

**Does the thought of raising a difficult issue make your stomach churn?  
Here's the most important ingredient to make it work**

Last summer on a holiday in Italy I went on a 'Try a Dive' lesson. The dive centre was at a sandy beach next to a clear blue lagoon.

The water looked so inviting but I was nervous.  
Would I get the 'bends'?  
Would I be able to breathe? What about being completely submerged in dark water.



I needn't have worried. The instructors took it step-by- step.  
I learned how to breathe with a regulator. I learned the 'Not OK' hand signal. By the time I got in the water, all the nerves had gone.  
Why?

Because I felt safe. But it wasn't only because the instructors had explained to me how to do everything. It was the calm, reassuring way in which they slowly but surely took me from dry land to deep water. They sensed my anxiety. They knew I was out of my comfort zone. So they really worked on showing concern and making me feel at ease.

**Raising a 'difficult' issue with someone is like this. You are taking them on a deep dive.**

Imagine there's a problem with John, a member of your team. He's missing deadlines, he's not committed. You have to have a conversation with him.

You do your homework. You gather the evidence – what, when, where, he's not followed through on things.

You stockpile responses to his excuses.

But what do you do to make him feel safe? How do you help him before, during and after the 'dive' to understand that he is not going to drown in the murky waters of this conversation?

**Difficult conversations flounder not because of our message but because what the other person believes about our intent.**

Think about the last training or course you took. You probably got some negative feedback from the trainer as you were trying out your new skill.

Did you get defensive?

Did you take it personally?

Probably not. In fact, you welcomed it. You trusted the trainer had your best interests at heart. They weren't out to get you. They wanted to help, they cared about your learning and your progress.

You knew that instinctively because of the relationship and context.

When you are trying to raise a difficult issue with someone you need to be more explicit about making them feel safe.

*"At the foundation of every successful accountability conversation lies safety. When others feel unsafe you can't talk about anything. But if you can create safety, you can talk with almost anyone about almost anything – even about failed promises"*

*Patterson et. al., 'Crucial Accountability'\**

### What might be the safety concerns people have in these kinds of conversations?

1. They doubt **your intentions** towards them:

When others don't like what they hear, the [fundamental attribution error](#) means they draw negative conclusions about your intent. They assume the worst.

They feel undermined. Therefore, you meant to undermine them.

➤ **What you can do:**

Be explicit – let them know that you understand they might feel you are trying to upset them. My teenage daughters regularly give me frank and honest feedback about everything from my clothes to my parenting. Their comments usually start 'No offense Mum but....'.

Patterson et al call this *Contrasting*. It's a simple three-step process:

- You imagine beforehand what's the worst they might think
- You flag this early on and explain it's not what you intend
- You then explain what you do intend.

So for John above it might be: 'John, I realise that you have been under a lot of other pressures in your work/life. I'm not trying to undermine or annoy you. It's just I'm concerned about the deadlines and how I can support you in meeting them...'

2. They believe that **you don't respect** them as a person:

When people know that you care and respect them as a person then it's amazing what you can get away with. For example, at heart, I know my daughters respect me. So aside from finding their comments sometimes helpful, but often mildly irritating, they don't impact hugely.

➤ **What you can do:**

Respect is communicated more in what we don't say than in what we do. Our body language, tone of voice, eye contact belie us.

Make sure you have these kinds of discussions in private.

If you are finding it hard to respect them because of what they've done, then work on yourself [and your judgement](#) before you sit down with them.

3. They feel you **don't care about what's important to them**, what we value or need:

You typically get so preoccupied with getting your side of the message across that you [forget to ask about their side](#). Your focus is on making convincing-sounding arguments rather than really listening.

➤ **What you can do:**

Give as much time to drawing out and listening to their side as stating your viewpoint.

Paraphrase back to show that you have understood. Ask probing (but non-interrogatory) questions to help draw out what [might worry or concern them](#).

4. They believe you are trying to achieve **an outcome that will negatively impact** on them:

Unless you work hard to avoid it, a common mistake is that they see the situation as a zero sum game. Either you have to win or they do. The effect is heightened if they feel in some way you have more power than them – as a Manager or if you represent a majority view.

➤ **What you can do:**

Don't go in with a preconceived solution that you are trying to convince them to buy into.

Instead, see the conversation as a joint search for [workable options](#) that meet each person's key needs and concerns.

When trying to resolve an issue or deal with a problem behaviour it's natural to focus on the 'what' of the conversation: what they have done that's not working, what they need to do differently. Paradoxically it is often not the message itself – the 'what' – but the 'how' of delivery that leads to ill feeling.

So yes, get clear on the issues and changes required.

But work also on creating a respectful, reassuring atmosphere.

That's the cornerstone for success in 'difficult conversations'.

\* Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior: Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, David Maxfield, McGraw Hill, 2013

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**Consensus Mediation**, offers a range of services and interventions to help support people to prevent, engage and manage conflict and build positive relationships in the workplace

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**Profile: Mary Rafferty, BEd MSocSc MMII**

MARY is the founder of Consensus Mediation, a Consultancy offering a range of services and interventions to support people to prevent, engage and manage conflict and difficult relationships at work.

Mary is an accredited Practitioner Mediator with the Mediators Institute Ireland (M.I.I.), Ireland's only non-profit professional association for certification and registration of mediators. She

also holds certification with the International Mediation Institute. Mary also lectures on the Workplace Module on the M.A. in Dispute Resolution at Independent College, Dublin

Mary is certified in the internationally renowned and innovative CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching Model. She is also a licensed member of the international team of Approved CINERGY™ trainers and has delivered the signature 4-day Conflict Management Coaching Programme both in Ireland and abroad. She also runs an M.I.I. Approved Mediation Training Programme to Certified Level. Consensus Mediation is a registered Open College Network training centre.

Mary is certified to administer the Conflict Dynamics Profile (Eckerd College, Florida), an assessment instrument dealing with conflict behaviors in the workplace which provides a powerful way to improve self-awareness of what triggers conflict in individuals as well as how they respond to conflict.

Mary is a Director of the Mediators' Institute of Ireland. She also holds an Honours Degree in Education, a Master's Degree with Distinction in Social Science and has attended a wide variety of specialised trainings in the field of conflict resolution.