

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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Having Courageous Conversations

The Question:

“One of the hardest parts of being a principal is having to deliver a message to someone that doesn’t want to hear it. How can I become better at this?”

The Answer:

Here are five Tips for Success:

1. Give yourself credit for accepting responsibility for “courageous conversations”
2. Approach it as a two-sided, “open-to-learning” conversation
3. Take into account the reasons for resistance
4. Use “Conversation Starters”
5. Choose the time for conversation wisely

1. GIVE YOURSELF CREDIT FOR ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR “COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS”

“Courageous conversations are about being true to oneself, doing what is right for students, and shaping an environment that supports learning.” (Abrams, 2009, in *Ideas into Action*, Bulletin #2)

Yes, these conversations are hard and, yes, you must have them. Susan Scott calls them “fierce conversations” and advises, “Take your toughest challenge today. The problem named is the problem solved. All confrontation is a search for the truth. Healthy relationships include both confrontation and appreciation.” (Scott, 2004, in *Ideas into Action*, Bulletin #2). Read [Ideas into Action: Engaging in Courageous Conversations](#) to learn about what the research says and for links to the Ontario Leadership Framework.

“In the absence of courageous conversations, we may be able to put a veneer on the status quo, and effect change on the surface, but deep and lasting change will be virtually impossible.”

Ideas into Action, Bulletin #2

2. APPROACH IT AS A TWO-SIDED, “OPEN-TO-LEARNING” CONVERSATION

Remember, there are two people in the conversation, both of whom need to be open to learning. This means that each person has the opportunity to express views openly, not defensively. This lessens the risk of either of you making faulty assumptions. Some tips for open conversations are:

- Explain the reason for your view
- Listen deeply, especially when views differ
- Share control of the conversation, including the management of emotions. (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009, in *Ideas into Action*, Bulletin #2)

“Treat others as well-intentioned, interested in learning, and capable of contributing to your own learning.”

Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009

3. TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE REASONS FOR RESISTANCE

Often the need for a hard conversation stems from your desire to bring about a change that some staff are resisting. It is important for you to explore the reasons for resistance before deciding how to proceed. When asked to write about an instructional practice they were finding difficult to change, many participants in Principal Congress 2010 identified staff resistance as a challenge. Their reflections on the possible reasons for resistance included:

- fear of failure in trying something new
- concern that students may lose out if the new instruction is unsuccessful
- lack of understanding or knowledge about new expectations for pedagogy.



Before you have the hard conversation, you should address some of the staff's fears and concerns about a change. Once supports are in place to address their concerns, the reluctant few may need time to talk with you. Sometimes, these concerns don't surface until you begin the courageous conversation, but once they do, you should respond to them rather than imposing a change that will be impossible for staff to make.

“You need to respect and acknowledge the loss that people suffer when you ask them to leave behind something they have lived with for years... People need to know that you realize that the change you are asking them to make is difficult and that what you are asking them to give up has real value to them.”

Heifetz and Linsky, 2004

4. USE “CONVERSATION STARTERS”

Remember that there is a power differential in many of your conversations (students, staff, parents), so your words carry more weight than you might realize.

No matter how carefully you structure your conversation, there is still a risk that the other person may feel threatened or defensive. The resource, [Conversation Starters](#), provides some useful tips on how to have more effective conversations. This resource was developed to support the work of mentors, but the skills are useful in many other situations. You can also apply other skills that you picked up in mentor training to courageous conversations. Tips in this resource include asking yourself:

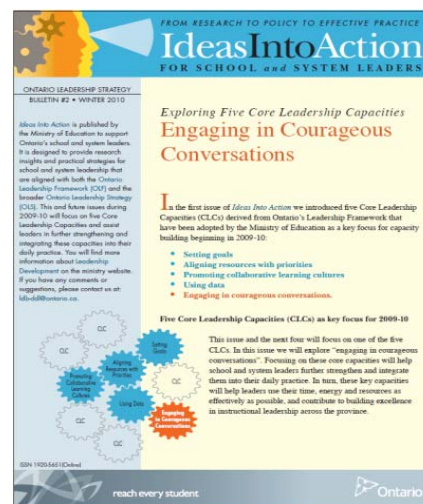
- What should you know about the person before having the conversation?
- What other perspectives or interpretations of the situation might you want to consider?
- If you were the other individual, how would you like this to be handled?
- What are some ways that this individual could become more engaged in the conversation?

5. CHOOSE THE TIME FOR CONVERSATION WISELY

Two common mistakes in having hard conversations are, one, jumping in too quickly just to get it over with and, two, avoiding or delaying having the conversation because of your own discomfort. To avoid these mistakes:

- take the time to think carefully about what you want to say and to gather the evidence you need to explain your ideas
- choose a time when you and the other person are most likely to be comfortable and relaxed and open to learning – not when either of you is angry or upset
- set aside what you think is a reasonable amount of time for the conversation, but be prepared to schedule a second appointment if one or both of you need to step back and reflect on the conversation so far.

Remember that these five tips are meant to get you started on your quest to handle courageous conversations more effectively. You can learn much more by reading *Ideas into Action, Bulletin #2* and the original sources listed in the references that follow.



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REFERENCES

- Abrams, J. (2009). *Having hard conversations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
- Heifetz, R. and Linsky, M. (2004). *When leadership spells danger*. *Educational Leadership*. 61 (7)
- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., and Lloyd, C. (2009). *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why – Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. New Zealand: Ministry of Education
- Scott, S. (2004). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work and in life one conversation at a time*. New York, NY: Berkley Books

