

## **Why you need to have Successful Difficult Conversations in School**

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We need to talk. I don't think any of us like hearing those words, do we? They are often the words that precede a difficult conversation. Now I really believe that difficult conversations, successful ones are critical to your school's success and that's because they're invisible blocks to school improvement. And they stop you creating high-performing cultures.

Why give a high-performing culture? Well in the work that we've done with schools what we've really noticed is the difference from a school getting to good and a school getting to outstanding is culture. What got you to good on its own won't get you to outstanding and this is the quality to shift. But only 4% of schools make that shift.

So how do you create a high-performing culture? Well, we look at three key leadership structures. Having a really powerful compelling vision, something that all the speakers I've heard this morning have talked about. Mark talking about vision you can argue with. It really sets out who you are. Jonathan talking about actually what was our vision for our school? What did it look like from a visionless environment to something much more meaningful?

You've got to grow the strength of your team, grow the talent, let them become exceptional again. I've heard this through the talks this morning. But if there's one strategy, if there's only one that I think is absolutely critical it will be this. Have those difficult conversations successfully.

When I'm talking about difficult conversations I'm talking about them to do with performance, marking, planning, differentiation, all those things, but also behaviour, conduct. And that's the bigger one because culture is behaviour over time and if we're not actively working on our adult behaviour, you're all great with the kids' behaviour, but our adult behaviour and conduct of which performance is part of, then these invisible blocks are going to stay in place and you are going to struggle to create that high-performing key.

Now one thing I need to be really clear about is that I am not saying this is a silver bullet. Creating exceptional education is a complex problem and I don't believe there is one single thing you can do to achieve it. But I do think getting really good at having difficult conversations successfully is an enabler, because a lot of the problems you face, well, a lot of them come down to what the people in your teams are doing. Then you have people who really are doing what you want to do and they're amazing and they light your days up and other people who on certain aspects might not be and it's how successful those conversations go that help remove those invisible blocks.

Key question. Do you have difficult conversations that need to be had in school? Some very expressive nod there. I'm on a mission to equip all school leaders to be able to have these difficult conversations successfully. It's why I've given you a copy of my book today. It's why I'm talking about this topic because if there was one thing, if I could click my fingers and make it happen I know if I could let every school leader be brilliant at these conversations so many other things would get sorted out. So many other issues would be resolved and that in turn would help improve the quality of your education, which I know is what you want to do.

So today I want to give you some practical tips that you can literally use straightaway in school on Monday things that will make your difficult conversations immediately more successful. But I also want to look at these invisible blocks, how these are actually getting in the way because they're getting in the way in a number of levels and if we remove them we get benefits on a number of levels.

But first let me define what I mean by successful difficult conversations and a difficult conversation. So to me, a difficult conversation is any conversation where I need to deliver a message and I think the other person is not going to like what I'm going to say and they will react negatively in some way.

[04:49] Feedback can be a difficult conversation. A successful difficult conversation should do three things: it should create the change you need; it should do it quickly. By quickly I'm thinking three conversations or less, certainly no more than five for the really tough ones and kindly. And I should point out when I say 'quickly' it's not because we then fire them or do anything like that. It's because we should fix the issue. That's what I mean by 'quickly'.

We've all got issues, right? Here are some of the common ones: policies not being followed like marking, lateness which always seems to be a TA. I haven't got anything against TAs but only last week did I hear the first issue, the first time in seven years of lateness being about someone other than a TA, so that's just what happens.

Unhelpful receptionists. Caretakers, and this is my favourite one, you know that person in your staff meetings? Yes, that special face. We tend to have common approaches. We might avoid the conversation; I'm never going to criticise anyone for that. Some are best left. We might avoid them, we might have the conversation but it's successful. And something I really see when I'm working with schools is we don't see the ones we need to have most of all. We think it's about this, it's really about that or we just think this is the way it is when really we need to talk.

