to them and why this tough conversation is so important**; this will help both them and you have a better perspective.*

## Ten | Talking about the important stuff away from the conversation and with other people

We've all been there, we've all had a tough conversation which was both hard to do and emotional, and we've got out of it, met with a friend, and told them all about the look on the other person's face when we said something, how we were fuming when they said something to us, and so on. But what we didn't do was say this to them in the meeting:

'Your face has dropped, will you tell me how you're feeling?'

'I feel upset at what you have said and I would like to explain why...'

'I can see this is an emotional topic for you and I would like to work with you to resolve this issue.'

We need to talk about this important non-verbal communication with the person who can make a difference.

I was coaching a senior leadership team where two members had a poor working relationship. Many times they would individually tell me about something that happened that

had upset them; for example, one time one had asked the other to move her feet off a chair she was resting them on, and the response she got back was, in her opinion, rude. The other thought they were having a bit of banter, and her response was intended that way, but had realised it didn't land as intended and she had upset her colleague.

However, neither spoke to the other about what happened, which could have easily resolved the tension and actually made their relationship stronger. Instead, they spoke to other people about the problem and the tension remained.

### *Top tip:*

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*Speak the **unspoken**, and if you feel something or think the other person does simply say what you feel or see.*

*So there you go, the top ten mistakes I see when people are having difficult conversations; avoid these and your success rate will go up.*

## About the Author



Sonia Gill is the founder and director of [Heads Up Limited](#), an educational leadership consultancy which specialises in moving primary school to outstanding.

She has trained 100's of head teachers and school leaders on how to have difficult conversations successfully and all of them recommend her training.

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