

Knowing + Doing = Being



Know+Do publishes monthly *think papers* for its subscribers and clients highlighting different issues that promote the philosophy of '**knowing+doing=being**'. Our approach is: if you cannot define where you want to **BE**, how can you **KNOW** your plans are correct and what you are **DOING** will help you reach your goal? This is the second paper of our fourth series covering 'Difficult Conversations Made Easier'.

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Communicating Clearly

Think Paper No 2. Series 4: Difficult Conversations Made Easier

Welcome to the fourth series of our popular *Think Papers*. The papers have been designed to capture our company values¹, including sharing and simplicity. We aim to take topical areas of knowledge and share our thoughts and experiences of these in an accessible way to encourage the reader to take action.

This series – Difficult Conversations Made Easier – is focussing upon practical support to managers and leaders. The pressure on modern workforces is to achieve more each year with less resources. Therefore, how people are managed, motivated and supported is crucial to improving performance in companies of all sizes, stages and industries.

The previous Think Paper² outlined a plan to approach difficult conversations with staff and maximise the return from such encounters. This paper provides a tool to support this process and advance a manager's communication skills.

"The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place"

George Bernard Shaw

Communication in business is a multi-faceted topic with many different forms, context and processes. However it is a constant issue for all managers. Achieving good communication with your team enables high quality performance to follow. Poor communication can cause inefficiencies and loss of customers. Whether it is how one motivates a workforce, conducts one-to-one reviews, or creates culture change effective communication is essential.

Workplaces where safety is a key feature know the value of clear, concise and appropriate communication. This is because failure to do so will lead to incidents that hurt both people and a company's reputation. For example, the World Health Organisation has addressed the issue of

¹ <http://knowanddo.com/about-us/values>

² Approaching Difficult Conversations <http://knowanddo.com/archives/2182>

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communication around surgical procedures by developing a checklist³. This tool is a simple, uncomplicated and practical system within a highly complex medical situation. It allows everyone involved in an operation to share the right information, in the correct way, at the appropriate time. The aim is to reduce unnecessary complications due to human error; it works because it is useful and improves performance.⁴

So, how does this translate to the everyday work environment, the office, the factory or the shop? Effective communication connects all human activities and too often companies make the mistake of thinking it is all about what is written. **In fact communication is not that which is said or read, it is what is understood.**

Within the UK an estimated 5.2million adults (approximately 16%) are functionally illiterate; that is adults classed as having the reading age no higher than an 11 year old child⁵. This means that internal communications - company emails copied to all staff, the important memos posted on noticeboards, the detailed policy handbooks distributed at induction - might be irrelevant to nearly one in five of the workforce!

To understand communication at work, a manager needs to appreciate the three core communication styles: visual, audio and kinaesthetic, i.e. there are people who prefer to learn by:

- Seeing something (e.g. pictures, video), or,
- Listening to someone (e.g. lecture, radio), or,
- Doing something (e.g. completing a task)

If these fundamental principles are not understood, even a literate employee may well have little or no engagement in a company's communications.

Therefore a good manager knows how to adapt the messages they distribute to motivate and encourage their staff. The clever people at Harvard Business School have researched this and describe how managers need to be just like good chess players⁶. A chess player has a deep understanding of the differences within their pieces. Despite careful planning they can never leave their pieces in one place because the circumstances of the game are constantly changing. It is the same for managers. No matter how hard a manager works, staff do not operate in a static environment. It is a constant process of planning, assessing what is being done and then reviewing its impact. In the context of clear communication, just stating that everyone should understand one preferred method of communication and be happy is not making the most of the skills, abilities and characters with a business.



For the modern manager a consistently challenging communication issue is the task of one-to-one conversations with staff. These might be performance reviews, probationary assessments, personal

³ <http://gawande.com/documents/WHOGuidelinesforSafeSurgery.pdf>

⁴ This Great Ormond Street Hospital video illustrates the value of the checklist http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMfyv84j_ME

⁵ http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/adult_literacy/illiterate_adults_in_england

⁶ What Great Managers Do by Marcus Buckingham (Harvard Business Review) p1-16 in http://hbr.org/hbr-main/resources/pdfs/marketing/HBR_UncertainTimes.pdf

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development plans, disciplinary warnings or redundancy meetings. Whatever the background to these individual meetings they have the potential to bring out the worst or the best in managers and their staff. Those of you who are fans of the well-known TV sit-com *The Office*⁷ will remember the excruciating appraisal meeting between the Manager (David Brent) and one of his staff, Keith. The employee was so disengaged in the process and the manager so unprepared that the conversation is painfully funny (for the viewer that is!).



