Trust in Organisational Life

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Placing your trust in difficult conversations

Sarah Harvey

"Our lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time… The conversation is the relationship."

<div align="right">[Susan Scott 2002]</div>

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Introduction

Since October 2013, through research and practice, I have made it my business to understand what it takes to turn difficult discussions into highly effective conversations. By effective, I mean that the conversation, or series of conversations, gets positive results whilst at the same time maintaining positive relationships. My observations working with business leaders, managers, individuals and teams has led me to investigate this subject in more detail and experiment with different approaches. Having assessed the feedback from this work with around 1000 individuals, I have identified six key considerations for having an effective conversation. Of these, 'trust' appears to be the most crucial underpinning factor.

By building and maintaining positive relationships, we are able to talk constructively to virtually anyone about anything, no matter how sensitive the topic. I have spent the best part of my career either having difficult conversations, helping others have difficult conversations or dealing with the fall-out of poorly handled conversations. These experiences have challenged and inspired me to specialise in this area of organisational and personal development, which I now refer to as 'Savvy Conversations'.

In this article, I argue that difficult conversations cannot take place effectively where there is no trust, and trust cannot exist in the absence of personal credibility. I highlight some research around organisational trust levels and then take the notion of trust back to basics, going on to explain how Stephen Covey's (1989) model of the Emotional Bank Account can provide a useful framework for anyone who is interested in maintaining trusting relationships in the workplace.

What constitutes a 'Savvy Conversation'?

In my view, there are six key considerations for every effective conversation. These are:

(The six elements of 'Savvy Conversations'. © Sarah Harvey)

Each of the six elements is important in its own right, but the central theme does seem to be 'trust'.

How we manage our 'emotions' in the here-and-now impacts directly on our behaviour, and observing our behaviour is one of the ways in which people will decide whether they can trust us or not. You cannot have 'safety' without there being a level of trust. When we seek to speak the 'truth' and aim to have the right conversation, in the right way, at the right time, we help to further build that trust. And without , we don't really have a 'relationship' because, as Susan Scott identifies, the conversation (in other words the 'exchange') *is* the relationship.

If trust is a central theme which enables effective conversations to take place, so too is the presence of credibility. Without trust, we simply don't have credibility.

> ***Credibility*** *[definition]*
>
> *Believability, believableness, integrity, plausibility, reliability, tenability, trustworthiness.*
>
> *(Collins English Dictionary)*

What constitutes a 'Savvy Conversation'?

Credibility and trust are interlinked.

So credibility and trust are key. You can't have one without the other. With credibility you inspire belief in others. It generates a feeling of trust and respect. It means you are capable of being believed. If you have credibility you are likely to be perceived as trustworthy and reliable and consistently demonstrating integrity. You will also be thought of as dependable, honest and sincere. These are all key attributes for being able to get results whilst at the same time maintaining positive relationships.

Trust and trusting

To trust someone, we must believe that they are well intentioned towards us and that they have our best interests at heart. To place confidence in them, we must have faith that they don't intentionally wish to cause us harm. This is true whether they are selling us a product or delivering a service, whether they work for us in a team we manage or whether they are our manager.

It is possible to be reasonably comfortable with others even when we disagree with them, provided we trust that the other persons' underlying motives and intentions towards us are honest and without hidden agenda. As soon as we start to question someone's intentions towards us, trust starts to erode and we instinctively become more guarded. In such situations, our primary objective becomes to keep ourselves safe.

This usually means we either withdraw from the conversation (which closes communications down completely), or alternatively we may become defensive or go for the verbal attack (the classic fight or flight reaction when we feel under threat).

The range of so-called 'difficult conversations' where such trust is important is vast. In the workplace, difficult conversations may typically involve addressing a worker's ability to do their job, carrying out an appraisal or giving a lower than expected performance rating. It could require discussing reasons for sickness absence, addressing a personal hygiene issue, or exploring why one team member doesn't appear to get on with others. By their very nature these conversations are often regarded as ', and without trust they become even more difficult.

As trust evolves, conversations and relationships flourish.

In recent years it has been widely reported that trust in general is at an all-time low. Rock bottom levels of trust in the banking sector have been well documented, but in addition trust in politicians, trust in large organisations, and trust in leadership in general has suffered (and it appears to have been in decline for several years, certainly pre-dating the current financial crisis). In the 2013 British Attitudes Survey, 47% of respondents said they didn't even trust other members of the public. (Warren 2016).

