



38 Reasons
The Difficult Conversations Survey

At a glance:

- Over 200 managers tell us why they dodge difficult conversations
 - 97% are concerned about stress caused
 - Over 80% are concerned about an angry response
 - 80% believe difficult conversations are a part of their role
- But more than half lack the training and experience to tackle difficult conversations

Executive Summary

Globis is one of the UK's leading providers of preventative and remedial solutions that help organisations build better relationships at work. The topic of difficult conversations crops up on a daily basis in discussions with our customers. We know that managers are frequently dodging difficult conversations; we wanted to find out why.

The Difficult Conversations Survey was launched in October 2013, in association with Enterprise Rent-A-Car and Green Park Interim and Executive Search, to find out the answer to this question. With responses from over 200 managers, including chief executives, managing directors and Human Resources directors, we were able to build a better picture of the real reasons behind their tendencies to dodge rather than tackle a difficult conversation.

Evidence from the survey suggests that the top three most influential reasons behind the decision to dodge are "concern about the associated levels of stress for the other person" (97% reported this as influencing them), "concern about damaging other's self esteem" (94%) and "concern about causing upset" (92%). An overarching theme, as detailed in our results section, is worry about the immediate impact of the conversation on the other person's health and well being.

The survey ascertained that there is a continuing need for training in managing difficult conversations. Just over half (53%) of respondents report avoiding difficult conversations because they lack the training and 56% avoid them because they lack experience in handling such situations. Managers are even more concerned about others in their organisation that lack training (77%) and experience (85%). There is a very real opportunity for organisations to change this by providing training to equip their managers with the skills, knowledge and confidence to tackle difficult conversations.

Survey Methodology

The Difficult Conversations Survey consisted of 38 reasons why managers might choose to avoid or put off raising a tricky issue with a colleague. The reasons were compiled by Globis trainers who have first hand experience working with managers struggling with tackling difficult conversations. From these reasons, an online survey was composed (see Appendix 1), with potential participants informed via our mailing lists, websites and existing customer contacts. The survey ran from 1st October 2013 until 18th October 2013 inclusive.

The survey listed 38 potential factors and asked participants to rate each one in two ways. Firstly, the degree to which the factor has been influential in their decision to hold back from a difficult conversation; secondly, the degree to which they think the factor has influenced the choices of other managers in their current or most recent organisation. Potential ratings for each were: none, marginal, moderate, significant, highly significant and unsure.

In addition to these, we also gave respondents the opportunity to list any other factors they believed to be influential in their decision, or the decision of others, to dodge a difficult conversation. Finally, we asked respondents to provide basic employment information, such as years of experience and sector.

