Tackling tough conversations

without resorting to fisticuffs

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Sharon Jones is one of our experienced Client Trainers at Thomas International, who has delivered our “Tackling tough conversations” workshops across the UK.

Sharon was born in Manchester and grew up fascinated by horses and the ads on TV. No surprise then that her career started in the advertising business, and that she also owned and trained her own horses as well as worked as a Trail Guide on a ranch in Canada.

Beginning as a graphic artist, Sharon realised she was better at talking about design and advertising than she was at doing it. She worked her way up as a ‘suit’ through the agency ranks and in 1995 she started a small boutique agency in Halifax, England, with three colleagues. It was a successful agency, yet Sharon had started to yearn to live and work elsewhere – and in 1997, she immigrated to Canada.

By 2005 Sharon was Vice President, Client Services at one of the largest global agencies and her feet itched once more in a different way.

She quit her career in the ad business and started working as a consultant to other businesses, as well as the Trail Guide in her spare time.

Her consultancy business – as well as teaching people how to ride horses – led her to the delivery of some formalised training and started Sharon on a journey of learning all about the ‘soft skills’ of communication.

Sharon travelled all over Canada and the US, training thousands of people in areas such as Conflict Management, Managing Emotions, Communications Skills, Business Writing, as well as developing Management and Leadership programmes.

Thoroughly enjoying this, she jumped at the chance to take a contract with a large North American company in their training department, where she further developed courses for aspiring managers and leaders – and it’s here that Sharon encountered Thomas assessment tools for the first time. Realising the knowledge these tools could deliver and the positive changes she could affect when using them with people, she wove them into the majority of her training material.

Her fascination with the tools was a perfect fit for when she came back to the UK in 2013: Thomas was hiring a trainer and Sharon fit the role.

She now trains PPA, GIA, 360, Evolution courses, Bespoke assignments/training, client development workshops and TEIQue.

Sharon has trained thousands of people in Conflict Management, Managing Emotions and Communication Skills.
Tough conversations
what makes them so tricky?

“You’re the worst boss I’ve ever had!” She said loudly with an exasperated tone, as she walked into her manager’s office, slamming the door behind her.

She glared at him; he looked up, somewhat bemused – this was not particularly unusual behaviour from this employee, but it was markedly extreme.

He leaned back in his chair and tried hard not to roll his eyes. “Tell me more” he said.

Tough conversations can come at us in any guise: from the driver who cut you up on the road this morning, to the employee whose negative performance appraisal is coming up; from the neighbour who cut a branch off your prized tree, to the member of staff who always has something to complain about.

They come easy, yet dealing with them is something that leaves most of us cold at the prospect. Ask 100 people how they feel about tackling tough conversations and at least ninety of them will squirm at the thought – recalling a previous time when they had to deal with one, they will experience the emotional state again as if it were happening right now. Hostage negotiators and people who do deals for large corporations have months, if not years, of training; learning how to stay out of the emotional web that people might try to draw them into and instead, remain calm, able to objectively see the facts. The rest of us? Well, we need to learn a thing or two about ourselves and try to understand why we respond the way we do, before any self-help techniques or quick fix books will help us.
A quick internet search on the cost of conflict (AKA a tough conversation) throws up pages and pages of results: conflict is big business, a money earner. Yet we seemingly aren’t making a dent in our ability, en-masse, to deal with it. A recent Forbes article stated that ‘60-80 percent of all difficulties in organisations come from strained relationships among employees’. Most people agree (and have experienced) that if a brewing conflict does not result in actually having that tough conversation, then the conflict will grow and fester, infecting all around it with potentially unbridled negativity and spreading like wildfire around the office.

The cost of conflict

25% of HR professionals spend more than 10% of their time dealing with one form of conflict or another. That’s an equivalent of 23.5 days lost per year and yet 55% of managers don’t see it as their responsibility to deal with conflict.

40% of Employment Tribunals are relationship oriented.

1 Conducted 15 August 2014
3 Workplace Conflict Survey (UK) Report 2016, People Resolutions
So how do you spot when a tough conversation is needed in the workplace?