These really visible, I call them invisible blocks. You're aware of some of them but this is the bit that we don't always realise, that is these issues often lead to drama. That might be me going or having a huff in the staff front because of something someone's done or something someone's said or not said. It might be you guys talking in your senior leadership teams, spending a lot of time discussing the issue but actually not finding a resolution.

So these issues lead to drama. Drama leads to distraction and distraction leads to ineffective teams. And we're saying that high-performing teams, high-performing cultures makes these exceptional schools, we can't afford to be distracted. Again, one of the things that I've really picked up listening from the talks today is how focused, how effective these teams are because they're really focusing on what they need to and this is what we want.

So I'm going to share with you three critical components you need in place and these will immediately make a difficult conversation more successful. I'm going to look at two of them in little more depth and give you some quick tips to increase your success straight off the bat. And then we'll look some more at why these difficult conversations are so important. Sound good, yes? Let's make them easier.

So, three core components of different conversations are structure, emotions and trust. When you have those three in place you're in this zone, this tiny little space in the middle which is where successful difficult conversations can happen. If you miss any one of these three things out you don't put in place sufficiently, then a common problem is likely to happen.

[08:08] He's had a difficult conversation where the person's walked out the room and you've thought you didn't hear the message I was trying to tell you. Oh yes. That's because you're missing structure and I'm going to give you some tips on that today.

Who's had one of those difficult conversations that you've dreaded, you thought "I'm going to see that person on Thursday. I need to talk to them but I really don't want to". It's like this little grey cloud lurking in your week. Then you get in it, yes? So you've got that. You get in it and then the other person starts to cry, get angry, withdraw, huff. Yeah? Had that? And then have any of you done that thing where it's still rattling around your brain and emotions after the event? You're reliving it, replaying it, perhaps changing what you said because you would have got a different reaction. But it's done, yeah? That's looking like it sounds unfortunately familiar.

That's where we're missing emotions and then the final one, trust. Now this isn't about trust we've got for years because we've known each other and you know, you're the godparent, wife, children or anything like that. This is trust in the interaction. When it's missing what we tend to get is people saying "Yes, fine. I'll do all of that. No problem. Sure. Yea, I'll go now". They walk out the room and you think "You're not going to do any of it". Anybody have that happen?

So this is why it's so critical we get these three core components in place and I'm going to give you some quick tips to improve trust, increase the likelihood that action will happen afterwards and this is a really fundamental piece of having your difficult conversations. The good news is it's really easy and I'm going to give you two key pieces; there are more but two key things you can do whenever you're in a difficult conversation, either one you've started or someone's come at you. 1. sit or stand like they do. We do this when we're with people we know, like and trust, yeah? It's a subconscious signal we give to each other. Not consciously, it's subconscious. We don't do it knowingly but we sit or stand like people we feel really comfortable with, that we feel safe with. Because in a difficult conversation we're not feeling that safe, whichever side of the call you're on. We might be concerned, we might want the best for them but your body language leaks this and what you can't do is control how it's interpreted.

So sit or stand like the other person. If it's really negative, do a positive version of how they're sitting or standing. If someone comes in like that, yeah, you can have a more relaxed version, like this, yeah? Can you see how different it would be? Mirror them. We do this when we're comfortable. It'll help neutralise your non-verbal messages which will totally sabotage the words coming out of your mouth.

The second one is 'say'. Say their words, particularly if you feel like you're not getting anywhere. If you're getting stuck use their words because it proves you listened to them. It might be just key words, you know, I'm really annoyed, I'm really angry. Then change it to "Yes, I can I can see you're frustrated". If they're annoyed they're angry. We can say that. It doesn't mean we're saying they're right or wrong; we're just proving we heard. Two very simple things that if you put in place it will make your difficult conversations so much more successful because it will neutralise a lot of the noise that your non-verbal body language had.

