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"Please Take A Deep Breath." The Crucial Art Of Difficult Conversations.

Adam Bryant | [Follow](#)
Managing Director at Merryc...

Let's be honest. No manager likes to have tough conversations about performance with an employee, and the fact is that most of us go out of our way to avoid them (I've been guilty of this myself over the years). But as [Valerie Salembier](#), a veteran publishing executive and a colleague of mine at [Merryck & Co.](#), reminds us, having these tough talks is a core part of every manager's responsibility. She shared her playbook on the best way to approach them.

Q. What are the most common themes that come up when you're advising senior executives?

A. People often want to know how they can do a better job of managing both their bosses and their staffs. And for their teams, the most important message I share is to tell the truth because, over a very long career, the biggest disconnect for me has been bosses not being honest with their employees about performance.

It's very easy to do a performance review and give someone an above-average rating – even though it may not be brilliant performance – rather than saying, "Listen, I've got to tell you that one thing you're doing is causing a big problem for your team, so let's discuss what it is and how we might fix it." I have no problem telling the truth in a non-judgmental way and non-accusatory way.

Q. Have you always been comfortable with these kinds of conversations?

A. I think it started when I worked for Rupert Murdoch many years ago. I had to fire 30 people at *TV Guide* in one week and close seven offices. These people were all lifers, and it was the most horrible thing that I ever had to do. I still remember a man in one of the offices who said, "But eight years ago I was Salesman of the Year. How can you be firing me?"

Moments like that – when you see that people can have perceptions of themselves that are out of step – really changed how I viewed the business world. When you're giving somebody bad news, you have to say it exactly like it is. I can do it with a velvet glove.

Q. There's an art to having those difficult conversations.

A. When I had to have a very difficult conversation with someone, they would walk into my office, and just as they're about to sit down, I would say, "Would you mind closing the door?" When they get to the door, I would then say, "Please take a deep breath. This is not going to be an easy conversation." Then they sit down again and they are at least prepared. I've learned that this is helpful because they now know this is not going to be a "you're so wonderful" conversation. Then I get directly into it.

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Some executives might be more hard-core and go right into the conversation, but I don't want to be punishing because that's how that person will take it – as accusation and punishment.

Q. What's the distinction? How do you avoid that trap?

A. I avoid it by having the conversation start gently. And that doesn't mean I skirt what I want to say, because I don't. But I'm able to do this in a very sort of non-pejorative way. As an example, there was someone I knew I was going to fire, and he came in for a conversation. I said, "Listen, you and I have been talking about this for the past two months, and I don't see an improvement here, but now it's up to you. It's not up to me to tell you more of what you're not doing. If you want to keep this job, I am putting the responsibility back on you. You know what you have to do." And he tried, but he couldn't do it, and I fired him. But putting the responsibility back on someone to fix themselves has been very helpful.

Q. Let's shift to the other point you mentioned, about managing up. What are your tips?

A. I had a client who was a top executive at a global company, and her boss would sometimes disappear and not be in touch for two weeks at a time. I advised her to ask him how he wants her to communicate with him because she was totally stymied. He didn't answer her e-mails. He wouldn't take her calls. The truth is that it had nothing to do with her.

I said, "Why don't you ask a couple of your colleagues who had worked for him at one time or another how they managed him?" She did that, and ultimately started making decisions and emailing him about them, but not asking for his approval. She would say, "If you don't want to proceed in this direction, please let me know." She realized he was a terrible communicator, he wasn't going to change, and she just needed to do her job as it was outlined for her. Which is exactly what she did and then she was promoted out of that job.

So you need to learn about the person you're reporting to, and you do that by asking them directly how they want to communicate. Some bosses prefer email, some hate email, some like the phone and others don't want to talk on the phone. But you need to ask those questions going in. And if you need your boss's input, you can say, "I really need to have a biweekly meeting because I need your point of view on how to proceed – not that you need to tell me how to proceed, but I need your point of view."

Q. Other themes? What other advice do you give to people?

A. Go after something that will be a big win. If you bring something to the table that is really going to add tremendous value to your company or division, that can be a really big win for you. I say to my clients, when appropriate, "You can take this new job and make it as huge a job as you want it to be. Or you can take this job and make it as small as the definition currently is." That allows people to be innovative. By having early wins that are outside of the exact parameters of one's job, you create a name for yourself.

Q. Some people may have those wins, but they're uncomfortable about drawing attention to themselves for their accomplishments. What's your advice to people who worry about appearing as if they are bragging?

A. I say something like this: "No one is going to toot your horn. No one. You're in too high-level a job. You need to let people, especially your managers and bosses, know what you have achieved. And there's a way to do it without boasting."

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And the way you do it is to say, "The team I have working for me now and I came up with a plan to do XYZ." So you're including the team, but you're also saying you were the strategist. That's tooting your own horn but in a non-bragging way. People have to be comfortable to take credit when they should.

Q. What has been an important leadership lesson you've learned?

A. I can tell you a story about Al Neuharth [the founder of USA Today]. I had to take my boss's place one week in one of his management meetings, which had about 30 people in them. Kellogg's had just bought eight pages of ads, and they ran the day of the meeting. Al went around the table asking for three-minute reports, and when it was my turn, he said, "So, Valerie, what did the CEO of Kellogg's say when you called him to thank them for the eight pages?"

I thought for a second about not telling the truth, but then I let a couple of seconds pass, and I said, "You know what, Al, I haven't called." And he said, "I bet after this meeting that's what you will do." That lesson stayed with me forever, and still stays with me. Have I done what I was supposed to do before I get into this meeting? Do I have all the information that might be asked of me? And that was a huge help. It never came up again. You don't necessarily drive yourself crazy, but you make sure you go into every meeting prepared.

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