I've trained thousands of people across Canada, the US and the UK on the subject of Conflict Management and, without fail, everyone could spot the signs that a tough conversation is needed. Yet 99% of them would prefer to avoid it if they could or, if they're a manager, would tend to quell the conflict by telling people what to do rather than taking the time to find out what is going on.

The strongest and most common signals are found in what we call 'observable behaviours.' Thinking about the workplace, when someone starts a new job you can tell by her demeanour that she is happy and engaged, and whether she wants to be there or not. The new person often has an upright body position, probably smiles more at other people, is open and receptive to learning the job and getting to know colleagues. The newest person in the office is often curious and likes to ask questions to find out how things work. It's a bit like dating – when we start a new job we are on best behaviour because we want to make a positive impression.

Over time though, things can happen to the employee that start to chip away at their resolve to love the job.

People don't start jobs exhibiting such negative behaviours (otherwise how would they get the job to begin with?), so the causes are universal too:

- The psychological contract between employee and manager is broken (the expectations have not been met)
- Change in any form:
  - Leadership
  - Process and procedures
  - Team members
  - Working conditions
  - Job definition
  - Personal circumstances

Change is often seen as something being taken away and therefore assumed to be negative. Without communicating the adverse effects these changes are having for fear of reprise, the employee may instead begin to withdraw and feel that she needs to protect herself.

- A sudden change in employee behaviour
- A noticeable reduction in productivity
- Increased palpable stress levels
- A sudden change in employee verbal tone when talking
- Presenteeism: being present in body but not in mind or spirit
- Increased absences
- The universal signs a tough conversation is required

Increased absences

Increased palpable stress levels

A突然 change in employee behaviour

A noticeable reduction in productivity

Presenteeism: being present in body but not in mind or spirit

Increased absences
While most people can easily recognise when a tough conversation is required, how many of us actually do something about it? The Workplace Conflict Survey (UK) Report 2010 found that a staggering 55% of managers don’t see it as their responsibility to deal with conflict! So whose responsibility is it?

Again, universally, 100% of people would agree that if a conflict or any of these negative behaviours is not dealt with, the issue does not go away (unless the person leaves) and in fact it will fester and grow, often infecting other people within the organisation. It’s a fact that humans respond more quickly to negative emotion than positive emotion; our brains are hard-wired to respond to negativity – probably because it developed as a way to keep us safe.

In the early days of our evolution, we needed to be suspicious of everything because the decisions we made would often have life or death consequences. That inner part of our brain – the amygdala – kept us safe by generating ‘flight, fight or freeze’ responses, which meant being wary of and negative about everything until proven otherwise. The rational part of our brain didn’t evolve until much later; and it doesn’t get a look-in when the amygdala is roused.

So when we think about the types of tough conversations we encounter on a daily basis, you can probably pick apart your own thought process. Chances are, you’ll discover your own rational and emotional brain wrestling, trying to make sense of a situation by filling in the blanks of what it doesn’t know, with what it thinks it knows, based on your own world-view.

This is making assumptions. We all do it – it’s a necessary process which, again, evolved to keep us safe from the tiger. We didn’t know if it was hungry when it walked past our cave, growling, but rather than find out if it had a thorn in its paw and risk becoming dinner; we’d assume it was on the hunt for food and would take evasive action.

We still respond like this today, even though the danger is not the same; the tiger may have been replaced by a snarly supervisor in a natty suit.

We don’t have sabre-toothed tigers to deal with anymore but our amygdala doesn’t know that; it simply responds to how you feel, which means we experience unpleasant emotions and have little desire to deal with the situation.

Assumption
the architect of disruptive responses
Imagine this scenario

You’ve been invited to make a presentation to your peers and managers for an idea you’ve had. You prepare what you’ll say and you’re pumped. You walk into the room and one of your colleagues, Sam, doesn’t acknowledge you or greet you as you enter, whereas everyone else does. You’re on hyper alert: a lot is riding on this. A flicker of doubt runs across your mind as you wonder how on earth you’ve upset Sam. Trying to shake it off you greet the room, set yourself up and prepare to begin. Again, Sam catches your eye. He’s looking down into his lap, with a frown on his face; his hands lift and you see he has his smartphone in his hand. ‘Great,’ you think, ‘typical that Sam can’t even take his eyes of his phone for one minute, I bet he’s not even interested’.