Some of you who have been on my training know that right now I'd quite like to demonstrate the primal crotch display. It's not great to demonstrate in a dress. But the primal crotch display is one particularly we're doing a display of dominance. It tends to be more men than women. It's where you come in and it's legs apart. In fact, Binks, do you want to come a demonstrate for me? Go on, get a chair because actually, I'm wearing a dress so I'm not going to be comfortable like most of you.

[17:17] This is Binks who's speaking this afternoon. Oh yes, I bet you've had this. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[12:26] (Audience participation)

I'm going to borrow that. You definitely win. You win marks. Stay in that position for me. So I'm sitting here and typically what we might do, because I don't want Binks to sit like this, is: "Thank you for coming to meet with me, Binks". I will change my body language. Now the problem is that I am wearing a dress today. When I train I never wear a dress but I do not want to sit like that wearing a dress and even if I wasn't I might not be comfortable. So how do I mirror this body language? I put my legs as comfortably as I can, yeah? So I'm not going to have them crossed, but I can use my arms. Not "Let's have a showdown" but I can use my arms to create width. Because this is a size thing. It's like puffer fish and frogs expanding. That's what it is. It's a dominance display. So I don't want it to be aggressive but I can use my arms to create that width.

[13:26] (Audience participation)

[13:29] Would you like to cross your legs? And when Binks finally changes I'm just going to change with her.

Once you're in rapport, once you've set this up, you'll find that you start to do it naturally. That's what we do with our friends. Thank you for the best primal crotch display ever.

[13:43] (Audience participation, clapping)

Have you got any particularly negative body language other than primal crotch display that you're thinking "How would I manage that?"

[13:54] (Audience participation)

[14:12] So I'd stand back up? Sorry. It's nice that you have tried all those iterations. I think that's really good. I stand up and then I would mirror him as I'm standing.

[14:21] (Audience participation)

Oh no, it is because you get neck ache when someone's tall. I feel like that when I talk to Paul, he's so tall. It is hard, but you create too much of a difference if he's standing and you're sitting down, yeah? So, sorry. Any other ones? It's one of these things that sounds really daft and really basic but when you see it in action you can see how much of a difference it makes to that interaction and how it just takes out the non-verbal noise that you don't realise you're creating. Couple that with using some of their words, maybe phrases they use, you'll see a shift, OK?

[15:00] (Audience participation)

[15:16] I'd get up and leave. It's in the same way that I'm presenting to you now, but I could quite easily come along and sit down and carry on my presentation here without making a big deal of it, yeah? And in the same way then I can decide that I want to get up and leave. When you realise you're caught in this place they're standing there then, not standing and coming to stand next to you; we're not trying to inflame things, we're trying to calm things. But I would just come round or come and join you on the sofa. If they comment, just say it's more comfortable to talk to you like this.

[15:52] (Audience participation)

[16:39] Team leaders typically won't be dealing with the most difficult conversations. They're reserved for you guys, lucky you. So I would say whichever environment promotes the most equality and I would say that's probably in the other person's classroom. However, if the other person was quite dominant I'd probably want it in my classroom because I want to make it as equal as possible. This is not a telling off. This is a meeting of minds I hope, and that's what we're trying to create. So that's exactly where I would have that conversation.

[17:07] (Audience participation)

[17:15] What do you mean, taking it outside?

[17:16] (Audience participation)

[17:21] Oh absolutely you can. The only thing is that sometimes when we change the territory we kind of think "What's going on?". "Why don't we come outside? Why don't we go for a coffee?" "Wow, this is weird. What's up?" And now I'm already spinning before you got started. But there are times when the best thing you can do is take it somewhere else.

[17:38] (Audience participation)

[17:40] It can, as long as that's what happens. If it is the "You never take me for a coffee. Why are we going for a coffee now?" Or "Why are we going outside; it's too public?" So there are lots of different things around environment. It's a good question.

There's so much more we can talk about and there's tons in my book for you, but what I do want to talk about is structure. Now when I said to you have any of you had that conversation where the person walks out and you think they haven't heard what you said. This is where the problem lies and I shared this with a lot of school leaders. They always love it and that's why I want to share it with you today.

