



## Courageous Conversations in the Workplace

**W**hat type of conversation at work do you dread having the most? Which individual must you talk with that you feel most nervous about? Who is it that you avoid running into at work so you don't have to have the difficult discussion?

### What do you say or where do you go when the supervisor IS the problem?

You can see where I'm going with this. It takes courage to face conversations that are unpleasant, especially with certain people.

This form of "emotional calisthenics" takes preparation, heart, a lot of thought and professional courage.



### A Passive Workplace Culture

Believe it or not, most people would prefer not having a necessary, yet uncomfortable discussion at work.

When I ask why, I get answers like:

- I don't want to hurt their feelings.
- It's not that big of a deal.
- Maybe I'm just being too sensitive.
- I don't want to be seen as the office complainer.
- I haven't been here that long.

But actually, underneath all of this there is usually a fear of how the other person will react or who else will they tell about the private discussion.

Many years ago I was talking to a young wife who was frustrated about her mother-in-law who would re-arrange her daughter-in-law's furniture whenever she came over to babysit her grandson. When I asked the daughter-in-law if she had brought it to her mother-in-law's attention she said, "Oh I would never do that!" When I asked why she replied, "I love her too much."

## Courageous Conversations in the Workplace

---

I replied, “No you don’t. It’s not about love. It’s about your concern of how she will react to your uncomfortable discussion.” She agreed.

Again, it takes guts and courage to wade into the murky waters of verbal clarification and confrontation and a higher percentage of employees in the USA would prefer not to.

Below are some ideas regarding how to speak to another when necessary.

### Accountable Communication

#### Go Individually to the Person

There is a new wave of training in the workplace called Accountable Communication. It suggests it is the role and responsibility of each individual employee if they have a concern, problem, opinion or idea with a co-worker to go directly to the individual to have the discussion.

The concern with this for many is they don’t want to cause a problem and it’s easier to just have the manager deal with the issue. There is also a feeling of nervousness, especially if they have to correct their peer or suggest a better way. Accountable Communication is for the professionally strong at heart.

I was at a marketing firm recently and was asked to elaborate on this newly-presented concept of Accountable Communication. I could tell there was some confusion with staff as to how to specifically do this since their former culture had always been a top-down management model. The CEO stood up and explained it in a profound way.

*We are all part of a team here. If you were on a basketball team and you were in the clear to make a shot and the ball was not being passed to you, you wouldn’t go to the coach to complain that you weren’t getting the ball. You would simply nudge your team member and say, “Hey, I’m in the open.” If it happened a second time you would more emphatically assert that you are in the open. If it happened 3, 4, or 5 times then you might want to go to the coach and mention there needs to be some discussion about the play calls.*

The problem in the workplace is we complain to the coach first and hope they do the work for us. So first and foremost, when there is a problem that requires Courageous Communication you must approach the person individually.

#### Seek Advice if Necessary

Of course, if you need ideas and direction on what to say and what the best approach might be, then seek input from your supervisor. Hopefully you have one who knows how to mentor, suggest and brainstorm without doing the work for you as opposed to one who shows no interest at all thereby throwing you back into the deep end of the pool to dog paddle on your own. A professional leader would be glad to help resolve a concern that could potentially and negatively impact staff and the company.

As a sidebar, I think it is appropriate to vent to your supervisor IF you are looking for a solution to the problem. Anything short of that could be a dumping ground for gossip and trash-talking.

#### When Are Courageous Conversations Necessary?

1. When there is a growing sense of disconnect between two co-workers.
2. When a worker’s projects are being negatively impacted by another’s work, behavior or lack of communication.
3. When resentment begins to settle in and your thoughts are dominated by the problem.
4. When you find yourself avoiding the worker, perhaps even one you were previously close to.
5. When you begin looking for another job because of lack of resolution.

## Courageous Conversations in the Workplace

So it's time for you to have that uncomfortable conversation. There is no way around it and your supervisor agrees it needs to happen. Where do you begin? How would you approach the individual? What possible words can you say to keep the discussion from going off the rails? Consider these thoughts...

### Preparation for Courageous Conversations

Here are some ideas and questions to think about so when you are ready to go your thought process will be clear, your head is right, and your approach is professional.

**1. Is this a real problem or just a personal preference?**

Just because you don't like what happened or the individual has a different way of approaching a project, that doesn't necessarily indicate a courageous discussion is necessary.

**2. How about the timing and place?**

Timing is essential and wise. Is this the best time? Are there other factors that would take away from the discussion? It is always preferred to begin by going directly and privately to the person of concern.

**3. Are you clear on what the facts are?**

Is it something you experienced personally or are you speaking for others? It's almost impossible to be clear on what the problem and solution is if it is only based on hearsay.

**4. Be sure to ask questions rather than make declarations.**

Running at others with both verbal-barrels blazing is surely not the most effective approach. It is much better to go on a fact-finding mission to get their perspective about what happened and why to avoid making accusations

### What to say in a Courageous Conversation

Emotions can run high even with constructive criticism. If you don't have an outline in your mind about what the goals and points of the discussion should be you can get derailed very quickly and it can become more disastrous than it was before you even opened your mouth. A communication model to avoid this happening is called the D.E.S.C. Model. Following are some examples of the different phases:

**Describe the situation:** One month ago you and I discussed the need to approach each other rather than go over each other's head if we had a concern or complaint. It has been brought to my attention that you went directly to our supervisor again.



## Courageous Conversations in the Workplace

**Explain your feelings:** I am frustrated that what we agreed would be the best approach with each other has not happened.

**Specify what you want:** I want you to have the freedom to come to me personally if I have made a mistake or you have an idea or question about my work.

**Consequences or outcomes are given-**

**Positive consequences:** I believe if you and I are able to go to each other individually it will build a greater team overall and create more respect with one another.

**Negative consequences:** If you are not able to come to me directly next time I will request a sit-down discussion with our supervisor so we can build the strong team that you and I desire.

**Conclusion:** If we desire to be truly effective in the workplace and to develop good leadership skills it will never happen without the ability to have Courageous Conversations. It prevents triangulation, keeps others informed, ultimately gives us more peace of mind and builds respect among staff. So take heart, face your fears and go for it!

In the next newsletter I will focus on the subject of **“When the Problem IS Your Supervisor”**

### The D.E.S.C. Model

**Describe** the situation

**Express** your feelings about the situation

**Specify** what you want to change in the situation

**Consequences** associated with the behavior, good or bad



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.