You try to shake off this thought process because it’s awakening those negative emotions but the harder you try the worse they get. Thinking negatively means we have to think of the opposite thing first; if I ask you not to think of the elephant in the room, in order to not think about it you first have to think about it. You can’t not think about something without actively thinking about it first. So as the thought, ‘Don’t think about Sam influencing everyone else in the room to hate my presentation’ goes through your mind, you have to first think of Sam indeed influencing everyone in the room.

From here, the only way is down. By the time you’ve finished your presentation you’re filled with negative emotions; you think Sam is a fool and he was deliberately trying to put you off. Well, that’s it – you’re never going to help Sam again!

When someone else displays a negative response it is human nature to automatically assume it has something to do with us

The assumption in this scenario is obvious; that Sam doesn’t want you to do well. The reality is, Sam had just received a text from his wife, explaining that their daughter had to stay off school for yet another day due to a mysterious bug. Sam was preoccupied about her and wasn’t even thinking about you.

If Sam had any self-awareness, he’d have excused himself or at least explained his behaviour. Instead he thought no-one would notice his frowning, his shuffling around in his chair; his pen clicking, his clear signs that he wanted to get out of that meeting and pronto.

Equally though, when someone else displays a negative response it is human nature to automatically assume it has something to do with us and conclude that it’s somehow our fault. The fact is, however someone responds to anything says more about him or her than it does you; if someone is displaying negative behaviours, chances are they are not getting their needs met one way or another. Moreover, that has nothing to do with you.

Sam’s intention was not to de-rail you – his first concern was his daughter. He didn’t deal with the situation very well because he wasn’t self-aware enough to know that everyone would be able to pick up on his behaviour. Because no-one said anything, he was able to continue.

Unchallenged behaviour is a universal issue. A common delegate on my courses is the manager with a recently inherited tricky employee; one who has been at the company for many years and exhibits some extremely negative and disruptive behaviours, and who finally needs to be dealt with. The problem in this scenario is that if someone has been negative and disruptive for years and it’s never been addressed, then there’s an implication of agreement – the company is allowing it to happen, therefore it is ‘OK’ and harder to challenge.
We aren’t judged on how we feel; we are judged on how we behave

It’s not our intentions that cause problems with others; it’s our behaviour. And behaviour is all too often misinterpreted by other people’s assumptions.

As it is, the quandary for you now after the disastrous presentation incident is deciding whether or not to have that tough conversation with Sam. After all, you have no idea why he was acting the way he was, yet you have already internalised it and assumed it was all about you.

Re-winding the scenario, if you could recognise and stop the assumptions going on in your head, you would know that Sam’s response wasn’t really anything to do with you. You could have calmly made a request for everyone to put their devices away and focus for the next 10 minutes, which might have resulted in jolting Sam back into the present (enabling him to pay attention for the span of the meeting) or given him the opportunity to excuse himself in order to deal with the situation. Even if Sam didn’t comply, you’d still know it wasn’t about you.

Is it what we say or how we say it?

We may have five senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing) but we can’t use all five to interpret our work in the workplace. In most organisations, we’re not encouraged to go around smelling, tasting or touching each other.

Therefore, we only have our sight and hearing through which to experience our business world and how one person experiences it can be completely different to the next person. We express our opinions and beliefs through the words we choose; the tone of our voice; and our non-verbal signals, our body language.

There is a massive amount of information available on body language, because it will always convey how we really feel about something – we may have lost our ability to inherently interpret body language, but we certainly know when someone is being incongruent; is feeling negative, in a bad mood or equally, feeling ecstatic.

Being conscious of your body language and how it ‘leaks out’ how you’re feeling is a great step towards self-awareness; if Sam had known how he was coming across, he could have dealt with it very differently and behaved as a professional.
Total communication

7%  
Words  
convey facts and data

34%  
Tone  
conveys frame of mind and mood

59%  
Body language  
conveys feelings, thoughts, emotions
A key stage in being able to have those tough conversations is self-awareness. Becoming self-aware, we can then make an effort to choose our actions and responses.