It's how to open your difficult conversation. And I have a centre structure for you. I issue the outcome, yeah? three parts and I'm going to look at it as three different levels of difficult conversation. so I think there's a spectrum. They're all hard, some are harder than others. So things like lateness, inappropriate language, clothing. They're at the easier end of difficult. Then in the middle we've got performance. You know, we talking about the quality of work, the marking, the quality of the lessons. That's in the middle of difficulty and then the ones none of us like having, around my behaviour, the fact I wear face, the fact that I don't welcome people into the school as a receptionist. The fact that I put my point across in a very aggressive way and I shout people down or I'm always negative. That's the harder end. So would it be useful if I demonstrate this sentence in action at those three points? I'm going to make an offer. If you've got a difficult conversation you need to have and it fits into one of those three; they'll all fit into one of them, and you want me to use a sentence, use that as my example than just stick your hand up and I'll do the best I can. So you could have your sentence.

[19:30] (Audience participation)

[19:50] Stay there for me. I'm going to come to yours third. Has anybody got a performance one that they want me to do and has anybody got one of these, more straightforward lateness, language, clothing?

[20:01] (Audience participation)

[20:16] So a TA who doesn't think he should have to wear a shirt and tie. I'm guessing that's part of your dress code? Great. Has anybody got a middle one about performance? Have a think and let's have a play with these ones. Sorry. I've got a few examples; they're in your packs. There's a lateness one, for example. So with the tie one, something along the lines of... and one of my top tips is you write the sentence out, you improve it 3 or 4 times. I'm going to go with this. I say something like "I'm aware you continue not to wear a shirt and tie. This is the dress code in our school and so from Monday I do need you to come to work every day wearing a shirt and tie" yeah? Now I specified the time, Monday, and I said from that point every day wearing a shirt and tie, yeah?

[21:09] (Audience participation)

[21:20] So now that moves to a conduct issue, in my opinion, yeah? So straight away, actually, I'm not thinking it's about your shirt and tie anymore. This is about the conduct. You know, in a school I wouldn't expect to be having a conversation with how many verbals you have because that tells me you're looking at how many times you cannot come in with a shirt and tie and that goes against our ethos. Actually, what I would like is for you to understand that it is a requirement of working here and that you need to do that going forward and you accept that graciously. It becomes a conduct issue at that point. These are the conversations we don't necessarily see.

Let's go to the tough one. I've got a marking example there that's kind of the middle level and then I've got tough. There you go; there's yours. I've done it already. I feel you can come across as rude to parents at times and I'd like you to express yourself in a positive manner throughout the school day, especially to parents. I've had staff in there. That's a staff one. We get this one all the time; it's a really common one about receptionists. Really critical... sorry, it is; it is. I'd love to say it isn't. I've got nothing against receptionists, nothing against caretakers. It's just common ones we see.

Actually critical to all of these is that you have examples to back it up. "What are you talking about? I'm never rude". Well, do you remember when Mrs James came in on Monday this is what happened. and then last Friday they came in this is what happened. A few examples, yeah, to back that up.

With things like rudeness or not being a team player people don't always realise they are being those things so we have to be able to explain to them what it is they're doing that makes them come across this way. It's really important. This isn't about their personality. it's about their behaviour. And if you're ever in doubt change it to a child. If a child was doing this what would I do? Well, you'd probably talk to them about it. You wouldn't go "Oh, it's just their behaviour, just a spiteful kid". We wouldn't say that. We'd say we need to help them understand what is appropriate behaviour and it's the same with adults. Now some people are more receptive than others, I know that, but it's the same thing.

So again, it's the "I" issue of the outcome. I feel like. You're asking for a lot of things, you want it all yesterday and actually it's not possible to meet every request that you're making. I really want to support you moving into the outcome. When you become interim Head and the way I can do that is this. We can sharpen it up a bit, but that's what you write out a few times. You need to get it tight. Don't make it a paragraph. People can't listen to it that long. Their emotions are kicking off. You've only got so much time so it needs to be tight, it needs to be planned.