To avoid such pitfalls what can we do to make one-to-one meetings effective and productive? Well, perhaps we should start with the one thing that cannot be done – change the context. If the meeting is about a specific issue the manager will not solve the situation by glossing over the problem. This merely delays the next conversation. **A manager's responsibility will be to initiate what can be seen as difficult conversations; the approach to improve these experiences is to search for the RIGHT outcome from these conversations.**

In his book *Vital Conversations*, Alec Grimsley describes how even a conversation between two people involves a series of complex, changing interactions: *“Although you have the physical exchange of words, each party will also have a private conversation with themselves in the recesses of their own mind. So in reality there are not one but three conversations taking place.”*⁸

A key skill for a manager is the ability to understand perspectives that are different from his or her own. Being able to comprehend another's point of view is an example of emotional intelligence, something that aids the management and motivation of others. This is not the same as being a 'yes' person and agreeing with everything others say. It is being an aware person, attuned to the needs and wants of others and therefore how to respond to these. **An exercise for practising this 'people management tool' is to conduct a short perspectives analysis. To do this, follow the instructions in the box on the next page >>>**

This 'perspectives' exercise is not designed to eradicate the issue(s) you highlighted. It is designed to help analyse the one person each of us can control the most, i.e. ourselves. A person's behaviour, language and expectations can influence others. Often we develop default patterns of behaviour to pressurised circumstances. Being aware of this response and how to break such habits can have a big effect on others. **So before anyone can communicate well with colleagues, he or she needs to be reflecting and reviewing their own approach to situations.**

Future Think Papers will help the reader expand on these communication techniques to improve the motivation and management of others. To help managers, Know+Do offer in-house training on a range of management issues. We also have expert performance coaches available to support leaders in business. **In November 2013 we have two half day masterclasses in Manchester which are now available for bookings. To find out more and claim a reader's discount visit our Eventbrite webpage at <http://bit.ly/1a6lhLK> .**

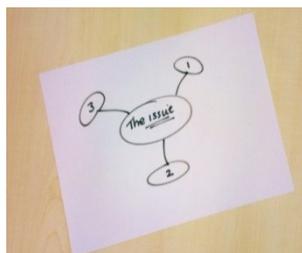
- **Recruiting and Retaining Staff Well, 6th November 2013** [discount code: RRW113]
- **Difficult Conversations Made Easier, 19th November 2013** [discount code: DC113]

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jd68z>

⁸ Grimsley, A. (2010) *Vital Conversations*. Barnes Holland Publishing: Risborough, UK

Perspectives Exercise

Find a place where you can focus for 10 minutes with a blank sheet of paper and a pen. Think of an issue (either current or past) where you have disagreed with another person(s) in your workplace. Draw a circle in the middle of the page and give this scenario a title (2 or 3 words only). Now draw three lines coming from the edge of the circle finished with a numbered circle. Your diagram might look something like the picture below.



Around circle one write your name and then begin writing in list form about the issue from your perspective. **What did the scenario look like, sound like or feel like to you?** Other questions - which are only a suggestion and not exhaustive - might be: How did you react? What did you say? Why was it important? When did it happen? What did you know before and after the event? What assumptions did you make from the words, body language or tone of voice? There are no right or wrong answers here, it is your opinion. Stop when you feel you've exhausted your list.

Around circle two write the name of the key person(s) who you disagreed with. Write out **how you think the issue could have looked, sounded or felt like from their perspective.** Try using some of the same questions or key events you listed by your name but think through how this person(s) might answer if asked. It might take a moment to start writing but whatever you put, however brief or extensive, write what first comes to mind. Remember this is a private exercise, hence we recommend the choice of paper and pen rather than an electronic format for this activity!

To complete the diagram now write the phrase 'neutral party' by the third and final circle. Can you now list around this phrase **how the issue might be described by a third party,** someone completely neutral to the events? What might it look, sound or feel like to them? Take your time and trust your instincts in what you share.

When these three viewpoints are complete stop and review the process. Read the answers for all perspectives and ask yourself:

- i. **What can I learn from the other perspectives?**
- ii. **Could I have done anything differently?**
- iii. **How will I change my future actions?**

Try repeating the exercise a day or two later, to see if any answers or conclusions drawn change. With greater hindsight a situation may look different. If you have a trusted colleague or friend, sharing the results of this exercise with them might allow another perspective on this situation.

For more information on this topic or to book a masterclass please contact us on info@knowanddo.com or call (0161) 280 4567

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