The ability to successfully tackle a tough conversation stems from our emotional intelligence; how aware we are of our own emotions and our ability to manage them and express them in an appropriate manner; coupled with the ability to recognise emotions in others and not respond negatively.

Ask any parent how a two year old gets his or her way: most of them say the toddler will throw a tantrum. Some of us do mature further than that, but I certainly know of a few adults who seemingly revert to two year olds when the pressure is on!

The reason the behaviours haven’t changed? They work for the person; they get their needs meet. The problem of course is that this childish behaviour will not result in long-term respect for the tantrum-throwing adult.

Not many of us have it innately. In my own experience of training people in the subject, it’s become clear to me that people do evolve behaviourally through school and tend to settle at how they resolve their conflicts at around age 16. People then continue their education or go into work and learn new skills, so learning ability isn’t the issue – it’s that people don’t recognise a need to develop higher levels of self-awareness, their emotionality, to consider the effect we cause on the people around us… just like Sam.

This of course is all fine as long as there’s no issue in the workplace, but as soon as a potential difficult conversation comes along, behaviour reverts to the playground.

The good news is that emotional intelligence can be learned and a higher level of self-awareness, combined with a desire to become more adept at managing our own and others’ emotions, is well worth the time investment.

We’ve probably all heard our mothers tell us to, ‘Put yourself in their shoes’. It’s become a cliché: we can trot it out with dexterity when we are talking to someone else. But how often do we do ourselves?

So the question is…
How does one become self-aware?

You can certainly ask the opinions of the people around you, but you may get a mixed result. I began my own journey of self-discovery in 2005 (brought about because I inherited a new maniacal boss, but that’s another story) by undertaking all manner of psychometric tests, trying to glean an insight into my own behaviour.

The tools that really did it for me were the Thomas assessments.

I first was exposed to Thomas PPA (Personal Profile Analysis) in Canada when I took on a contract at a larger North American company. I immediately appreciated how PPA could tell me how I was modifying my preferred behaviour and how I’d respond under extreme pressure. It also gave me a lot of insight into why I could sometimes be seen as overly assertive.

I learned that, being high in the Dominance traits, I could come across as aggressive when my intention was simply to get the job done.

Working with others I can recognise when someone high in Influence traits is looking for praise; when the security of someone high in Steadiness traits is being threatened; and when someone high in Compliance traits is facing conflict that will make him/her retreat for the rulebook.

Realising that psychometric assessments can tell you some things about yourself you may not even be aware of, I have learned that not everyone sees the world the same as me and everyone has good intentions. It’s simply the way we go about things and the behaviours we exhibit to get our needs met that can see us labelling other people as ‘too controlling’, ‘rebellious’ or ‘overly detailed’.

Looking at Sam’s behaviour in the meeting, if his team had completed a psychometric assessment like PPA, you may have known that Sam was high in both Dominance and Influence traits, meaning that he’d probably be unaware of his impatient behaviour and the effect it was having.

You’d have understood that it was nothing to do with you at all and you could have dealt with Sam and completed your presentation without feeling unsettled.
William Moulton Marston was a lawyer and a psychologist; he postulated a theory of human behaviour as a function of two bipolar dimensions: one external, and the other internal.

These two dimensions provided a matrix for an individual’s typical pattern of interaction, which is described through four characteristics. The theory states we are all striving to avoid something (our basic fear) and this will dictate our behaviour. Our behavioural preferences will also demonstrate the following:

**DOMINANCE (Power)**
- **High ‘D’ Consistent Characteristics**
  - Assertive, Competitive, Direct, Driving, Forceful, Inquisitive, Self-starter
- **Value to the Organisation**
  - Driving for results
- **Motivator**
  - Power and authority
- **Management Style**
  - Directing
- **Communication Style**
  - Telling

