

Courageous Conversations #2: Do You Need One?

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*This is the 2nd article of 4 in the Courageous Conversations Toolkit series.
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at
atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation*

All leaders need to become comfortable and proficient at Courageous Conversations. But it's also important to understand that dialogue is not always the right choice.

There are situations where you would be ill-advised to sit down and have an honest conversation. There are realities of power. There are people with bad intentions. The **Risk-Reward Assessment** is a tool to help you determine whether or not to initiate a Courageous Conversation based on strategic thinking rather than your comfort or discomfort in dealing with a situation.

Step 1. Risks of Inaction

What are the negative implications and possible consequences of NOT having a Courageous Conversation?

For you? For the relationship? For the organization? For the work?

Look at both tangibles (e.g. negative impact on work) and intangibles (e.g. drain on your energy, lower trust)

When we procrastinate or avoid, we may delude ourselves into thinking we're not making a choice. It's important to keep remembering that not having a direct conversation is a choice.

Step 2. Rewards of Courageous Conversation

What are the potential rewards in having a Courageous Conversation? For you? For the relationship? For the organization? For the work?

Step 3. Risks of Courageous Conversation

What are the REAL risks in speaking honestly?

Be aware that we sometimes have troubling discerning real danger from anxiety that causes us to overestimate risk or see danger where there is none.

Step 4. Assess Risks and Rewards

Look at the relative risks and rewards in the situation?

Do exactly what you should do before initiating any significant action – be strategic.

Assess the potential benefits of action. Assess the risks of action and inaction.

Step 5. Make a Clear and Committed Choice.

There are four possible tactics for dealing with relational challenges. The key is to actually make a clear choice and deal with the situation, rather than avoidance.

Option #1: Have a Courageous Conversation

Use the principles and tools in this toolkit to engage in an authentic dialogue

Option #2: Have a Courageous Conversation with help

This can be a wise choice when you have previously failed in attempting to work things out. This might look like engaging a professional facilitator or mediator, or even just a colleague whom you both trust. Sometimes simply the presence of a neutral party causes people to show up in a more mature and positive way.

Option #3: Make peace with what is

Perhaps you've made numbers of good faith efforts to work things out. Sometimes we simply need to accept things as they are – to lower our expectations and make the best of the situation.

In this option, we let go of trying to make things be different than they are. **IMPORTANT:** this is not a grudging acceptance or angry “the hell with it.” It’s a realization that things aren’t going to be as I would have liked them to be, but I’m making a wise choice not to keep fruitlessly resisting reality. In a relationship, this means we consciously de-invest in what we expect with and from the other.

For example:

There are 5 people on my team. I get along well with 4 of them. This person and I just don't get along. Not what I would have liked, but it's O.K.

Option #4: Restructure or terminate the relationship

Sometimes the problem in a relationship is the roles through which people are interacting. Whether it be due to differences in values, beliefs, strategy, personal styles or personal chemistry, sometimes the form of relationship demands too much interaction and interdependence and simply isn’t workable. What’s needed is not more Courageous Conversations, but a change in the nature of the relationship.

Some examples:

- You are having ongoing challenges with your campaign co-director. You two would actually do fine just being on the management team together, but the demands of such a close working partnership are too great given your very different styles of working. The right tactic might be to move one of you to another position.
- You are in a joint venture with another organization. Repeated conversations have failed to find alignment on strategy. The right tactic might be to end the joint venture. You can continue a relationship as allies, but not try to be close working partners.
- You are having ongoing conflicts with your boss and repeated conversations haven’t helped at all. Given the criticality of this relationship for your job satisfaction, you may want to consider leaving.

When things aren't working between you and other people, choose among these four options:

- Option #1: Have a Courageous Conversation
- Option #2: Have a Courageous Conversation with help
- Option #3: Make peace with what is
- Option #4: Restructure or terminate the relationship

By failing to choose one of these four, you are "choosing" the default option: to avoid dealing with things, hoping they will go away. This is not a habit of great leadership.

Accept our challenge and invitation:

Courageous Conversations are critical opportunities to advance the work and the mission. Every morning, scan your world and look for potential opportunities for Courageous Conversations that build partnerships, deal proactively with potential disturbances and breakdowns, and further the mission.

For best practices and tools in having successful Courageous Conversations, see the next two articles in this series:

3 How To Prepare

4 Best Practices