In their 2013 publication 'Are Organisations Losing the Trust of their Workers?',, the professional body for HR and people development, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), reports that public trust in big business has been falling for some time and this has implications for the trust which employees place in their leaders. (CIPD 2013)

Furthermore this report states:

- Leadership, culture and behaviour make a big difference to trust. When trust is lacking, this affects productivity and organisation performance.

- Employees spend more time watching out for management and covering their own backs. Managers spend more time checking up on employees. Employees who do not trust their employer are more likely to want to leave.

- Employees in low-trust environments are discouraged from sharing knowledge and taking risks – wasting innovation potential.

- Employees may also be reluctant to challenge the behaviour of leaders or colleagues, thus creating risks for both an organisation's performance and its reputation.

Back to basics on developing and maintaining trust

> *Can I trust you, and do you trust me?*

This is a key unspoken question in every single relationship we have.

But the challenge with understanding what 'trust' is and precisely how it is developed, is that different approaches will be needed with different people in different situations. Trust is an emotional response, making it uniquely personal. Yet at the same time there are certain common trust 'indicators' which give us a broad set of social norms to signpost us to who we should trust and who we should not. This makes trust hard to quantify as an absolute, and harder still to know what we can do to build and maintain trust within every relationship and context we find ourselves in.

Task-by-task approaches to trust

In the workplace, we may often be able to take a pragmatic approach. So rather than an all-or-nothing approach to trust (where we either trust someone or we don't), we can learn to instead think of trust on a task-by-task basis. For example, I can't trust you to deliver that report on time, but I know I can trust you to give good customer service. This task-by-task approach can be given in degrees and will vary according to the specific situation. You don't have to trust someone 100%, but as they prove themselves capable in one task, your trust in their abilities grows, and over time you trust in them to carry out a wider range of more complex tasks. This is a relatively straightforward application of trust and one that can be useful for managers to adopt when delegating to, and managing staff.

Relational approaches to trust

By contrast however, the type of trust issues that generally come into play when needing to have difficult conversations are far more complex and don't tend to be related to specific task completion. Trust in this context tends to be driven from our beliefs and values, and is more about our motives. More specifically it is about calling into question the motives and intent of the person we are talking with. This aspect of trust (or lack of trust) is intrinsically linked to concerns over safety. It can put our relationships into conflict, which in turn can reduce trust further still.

During the course of my work I have found that the most useful and practical metaphor to describe the amount of trust in a relationship is the Emotional Bank Account. (Covey 1989).

In The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (p188), Covey introduces the concept of the Emotional Bank Account:

"We all know what a financial bank account is. We make deposits into it and build up a reserve from which we can make withdrawals when we need to."

"An Emotional Bank Account is a metaphor that describes the amount of trust that's built up in a relationship. It's the feeling of safeness you have with another human being."

Image by Sarah Harvey

So if the relationship is a good one where we like, respect and trust one another and we share some common goals, there will 'credits' in our account. Through being courteous, kind and honest with each other we build up a level of trust that we can then call upon when we need to, such as when a potentially difficult conversation is required.

Even if one of us makes a mistake from time to time, perhaps through saying something that may be a little blunt or upsetting, the positive reserve we have built up in our Emotional Bank Account will compensate for it, and trust levels will remain reasonably high (or at least in credit).

By regularly investing in our Emotional Bank Account and keeping it in credit, our relationship should feel relatively easy, pleasant and well balanced. However, if it becomes 'overdrawn', one way or the other, we are likely to experience difficulties. We may feel that we have to watch what we say for fear of being misunderstood. Tension can become high as we call into question each other's motives and intentions.

Before too long tension turns into full blown conflict and we no longer feel we can talk to one another without arguing, getting upset or angry. Trust has all but gone and will take some continued and sustained effort to rebuild.

Trust in conflict

"Trusting environments can lead to more innovation, problem solving and sharing of knowledge."

(Hope Hailey, cited in Claire Warren 2016)

Of course, there is a school of thought that conflict can be positive, and that there are benefits to conflict that people and organisations ought to harness. Rather than trying to quash or manage conflict, there is a belief

that we should be embracing it or even encouraging it. I have observed that whilst a certain amount of conflict can promote personal growth, creativity and innovation, this needs to be within the right organisational culture to make it work. In my experience, so-called 'positive conflict' is only possible where trust is already strong and where people feel safe to voice opposing views, to disagree and to challenge the status quo without risking damage to their underlying relationships.

How can we create and maintain trust in such varied settings?

