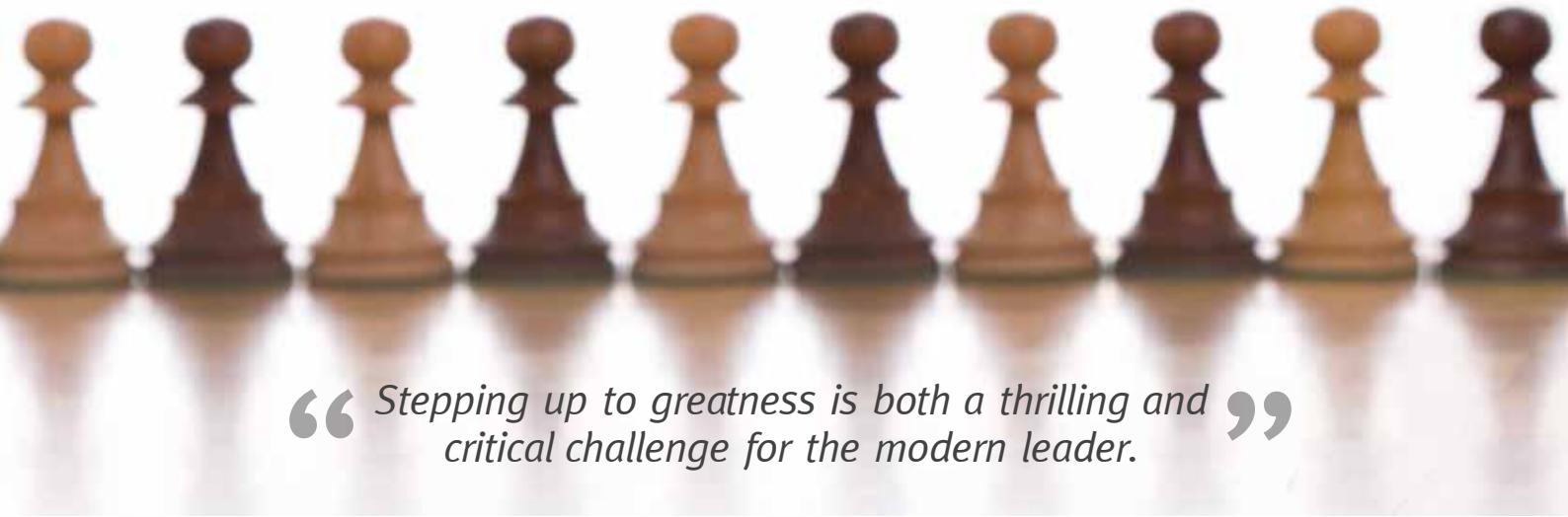


# MANAGING THE TOUGH STUFF

BY RICHARD DORE



“Stepping up to greatness is both a thrilling and critical challenge for the modern leader.”

*“Letting the wrong people hang around is unfair to all the right people, as they inevitably find themselves compensating for the inadequacies of the wrong people. Worse, it can drive away the best people. Strong performers are intrinsically motivated by performance, and when they see their efforts impeded by carrying extra weight, they eventually become frustrated.”*

– Jim Collins

With the ‘war on talent’, the drive for employee engagement and staff demands for workplace flexibility and work/life balance increasing – have leaders gone too soft when it comes to managing the tough stuff?

Or have workplace relationships become so difficult and complex that it is now just too hard and too risky to tackle the tough stuff?

Well I believe the answer is yes to both!

While working for many years with managers across Australia and seeing some of the appalling and unprofessional behaviour of some staff and management, my response has always been – “when are you going to call people on their behaviour and start dealing with the tough stuff around here?”

Are workplace relationships more complex in regard to managing conflict and people dynamics? – YES!

Many Australian leaders tell us at Proteus that it’s a minefield out there. If you pull someone up on their unprofessionalism – it now requires such sophisticated maneuvering to navigate your way through conflict that they often just can’t be bothered anymore. There appears to be an increasing trend when managers tackle staff on poor performance or unprofessional behaviour – they are hit with bullying accusations with little support from HR or senior management.