Some of you might have realised that Phil's my husband. Some you might just be finding out and realising "Oh, she was a bit close with him". If I want to have a difficult conversation with Phil I would write that sentence out.

[24:20] (Audience participation)

[24:24] Such a good man. It's why I dedicated my book to him.

[24:31] (Audience participation)

I can write the book - 7 years of working in schools. If I'm not going to make the effort for Phil, then I'm actually not going to bother with anyone because he's one of the most important relationships in my life. The few times I've just got that bit too big for my boots and thought "I don't need to do this" and I've gone in. I've walked out going "You idiot. Why did you do that? Do better". So genuinely write it down. Even that sentence I can hear ways to sharpen it up to improve it. So, I can just set out my stall and then we can talk about what we really need to talk about and solve it.

The amount of sympathy for you in the room right now, Phil, I can feel it.

Let me talk to you about the mistake within the mistake, though, because this outcome is hard to get right, It really is and this is the single biggest mistake I see people make so I want to help you with it because I don't want you to make this mistake.

People do a couple of things with the outcome. You want all these things. It feels like you want them yesterday, you know, with the demands on all of us it's quite hard to do. Here's the outcome. So I thought we'd have a chat. That's on outcome. That's a process because the moment that person engages in the conversation, tick, done. You want something different and you need to be really clear about what's different, what actually in your head will be a success and it's an end goal not a solution, and not a process, not a method.

People are always putting solutions into outcomes. So, you know, "I notice you haven't been marking regularly enough, Dominic, so what you should do is make sure you've got 10 minutes at the start of the day, another 10 minutes at lunchtime, 10 minutes after school. You'll find you'll keep on top of marking." That's a solution. The outcome is, "Dominic I need you to mark your books within whatever the policy says, hours, or this level of frequency and I need you to keep it up. How you get there, I can support you with that. We can talk about it but the outcome is I want you to mark your books at a certain time interval." Can you see the difference? Really watch out for this because even when I train people and I've banged on about this, we still get it wrong because it's hard.

Honestly, when I'm having difficult conversations, not just with Phil, with other people it takes a while to bring out what is it that I actually want because we're normally stuck in a swamp of issues. All we think about is the problem. Why do they do that, why do they do that. It's this outcome that's like the rope that will pull you out of the swamp of issues and if you don't have it you'll just stay in there.

If you get this outcome really nice and crisp the chances are you'll see your success rate notch up dramatically. You really will. Couple it with the trust elements I talked about, body language, really powerful. It stops the conversation getting pulled off track. You know how it is. People will pull the conversation. We sometimes pull it off track. The outcome is a real anchor. It'll keep you on track and as I say increases the chance of success.

[27:55] Now in the time we've got available I've tried to give you the gems that I know really really work. I have been working with hundreds of school leaders for seven years, training so many people how to have successful difficult conversations and with a very very high degree of success. These are two things that I know are up there in really making a difference so if you have got a difficult conversation coming work out that sentence, run it past a colleague, a trusted colleague, really look

at the outcome. There's tons in my book to help you with that and then when you go in bring those trust elements in, yeah? Is all that making sense so far? Because what I want to look at in the second part of my presentation is why are these difficult conversations so important to you as a school?

I said earlier they're critical to creating high-performing cultures and that's because behaviour over time equals culture. But they are harming your school in three ways. One very obvious, one less obvious and one isn't obvious at all but I think it's a critical one. First one is the issue. Be it marking, be it an unhelpful receptionist, be it a headteacher colleague who's actually hindering a lot of what you're trying to do. Whatever it is an SLT member undermining, just fixing the issue is a win, isn't it? But you're also haemorrhaging a huge amount of your payroll. Now this estimate is about 24k in a 2-form entry school, 50k in a 5-form, so a secondary you could say. One's to full time equivalents. Teachers.

