

## The 7 Commandments for having a Challenging Conversation about Accountability at Work

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### Let's begin by saying...

...just how important beginnings are.

Consider for a moment – How does a relationship at work begin?

- Maybe it is a job interview and you meet your boss for the first time, or, if the shoe is on the other foot, you meet your new employee for the first time.
- It might have been the case that your relationship began when you found yourselves working together due to an internal move, or because of some short or long-term assignment.
- After meeting, the two of you faced some choices about how open you would be with each other, about how honorably you would be toward each other, and how collaborative you would be together.
- Maybe you moved closer, maybe not. There are a lot of factors that impact your decision. Some of those factors are inside you, inside the other, and some are determined by your work culture and the positions you each hold relative to each other.
- If you are family, there are a ton of family systems issues involved which you can feel even if you can't label them.

Beginnings are where the stage is set for the more challenging parts of a relationship. **A challenging conversation, one in which one person reaches out to hold another accountable, happens after the “beginning of the relationship.”** Think about it.

If you have previously spent time together, you have chatted about big things and small things, you know something of each other's history, you have listened carefully and affirmed each other, and you have built trust by being consistent with each other over time.

But, of course, if it was all that wonderful, you might not be having this challenging conversation, now would you?

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Here is the situation. Someone with whom you have an agreement, has failed to live up to the agreement. This might be a key person in your business, and maybe a family member in your Family Business. It is someone, at least, who reports to you. You are in a power position, maybe lateral, but probably vertical.

Now, let's look at the "7 Commandments for having a Challenging Conversation about Accountability at Work."

I'm using the name "Sally" in this document. You will, of course, change the name to suit your circumstances. You are invited to follow along.

### 1. Prepare thoroughly before your conversation

- a. "Have I effectively communicated the core values of our business to Sally?" As a leader, one of your critical functions is to consistently build a shared vision for the future of the enterprise, and a very important part of that is the core values around which your business is organized. Have you done that well?
- b. Identify the specific observable behavior that has caused you a definable problem. Hold in abeyance your conviction about whether this definable problem is THE problem, or a symptom of other issues. (This is the UR in our IOS.)
- c. Get clear about your own emotional connection to the presenting problem, and to Sally. What are you feeling, and how intensely?
- d. Ask yourself the extent to which this issue with Sally is an ability issue (UR) and a willingness issue (UL). It is always a little, or a lot, of both.
- e. Step back and broadly consider all 4 Quadrants.
  - i. The UL – Inside of Sally – her Mental Models
  - ii. The UR – Outside of Sally – her Actions
  - iii. The LL – Cultural Context around Sally – her Cultural impact
  - iv. The LR – Standard Operating Procedures that apply to Sally – her cooperation with your SOPs

### 2. Do a Gap-Analysis

- a. Do a Gap-Analysis of Sally's Position Specific Tasks. Compare your results with previous reviews and, if possible, identify patterns. Then identify the level of anxiety you have about the pattern continuing.
- b. What will be the tangible consequences if the gap continues? Identify the impact on measurable outcomes. When you are challenged to address the tangible consequences of the gap between expectations and measurable behavior, between that to

which Sally committed and her deliverables, you must have the factual data.

- c. If there has been a pattern to this problem, identify it clearly and the measurable consequences for stakeholders should the pattern continue.

### **3. Your essential I-Message Statement**

- a. This is a critical step. Pull it all together into your “Critical I-Message Statement.” You aren’t actually in your meeting with Sally... not yet. For now, you are pulling together your I-Message. Having this clear will reduce your anxiety about this challenging conversation, and it will increase the probability of it being effective.
- b. “Sally, I have a problem and I need to break it down into three pieces: First, there is a gap between expectations of you and your performance; Second, the tangible and measurable consequences of this gap; Third, I’m feeling... (put in the emotion you are experiencing).
  - i. First – here are the expectations that you agreed to, and here are my observations about your actual performance. There is a gap and we need to talk about it. Here is my data.
  - ii. Second – here are the tangible and measurable consequences for the stakeholders involved. Here is my data.
  - iii. Third – I need to express my feelings about this in a healthy way, so please listen carefully and then tell me what you heard me feeling.
- c. “And, Sally, I need to revisit the commitment you made to the performance expectations that are the subject of our present conversation. We need to revisit our agreement.”
- d. Once you have your I-message formed, you are ready to meet with Sally.