Too many managers seem to have tilted to favour negativity, enhancing what we call ‘the culture of entitlement’ – rewarding people who are skilled in manipulative behaviours.

## The world has changed (that’s the good news!)

The workplace has indeed changed and now requires a new type of leader that can both engage and challenge their people because staff will no longer tolerate the old school approach of ‘command and control’.

However, the vast majority of staff (who are positive and a delight to work with) actually want an environment where managers challenge them to step up and be as successful as possible. They want managers to give them real clarity around strong performance goals, behavioural expectations and professional standards. They are crying out for leaders to get on with it and start managing the tough stuff and stop allowing the very small toxic few to dominate the workplace dynamics.

The good news is that the positive people now want and expect to work in an environment that has healthy dynamics where what they do makes a difference.

Stepping up to greatness is both a thrilling and critical challenge for the modern leader. The fundamental leadership role, is to create the right environment, where people can reach their potential, while simultaneously developing a successful and effective business.

So let’s look at how we can manage the tough stuff more effectively. If we don’t, we cannot build a sustainable workplace that engages and retains positive staff.



## Managing the tough stuff is the key to leadership and personal success

Managing the tough stuff will require candid conversations on a daily basis. Whether it is approaching your boss who is breaking the rules, critiquing a colleague, speaking to a staff member about poor performance, correcting inappropriate employee behaviour, requesting that your manager stop humiliating you in public, or asking an in-law to stop interfering, they are all conversations that cannot be ignored!

In these very real scenarios, stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run strong, so your candid conversations become crucial for success relationships. The irony is that the more heated the conversation becomes, the less likely you are to handle it well!

When the heat is on we can often get sucked into two unhealthy paths, or reactions, known as the ugly options of 'silence or violence'.

However, when we are in the middle of managing the tough stuff, through candid conversations that matter, rather than avoiding them, or attacking the person, we can choose to face the tough stuff candidly and handle it well.

## Why do we avoid conflict?

Let's face it – conflict simply sucks! It's unpleasant, scary, uncomfortable and it is a very difficult skill to master. However, as the famous author Robin Sharma points out – you're paid to be scared, as a leader!

Unfortunately, few of us have been trained in the art and science of managing conflict and it is usually assumed that when we get a promotion or a management title – that we also know how to manage conflict well. This is simply untrue in most cases.

We have all experienced the immense damages that occur from avoiding conflict, where an issue not addressed early has festered into a toxic mountainous nightmare. Only to be dumbstruck by how such a small thing turned so ugly so quickly resulting in our great staff leaving in droves because things were not dealt with, or have given in and joined in on the negativity.

***"And while you invest huge amounts of emotional and physical energy on employees who are fundamentally undermining your team, who are you NOT spending time with?"***

– Studer Group

There are universal reasons why leaders avoid conflict, which are; it's too trivial, I am time poor, it's too hard, I like to be liked, they will react badly if I raise this issue, it will only get worse, I have no support from senior management, I lack the skills, knowledge and experience to deal with this.

However, let's look at the amazing benefits of tackling conflict early. The small 'trivial' matters are easy to deal with as the conversation is more relaxed and informal, a small investment now will equal big rewards later, it might be hard now but I will avoid mayhem later, being respected is more important than being liked, it will build my confidence to tackle future bigger issues, it could simply get better, it's a great opportunity to formally seek commitment and support from senior management (or have a career change!), this is a great life long learning opportunity for growth and personal development.

We may know logically that there are massive benefits in dealing with conflict and the tough stuff early – however, many of us still avoid having those very candid, important conversations. This is often because people don't have a clear plan or clear outcomes around those conversations.

“ The workplace has indeed changed and now requires a new type of leader. ”

## The science of candid conversations

Many of us have experienced in our early days the scenario where we blundered our way into a staff conflict situation without a plan, only to have the situation go completely pear shaped, which ended in tears and worse still, the staff member put in a bullying and harassment claim to HR. Candid conversations need good planning!

## The five steps to prepare for candid conversations

The following five steps will assist you in your conversation preparation and will help you to stay focused and stick to the issue, avoiding circular arguments.