So how do we know how to create and maintain trust when what is needed to create and maintain trusting relationships varies from person to person?

Drawing upon the Emotional Bank Account, we can create trust by making investments or credits such as:

- Helping the other person

- Paying them a genuine compliment

- Showing interest in them and what they are saying

- Saying thank you

- Being honest and kind

- Keeping our commitments

And we may find ourselves making withdrawals of trust, as from the Emotional Bank Account, by:

- Saying 'no' to the other person when they ask for our help

- Asking the other person to change their behaviour

- Making time to speak to them only when there is bad news or criticism

- Being rude or treating the other person badly

- Letting them down/breaking promises

- Handling a difficult conversation badly!

On the face of it this may seem quite straightforward, but the reality is that people in organisations risk damaging relationships all the time by failing to invest in their trust account in the right ways, or by making regular withdrawals, often without realising they are doing so.

Three particular groups who might benefit from trust-based conversations

There are three categories of people that managers often need to have difficult conversations with:

1. Those with whom we share a positive history

These people will have already earned our trust, and we theirs. We may have known them for months or even years. We will have developed a mutual respect for one another over time through what we have done together, through information we have shared and through how we have behaved towards one another. The state of our Emotional/Trust Bank Account is good; it is in credit

and in balance, because we have both invested in our relationship equally. We bring all of this 'history' to any future conversations we have and our mutual trust and respect will help us have honest and effective conversations, provided that we don't do anything now to damage that trust.

2. Those with whom we need to co-author our story

We also need to have conversations with people we don't yet know very well or even at all. We may have only just met, or this may be the first time we have really had a detailed conversation. We have no shared history to draw on. We only have the here-and-now and the quality of the conversation we are having with them right now to start to create and earn their trust. We need to give them, through what we say and how we say it, sufficient evidence to suggest that they should trust us. And they need to do the same for us too.

3. Those with whom we share an 'uneasy' history

These are the individuals with whom we have a less than positive shared history! In the past, trust has been damaged because of what one or other (or both) of us has said or done. Perceptions and perspectives are everything in this situation. We may not even know what happened for the trust to be destroyed, but we do know it is not there! Having a difficult conversation effectively in these circumstances will take far more care and more time, as we seek to recreate trust in order to establish a feeling of safety between us.

Trust evolves but it does not simply grow with the passage of time.

When it comes to understanding how day-to-day trusting relationships are developed, Covey's Emotional Bank Account encourages us to focus on the fundamentals that make the difference.

As a people manager myself, I have learnt that it is vital to keep consciously and deliberately investing in every important relationship. It can be helpful to reflect from time to time on who we need to get on well with. Which colleagues, bosses, team members, customers? Whilst busy managers often have good intentions, many have told me that they don't have time for 'small-talk'. But a 'credit' in the trust bank is far from small-talk, it is an investment in the relationship. If we have invested plenty of credit, we are less likely to become overdrawn as a result of a difficult conversation. If we have neglected to invest in the relationship, our account can easily slip into the red when times get tough and conversations get difficult.

Trust only evolves between two or more individuals when they each believe the other understands their interests and we must believe someone is not intending to put their own interests ahead of ours. Above all, we need to feel we can trust people to do the right thing by us.

> *"Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships."*

[Stephen Covey]

Whether it is someone we have just met or someone with whom we have an established relationship, if we want to get good results and maintain positive relationships, we can really help ourselves by taking the time to invest the right trust 'credits' at the right time.

The Savvy Conversations 'Trust' Equation

To get results and maintain relationships:

Content + Approach = Credibility

Where Content = What you do + Approach = How you do it

And, If Credibility and Trust are interlinked, then

Trust in difficult conversations = What you say and how you say it

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About the author

Sarah Harvey is an Organisational Development (OD) consultant, training facilitator and executive coach. With over 25 years experience of managing and leading people personally, as well as working alongside managers and leaders at all levels, Sarah has experienced the highs and lows of managing people and performance from the perspectives of first line managers through to CEO's and Board members.

Sarah now specialises in working with individuals and teams to get results and maintain relationships at work, whether the aim is to avoid conflict, plan for important conversations, give more effective feedback, carry out better quality 1-1's, transform appraisal discussions, resolve differences of opinion or simply get the best from individuals and teams.

Company Website – http://savvyconversations.co.uk;

Twitter - @SavvySarahSPM

Linked In - https://uk.linkedin.com/in/savvysarah;

Email sarah@spm-ltd.com

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