### **4. Set the stage for the conversation.**

- a. Recognize the level of anxiety inside of you, inside of Sally, and inside of other stakeholders.
- b. Remember, this won’t be a comfortable conversation, but it should be safe. If you can’t assure Sally of her safety, be aware of that because she will have some legitimate fear, and it will surface.
- c. Identify your positive intent.
- d. Get together with Sally (her ground, your ground, or somewhere that is neutral depending on how you want to position your power).

**5. Begin with your “Critical I-Message Statement” to Sally.**

- a. “Sally, I have a problem. I want this conversation to be helpful and constructive for both of us. My intent here is positive, and I’m looking for your help. I’m going to share something with you and I would appreciate it if you would listen carefully, take notes if you wish, and then I trust that you will give me some helpful feedback. I have a problem and I need to break it down into three pieces:
  - i. First, there is a gap between expectations of you and your performance with regard to (state expectations and performance gap);
  - ii. Second, the tangible and measurable consequences of this problem are (identify them with as much specificity as possible for the stakeholders involved);
  - iii. Third, I’m feeling (your feeling) about this. Now, as I said, my intent here is positive and I’m asking for your help in addressing this so that we can have a positive outcome. I know there is some anxiety around this conversation, so let’s begin this conversation by you telling me what you just heard me say so that I know I am communicating well.”
- b. Now, you understand that you have had the advantage of preparing yourself for this conversation, and that Sally probably has not. There is some anticipatory anxiety involved here for both of you. As Sally verbally identifies the problem, make sure that she includes all three parts. She needs to identify the whole message, all three parts, for her well-being and for yours. The tendency to just say, “I know, ...” and to move on should be resisted. You can help this along by intervening and saying, “Look, I’m not trying to be difficult – as I said, my intent is positive. But, it would be really helpful if you can identify the three specific issues I identified at the outset. I need to know that I was understood.” That’s the key issue here; you need to know that you were understood by Sally, and you need to know that Sally understood you. Problem solving can’t really happen until a shared understanding has been reached.
- c. State that you want to leave this conversation with an agreed upon plan of action that will address the problem effectively.

**6. Discuss and dialogue, problem solving together until an action plan has been written.**

- a. The “written” part of this is critical because it is part of the tracking system that will help you BOTH to be accountable. Who is going to do what, by when, and how? Set a date for a follow-up conversation. To the extent possible, make everything measurable. The more measurable, the more you can objectify this entire process for both you, and Sally.
- b. It is normal for most people to transfer responsibility in such conversations to other people, and to amorphous “systems.” As Flip Wilson, the comedian, was famous for saying – “The devil made me do it!” This part of the conversation will take some patience, because Sally might well be identifying measurable problems with other people’s behavior, or with the culture, or with the SOPs that are in the way of success. You want this information! If Sally is too defensive, she might not be able to share this information with you. What barriers to her success has she encountered? Write them down and address them in your problem solving process.

**7. At the end of the conversation you should address the issues of accountability.**

- a. “Sally, I am counting on you to execute the plan effectively. This is a matter of trust and I want you to know that.”
- b. Re-state your positive intent at the end, set another date for a follow-up conversation.
- c. Agree together, that if anything comes up between now and your next meeting that will impact Sally’s ability to effectively carry out her remedial plan, she will let you know immediately. You want no surprises. Information helps you to see the big picture and to strategize effectively.
- d. If there is any written paperwork to be signed, take care of that before the end of the conversation.

High performance work teams engage in robust dialogue like this as a matter of habit. They normalize it. We have a friend who has engaged his people around “the brutal facts” for the last couple of years and it has made a great deal of difference. When one of his direct reports hears him say, “I want to talk with you about some brutal facts” they know that they will be uncomfortable, but safe. They have a great team.

Take some time and build this technique into your culture. Make it explicit so that everyone learns how to have challenging conversations. That way they can take this skill home with them, use it with their family, at church... everywhere.

We need relationships where we can count on each other.