### 1. Label it

*“If you can't label it – don't go there!”*  
– Proteus Mantra

Stay focused by labeling the issue and then sticking to the issue at hand. Remember to focus on behaviour and/or performance – not the person or their perceived attitude.

### 2. Impact

Focus on and discuss the impact (e.g. the negative impact on the team, organisation, clients, culture, career, etc) this will allow them to gain insight into both the urgency and importance of why there needs to be a change.

### 3. Call to action

Discussing what the issue is and the impact is not enough, your need to have a call to action and clarity on what the expected changes will be. You will also need to determine time frames and a follow-up review date. Don't leave them guessing or making assumptions about what is required.

### 4. Consequences of no change

Be clear with your expectations and what the consequences of no change would be. Be clear on why this issue is important to address and therefore why it's important not to ignore it.

### 5. Follow-up

Make sure you follow-up, otherwise all your hard work will be in vain and you may not be taken seriously next

time! Remember to thank them for their candidness and for being part of this tough conversation. It's all about creating a better future for both parties.

## The art of candid conversations

The above five steps will give you a great plan or road map for having candid conversations. However, we also need to acknowledge that managing the tough stuff is also an art form and requires us to be fluid within our plan.

People that manage conflict effectively don't go for perfect conversations; they go for a better outcome. They acknowledge that a candid conversation will sometimes be awkward and clunky, will not always stay on track and that they may say something wrong in the process. In fact, they embrace the awkwardness.

Successful leaders also know that no one owns the truth, they suspend judgment by genuinely exploring a better way forward before deciding on an outcome, they seek to find the truth with questions, not pre-set assumptions. They let 'silence do the heavy lifting' in awkward moments and they know that having candid conversations early will give them the skills and insight to prevent issues escalating.

Some other great tips and strategies for mastering the art of navigating your way through difficult conversations is to be CURIOUS and use the power of WHY.

For example; can you tell me WHY you were late, swore, breached protocol, dismissive, rolled your eyes, etc. when you know that this is unacceptable behaviour?

Be CURIOUS (almost child like) without patronising people with your questions. For example, help me to understand what happened, why you behaved like that, why you chose not to, why this should be allowed to continue, etc.

Finally a great question to ask is “do you see my problem” or “can you see my dilemma as a leader as to why we need to have this conversation?”

## So you do have a choice

You can be part of the unreflecting crowd that avoids conflict and reacts with passive hostility or overt aggression resulting in a future of cynicism, defensive pessimism and learned helplessness.

Or you can choose to step up to greatness, be bold and proud to have candid conversations that transform dysfunctional workplaces resulting in good relationships becoming great ones.

## Imagine what it would be like

Imagine what it would be like to be in a workplace where issues are resolved quickly, without drama and without repercussions. Imagine working in a place where the small toxic few are dealt with quickly and fairly; where negative people and negative behaviours are not tolerated or allowed to dominate your time, energy or workspace; where 'energy vampires' either leave quickly or get on board. How refreshing that would be!

Imagine a workplace where positive and productive people flourish; where robust and healthy debate is the norm; where people are solution focused; where success and achievements are constantly celebrated; where relationships are professional and people are highly engaged having passion and purpose; where people are connected to the heart of the business and are clear as to why you exist and who you serve.

This is not a pipe dream – it is a reality! At Proteus, we have not only created and continually work on improving such an environment, but we have also assisted many leaders and organisations around Australia to actually make this happen in their workplaces.

*“Whether you think that you can, or that you can't, you are right.”*

– Henry Ford

However it all starts with you not settling for the status quo and not accepting toxic relationships or dysfunctional workplace dynamics. It's about being gutsy, bold and proud enough to manage the tough stuff through candid conversations and to continuously work on stepping up to greatness within your own leadership.

*“Imagine the magnitude of what we're suggesting here. We're asking you to recode silence and violence as signs that people are feeling unsafe. We're asking you to fight your natural tendency to respond in kind. We're asking you to undo years of practice, maybe even eons of genetic shaping that prod you to take flight or pick a fight.”*

– Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler