

How to Make Difficult Conversations Worse, as Seen on “Succession”

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Macall Polay/HBO

Summary.

There are so many moments in “Rehearsal,” the latest episode of “Succession,” where characters face the choice of engaging in a hard conversation and choose avoidance. While this may seem like an easy way out in the moment, in the long run, it can be a...more

Difficult conversations are a part of life, yet many people don’t know how to have them. Whether it’s addressing a sensitive topic with a friend or confronting a coworker about a problem at work, these conversations can be uncomfortable and even intimidating.

In various scenes throughout “Rehearsal,” the most recent episode of HBO’s hit show *Succession*, characters are trying to have a difficult conversation, but it’s almost as if the air is thick with tension and suspicion. You may have been in similar situations in the past: You’re hesitant to speak openly because you fear that your words will be used

against you or twisted into something they're not. It's like you're walking through a minefield, unsure of where the next explosion will come from.

Watching the Roys make a series of common mistakes offers an opportunity to think about the right ways to have hard conversations in real life.

They didn't start from a foundation of trust.

Trust is the foundation needed for any difficult conversation. A lack of trust seems to be present across nearly all of the familial and business relationships portrayed in the show.

When trust is missing, people are less willing to communicate honestly, and misunderstandings are more likely to occur. It's a vicious cycle that can be hard to break out of. Without trust, people may also be unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, leading to prolonged conflicts and making it even harder to find a resolution.

Building trust requires vulnerability, honesty, and a shared goal of understanding and respect. It's not always easy, but it's essential for effective communication and healthy relationships.

They tried to motivate through fear.

In the episode, Logan, the fierce patriarch of the Roy family, pays a visit to the ATN newsroom. He paces around in dark sunglasses, and even hovers menacingly over an employee writing an email before unleashing a fiery speech — a classic mix of withering humiliation and rah-rah encouragement — upon the ATN staff. His words are laced with a fervent desire to beat the competition, and he's not afraid to call out those he feels aren't pulling their weight.

Fear is a powerful emotion that can motivate people to act. But when used as the main motivator, it has detrimental effects on both individuals and organizations, as much research has found. Leading by fear creates a toxic work environment that erodes trust, stifles creativity and innovation, and leads to high turnover rates. Fear-based leaders tend to be controlling and critical, leaving little room for employees to exercise their own judgment or creativity. This can result in decreased job satisfaction, increased stress and anxiety, and even mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders.

They avoided talking about hard truths.

In the episode, Logan's assistant (and likely girlfriend) Kerry submits an audition tape to become an ATN anchor. Her cringey performance is evident to everyone who views the tape, but no one wants to acknowledge — or tell her — the truth. Tom is tasked with relaying this news to Kerry, and he cowardly hands it off to Greg, who delivers the message as poorly as you'd imagine, blaming criticism received from a nonexistent focus group.

Greg gives Kerry the classic “feedback sandwich,” a technique where constructive feedback is sandwiched between two positive comments. Research has shown this approach is ineffective because it dilutes the impact of the constructive feedback and creates confusion for the recipient, who often focuses on the positive comments and misses the important feedback or doesn't take it seriously. Plus, the feedback sandwich can come across as insincere or manipulative, especially if the positive comments are not genuine or relevant to the feedback.

The feedback sandwich may seem like a kind and gentle approach to delivering feedback, but it's not the most effective or efficient way to help others improve their performance or behavior, or take what you're saying seriously. Like Kerry, the recipient

may end up doubting everything you told them. And, as is clear from Greg's discomfort, the feedback sandwich can create a sense of anxiety for the person delivering feedback, as they may struggle to find positive comments to sandwich the feedback between, leading to delays in delivering important feedback.

They offered insincere apologies.

In a pivotal scene of the episode, Kendall, Shiv, and Roman find themselves in a karaoke bar, when their father unexpectedly shows up to try and convince them to support him in his latest business deal. What's surprising is that Logan appears to offer an olive branch to his children, attempting to make a personal connection, and even apologizing for his recent behavior: "Look, I don't do apologies. But, if it means so much to you, sorry."

Apologizing is a powerful tool for repairing damaged relationships, restoring trust, and promoting forgiveness. Genuine apologies validate and acknowledge the hurt we've caused, reducing negative emotions like anger and resentment. Apologies benefit both the apologizer and the recipient by increasing empathy, forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction. In fact, research shows that apologizing can make us feel more authentic, promote personal growth, and increase our self-awareness.

Despite these benefits, we often avoid apologizing out of fear that it will make us look weak or because we don't think it will do any good. However, a well-executed apology can improve our relationships, leaving us better off than before the mistake was made. Even after a serious transgression, a perceived genuine apology can increase feelings of trust and closeness in a relationship.

When we apologize, it's essential to include certain key elements, such as expressing remorse, taking responsibility for our actions, and offering to make things right. It may

also be helpful to explain our actions, admit wrongdoing, acknowledge the harm caused, promise to make changes, and ask for forgiveness. A well-executed apology can go a long way in restoring damaged relationships and building stronger bonds based on honesty and accountability.

There are so many moments throughout the episode where characters face the choice of engaging in a hard conversation and decide to avoid it. Such avoidance may seem like an easy way out in the moment, but in the long run, this can be a recipe for disaster. When we avoid these conversations, we allow problems to fester and grow, and they can eventually become much bigger than they would have been if we had addressed them early on.

In addition, avoiding hard conversations can erode trust and credibility in our personal and professional relationships. It can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and ultimately, the breakdown of the relationship altogether. By having the courage to initiate and engage in difficult conversations, we can address issues head-on, build stronger relationships based on trust and respect, and create more positive outcomes for everyone involved.