

# We Need to Talk: Up Close with Critical Conversations



By **Amelia Chan**, CHRP

**“W**E NEED TO TALK.” While this phrase is heard often enough by HR professionals, for many in the workplace it generates reactions ranging from nervousness to dread. In an era with such a variety of communications choices, how is it that face-to-face conversations have become connected with such a red flag that even a simple request to talk can evoke a fear response? Problematically, if we only talk to each other ‘as required’, our most natural and effective means of communication atrophies.

When we don’t seize the moments to communicate, the “human” in our human resources function loses its effectiveness. Moreover, small dramas can become major traumas left unaddressed.

## Common Misconceptions and Fears

As human resources professionals, mastering face-to-face communications is considered a key component of the toolkit, yet even HR benefits from ongoing coaching in this area. After all, it is widely assumed that others understand what our message is because “we know” what we are saying. However, each person brings their own attitude, perception, emotions and thoughts to the table. Miscommunication is often the standard—which becomes even more challenging when truly critical conversations are required, as they are so often in HR.

Aside from maintaining a strong focus on daily rapport building opportunities and listening actively to the employees and executives alike, critical conversations

lie at the heart of many core HR functions ranging from hiring to firing.

Bear in mind that at least part of the reason the words “I really need to talk to you” carry a negative connotation is that they precede genuinely challenging conversations. How then might HR diminish the knee-jerk negativity and generate positive outcomes for the organization and individual?

## Welcoming the Elephant in the Room

That is a question that Diane A. Ross took to heart when authoring *The Elephant in the Office: Super-Simple Strategies for Difficult Conversations at Work*—and addressed from the heart at the recent 2014 HRMA Conference + Tradeshow. As a prior litigator, Ross was inspired to make a change and founded Elephant Conversations Ltd., a business devoted to teaching people practical skills for difficult conversations based on real and respectful communication.

While Ross respects that courage is required to initially engage in difficult conversations, what holds many people back is as much a fear of their own reactions as the individual or group being engaged. What Ross considers essential to navigating the uncharted waters which such conversations can broach is a change of mindset—and a plan. The first is achieved, Ross shares, when we do away with the anxiety of facing tough reactions and step forward more confidently with a results-oriented approach.

As for the plan, Ross is a proponent of preparing for worst case scenarios. Let’s be honest, no one wants to be in a volatile

or potentially hurtful situation. By anticipating difficult conversations, we can be equipped to deal with potentially dramatic or traumatic exchanges beforehand so we are empowered—and remain calm. Preparing takes fear away, regardless of the content or context of any interaction.

## Four Step Stigma Reduction

Following with Ross’ simple four step strategy<sup>1</sup>, the stigma of difficult conversations is greatly alleviated.

**Step One:** Prepare to Talk

**Step Two:** Reaction Management

**Step Three:** Deliver Your ABC (Accurate Brief Clear) Message

**Step Four:** Respond, Don’t React

Now that we have the tools to deliver difficult messages, we need to align these exchanges with positive outcomes. It may seem very HR-oriented to paint a good picture and talk a rosy glasses kind of game. How can we set a different tone at the very core of our organizations and not just in a superficial way?

## A Change of Tone Inspires

As founder of Clarion Enterprises Ltd. and a business columnist for American Express, Bruna Martinuzzi is both a gifted speaker and committed to sharing the answer to exactly that type of question. With over 25 years of leadership experience and fluent in six languages, she has trained and coached hundreds of leaders internationally—in both start-ups and Fortune 500 companies—to become more effective communicators.

As author of *The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow* and, most recently, *Presenting with Credibility: Practical Tools and Techniques for Effective Presentations*, Martinuzzi brings the substance of style and presentation to the forefront in her presentations and published mediums alike.

In short, Martinuzzi walks her talk, and knows well the power words can wield—for practiced better or unconscious worse.

### The Heart of the Matter

In her “How to Speak in a Way That Inspires” session at the HRMA conference, Martinuzzi stressed—without stressing—the importance of allowing ourselves as leaders to speak like human beings and hear with ears attuned to the emotions in the room.

As per Martinuzzi’s wisdom, bringing a measure of grace to even the water cooler conversation can only serve us better when critical conversations flare up. We need to remove the fear from the words “we need to talk” by making them ordinary and usual, not random and unexpected.

Philosophically attuned to the positive

outcomes of challenging conversations, Martinuzzi speaks to a truth often forgotten in the moment—while people may not remember all the details of a conversation, they will always remember how you made them feel<sup>2</sup>. To have impact involves addressing the emotional aspect; it is here that authentic—and thus effective—conversations and communications begin.

Where they lead is largely a matter of mindset and the questions in mind.

### Always Asking (Better) Questions

A key component is to revisit the areas where critical conversations most commonly occur, and look for ways to turn the transactional into the transformational. Asking new questions can play a pivotal role—both in terms of the knowledge gained and defusing assumptive thinking.

Most importantly, as driven home by Ross and Martinuzzi, critical conversations are already an essential aspect of human resources. Using them consistently and wisely enables HR to both advance the core principles of humanism with improving organizational profitability.

After all, with the challenging conversations addressed, mutual respect and shared innovative potential begins. As important as the information is the presentation—the approach, the reception and response.

All the one directional newsletters, memos and letters will not carry the same amount of power as active (and regular) exchanges. Information is valuable; effective communications are invaluable. Moreover, the key lies in consistency—through the good times and bad, daily mundane to the pivotal moments—punctuated with critical conversations openly engaged by all parties with positive expectation. **P**

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<sup>1</sup> Diane A. Ross “Difficult Conversations Mind Map” Elephant Conversations Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> A nod to Maya Angelou for this is so true in critical conversations.



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