**COMPLIANCE (Policy)**
- **High ‘C’ Consistent Characteristics**
  - Accurate, Careful, Compliant, Logical, Perfectionist, Precise, Systematic
- **Value to the Organisation**
  - Technical, Quality, Standards
- **Motivator**
  - Standard operating procedures
- **Basic Fear**
  - Conflict
- **Management Style**
  - Rule enforcement
- **Communication Style**
  - Writing

**INFLUENCE (People)**
- **High ‘I’ Consistent Characteristics**
  - Communication, Friendly, Influential, Networker, Persuasive, Positive, Verbal
- **Value to the Organisation**
  - Working with and through people
- **Motivator**
  - Public praise and recognition
- **Basic Fear**
  - Rejection
- **Management Style**
  - Motivating
- **Communication Style**
  - Speaking

**STEADINESS (Pace)**
- **High ‘S’ Consistent Characteristics**
  - Amiable, Deliberate, Dependable, Good listener, Kind, Methodical, Persistent, Thorough
- **Value to the Organisation**
  - Service and Support
- **Motivator**
  - Security
- **Basic Fear**
  - Insecurity
- **Management Style**
  - Organising
- **Communication Style**
  - Listening

Dr. Thomas Hendrickson developed Marston’s insights further and created a tool to measure where each person places themselves along each of the four characteristics – called profile factors. This instrument was developed into the Thomas Personal Profile Analysis, which analyses behaviour in the workplace.
Psychometric tools can help you and your colleagues understand a person’s behaviours (PPA), their level of Emotional Intelligence (TEIQue) and their speed of learning (GIA). They can give you immediate insights that would otherwise take months to observe – I’m sure there are laws against shadowing your people, plotting their every move for six months!

That said, you don’t always need to ask someone to complete a PPA to see how his or her behaviour has changed and you won’t always need an assessment to gather your information before tackling every type of tough conversation.

What you do always need to do, however, is prepare.
Preparation for the conversation

Assuming you have the information and evidence to have the conversation, you need to consider how you’ll approach it and how the other person could possibly respond, as well as whether he/she will hit on any of your emotional triggers.

Just because you may have buckets of self-awareness and are able to modify your behaviour, doesn’t mean that the other person will follow suit. One of the most frustrating things about trying to have a difficult conversation with someone who can’t play in the adult world is wondering how on earth you can make them see your point of view, or acknowledge the facts. Quite simply, you can’t.

In business, people are paid to do a job. To do a job they need to be professional. You can safely work within this territory.

The only recourse you have is to draw objective attention to their negative behaviour and stipulate what will happen if it does not change. You can’t enter into negotiation with someone who blames others, plays the victim or tries to dominate the proceedings. What you can do is prepare yourself in advance for the conversation — emotionally as well as factually — so you know the outcome you want.

Preparing for the conversation

Stay off the Drama Triangle

Ever had a conversation that quickly degenerated into ‘he said/she said’ or name-calling and only served to increase negative emotion? I don’t think I’ve met anyone yet who hasn’t been down this path when an issue needs discussing.

Problem is, when this happens, everyone has taken a place on the ‘Drama Triangle’.

The Drama Triangle has three positions: Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer. You can find yourself in any one of these positions with different people in your life; you may even chase yourself around the Drama Triangle if one of your needs isn’t being met.

Victim

- Usually first on the triangle.
- ‘Why does this always happen to me?’
- Life is always unfair
- Feel they are too stupid to understand
- Always in a hurry and feel harassed

Persecutor

- Needs someone to blame.
- ‘It’s not my fault!’
- Blames others for their difficulties
- Defensive and spoils for a fight
- Will not accept responsibility for the mistakes they make

Rescuer

- Rides in on the white horse.
- ‘Here, let ME do it.’
- Keeps offering help regardless of whether it’s asked for or needed
- Believe they can make it all better
- Thinks they are indispensable
Keep it ‘adult to adult’

Playground behaviours see us sticking our fingers in our ears, standing our ground (some even stamping it) and taking a position of either ‘I am more important’ (persecutor) or ‘you are more important’ (rescuer and victim).

The antidote to keeping off the drama triangle is firstly to recognise that you are on it and secondly to practise adult, assertive responses. Assertiveness means recognising that everyone is as important as each other; calmly stating the facts and their impact on you; and allowing the other person to speak too.