That estimate is based on the following. A little bit of sick leave, a little bit of time for recruitment. But the bulk of it, the biggest chunk is if in a typical headteacher SLT teacher TA, no admin, no support, no catering, no caretaker. Just those core teaching roles. If everyone is spending just thirty minutes a week somehow involved or affected by conflict issue, that's what it adds up to, Thirty minutes. By conflict issue that can be I'm compensating for my TA who is always ten minutes late. I'm doing extra work because my Year Group partner doesn't plan well enough or doesn't provide resources. I'm having a moan with my friend over here because you know what? They've done my head in again and I need to get it off my skin. Or as an SLT, we're talking about that person again. That's how much it is, just 30 minutes of the week.

But this is the big one, energy. So at this point it sounds like I'm going to talk about auras and chakras and I'm Indian, so it would kind of fit, but I'm not. I'm talking about radiators and drainers, or energy zappers as I've heard them called. So radiators are those people who, you know, you meet with, you talk about problems with them. You feel great when they inject you with energy, it's really buzzing. Even if it's a tough problem there's a really nice energy given between you. And then there are those drainers. Those drainers who sit like that. Those drainers "Oh, I need to go and talk to Sonia again. Can you do it this time, Binks, please. I can't take another one of those conversations". A bit like mentors, aren't they? I'm sure that's what J.K. Rowling was thinking. "I'm going to come and suck all the energy out you".

[31:21] Now in any organisation, and I've worked in business, I've worked in schools. You know, money is really there to buy resources. That's what it's about and that's the most valuable resources are always human beings. But it's the energy these human beings can bring that we can bring that enables us to do more or actually just feel downtrodden.

So I've got a quick little activity for you. It's to help you understand what the impact of these issues is. I want you to think of an issue in your school. So like this, I said the TA's frequently late for class. The job role, and then what emotion you have. I'm going to give you thirty seconds to just quickly make a note of those three things, the issue, the job role and what emotion you get when you think about that issue. Go.

[32:11] (Audience participation)

[32:24] Ladies and gents, thank you. It's hard to start that without us getting into conversation because these issues, we carry them with us, don't we? So three people, call out what emotion. Don't worry about the job role. We'll keep that to you and the issue. But three people call out the emotion, thinking about this issue.

[32:43] (Audience participation)

[32:45] Oh, almost in harmony. Frustration. 1. Another one.

[32:49] (Audience participation)

[32:51] The emotion that it gives you.

[32:54] (Audience participation)

[32:55] Disbelief and said with disbelief. Give me one more. Frustration, disbelief and...

[33:01] (Audience participation)

[33:02] Exhaustion. You can feel that thinking, can't you? So now I want you to imagine that maybe you're reading my book and it helps you, maybe this presentation... something, something happens and you have this difficult conversation and like almost magic it goes so well that this problem goes away. It's fixed. Your faces tell me the kind of emotions that are coming. But three people, tell me what emotion that gives you now. We've got frustration, disbelief and exhaustion. We fixed the issue. What emotion do we get?

[33:34] (Audience participation)

Relief. What else? Hope. One more. Gratitude. And even in this room it feels different doesn't it, when we talk about those two. The first one felt heavy, facial expressions were down. The moment I said "Right, let's fix it", the smiles ... some people are still thinking about the joy that comes from fixing this issue or the satisfaction. And that's what I mean about energy. I don't mean auras and chakras. I mean how much would you give to the job at hand, the job of educating your children as well as possible and we energize each other or we bring each other down. One is going to lead to a high-performing team. This is why I think these difficult conversations are critical enablers to help you remove these things that are getting in the way, to remove these barriers to school improvement. Yes, it's costing you time and money and yes, the issue itself is a pain in the backside I'm sure, but it plays a bigger role in creating a high-performing culture. Because culture is behaviour over time.

Thank you.

## Moving to Outstanding 2019

Friday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019

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