It helps to have clear thinking, which can be difficult if you awake the amygdala! Knowing ahead of time that you might get emotionally involved can help you to prepare your responses. As the saying goes, if you don’t want someone to get your goat, don’t let them know where it’s tied up.

With all tough conversations, you need to be:

**Flexible**
keep an open mind

**A good listener**
listen with the intent to understand

**Non-judgemental**
remember it’s the other person’s world, not yours

**Solution-focused**
concentrate on resolving the issue at hand

**Questioning**
probe for facts and solutions

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**Asking really good questions is a valuable skill worth honing…**

**Good questions**
- Are thought provoking
- Are open not closed
- Usually start with “who” / “what” / “where” / “when” / “how”

**Avoid**
- “Why” questions – they sound accusatory
- “Have you” / “did you” / “are you” questions – they elicit one word responses

**Pause for response**
- Suspend judgment on the response – how is your listening face? Are you letting your negative reactions show?
- Paraphrase again to ensure clarity – so the other person feels understood
Success factors

Before any type of difficult conversation, you need to gather your facts and check your assumptions. Using psychometric tools to measure behaviour, emotional intelligence, speed of learning, etc. can help you gather information in an objective way.

Preparation is critical in deciding how to act. Consider the incident, the reason, the personality/ies involved and how each party has responded in the past.

In business, you can eliminate a negative behaviour by helping the person understand that there will be consequences. Like the two year old who has learned that throwing a fit gets the parent to change his/her mind, the ‘adult two year old’ may too test your resolve and the consequences. If you can’t enforce the consequences, then don’t make them. Don’t bluff. Find out what is and is not acceptable (usually via your HR and/or Legal colleagues).

do

✓ Focus on facts – be specific about the behaviour and the effect it has had  
✓ Pay attention – give the other person all your focus – listen with the intent to understand  
✓ Adapt your style – you may have what you think are the answers, but should instead try to help the other person arrive to his/her own solutions  
✓ Ask questions – avoid saying ‘why’ because it can sound accusatory; instead ask ‘what, where, when, who, how’ questions  
✓ Accept your feelings – the other person may hit on one of your trigger points; but this is about the other person, not you  
✓ Empathise – recognise their position without compromising objectivity

don’t

✗ Use absolutes (‘always’/’never’) – they are seldom true  
✗ Make assumptions – ask questions  
✗ Judge – everyone has good intentions, they may simply have a different moral compass to you  
✗ Offer advice – for example: “If I were you…”  
✗ Respond when you’re angry – it’s OK to take a break. If your negative emotions are taking hold, your rational brain will lose!  
✗ Take offence – remember, it’s not about you  
✗ Sympathise – save your sympathies for outside the office

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In conclusion, know that you’re not alone if you fear the dreaded tough conversation. Also, know that any negative behaviours do need to be nipped in the bud, otherwise they will continue. Tools and assessments can guide you, but they’re not the only answer – preparation is a must.

If you remember only one thing, it should be this: How someone acts says more about him or her than it does you. Even if it is aimed at you, the other person’s behaviour stems from their own internal situation, which may have been knocked by completely separate external factors.

Think of it this way: if someone has something to talk to you about, you are much more likely to remain calm and respond positively if you are already feeling good that day. If, however, you’re already in a bad mood because you spilled coffee down your shirt, your keys were stuck in the car door and someone stole your parking space, how likely is it you’ll be calm when that same person comes to talk to you? Very unlikely – and it says more about your state of mind than it does theirs. People respond negatively because they feel threatened or their needs are not being met in some way. It’s not your job to try to control their emotional responses, but you can work on your own and have a positive impact on the other person in the process.

Key takeaways

Wondering how that very first conversation went, the one where the woman stormed into her boss’ office? That woman was me. A ‘high D’, as we say. I’ve since learned that the boss was also a high D, which is why he was able to take it.

He leaned back in his chair, listened to all my grievances (of which there were many) and calmly told me that he wasn’t going to change a thing about the way he operated.

It was up to me – I could either put up, shut up, or leave. I left. And started my journey of learning, a path I will always be on.