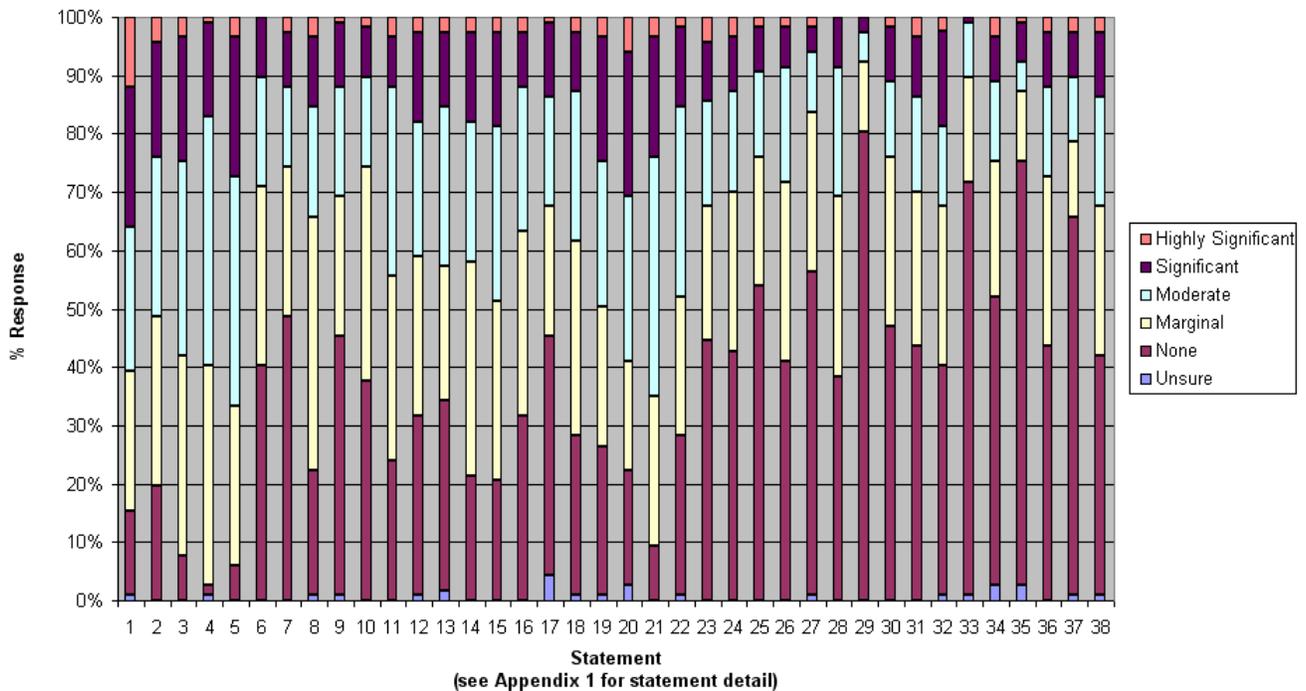
Survey Results

A) Personal responses – n=236

We received over 200 responses from professionals, including chief executives and HR directors from both the public and private sectors. The number one reason that managers are avoiding difficult conversations is concern about the associated level of stress for the person they are having that conversation with – 97.4% of managers listed this as having influenced their decision to avoid a difficult conversation.

This chart represents the responses we received in relation to each of the 38 reasons – provided in statements – for avoiding a difficult conversation. The top ten most influential reasons are highlighted in the table that follows.

What influence did the statement have on your decision to avoid a difficult conversation?



Top 10 Influencing Factors on Your Choice

1. Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 97.4%
2. Concern about damaging others self esteem – 94%
3. Concern about causing upset – 92.3%
4. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 90.6%
5. Concern about being fair – 84.6%
6. Concern about an angry response – 80.3%
7. Concern about permanent or long term damage to the relationship – 79.5%
8. Concern about short term awkwardness in the relationship – 78.6%
9. Concern you may have got the wrong end of the stick – 77.8%
10. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue – 77.8%

Private Sector n=118

Half of respondents (50%) advised us that they work in the private sector. Again, concern about associated levels of stress for the other person topped the list of reasons why they might dodge a difficult conversation. Issues left unaddressed for too long (74.6%) and concern about short term awkwardness in the relationship (81%) were of particular concern to managers in the private sector, when compared with those in the public sector.

**Top 10 Influencing Factors on Your Choice
(Private Sector)**

1. Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 96%
2. Concern about causing upset – 91.5%
3. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 88.1%
4. Concern about being fair – 83.1%
5. Concern about the short term awkwardness in the relationship – 83.1%
6. Concern about long term or permanent damage to the relationship – 81%
7. Concern about an angry response – 76.3%
8. Concern you may have got the wrong end of stick – 74.6%
9. Issues left unaddressed for too long – 74.6%
10. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue – 74.6%

Public sector n=86

Just over a third (36%) of respondents told us that they work in the public sector. The top three reasons why managers in the public sector may dodge a difficult conversation concern the impact of the conversation on the health and well being of the other party, with over 90% influenced by at least one of these factors.

**Top 10 Influencing Factors on Your Choice to Have Difficult Conversations
(Public Sector)**

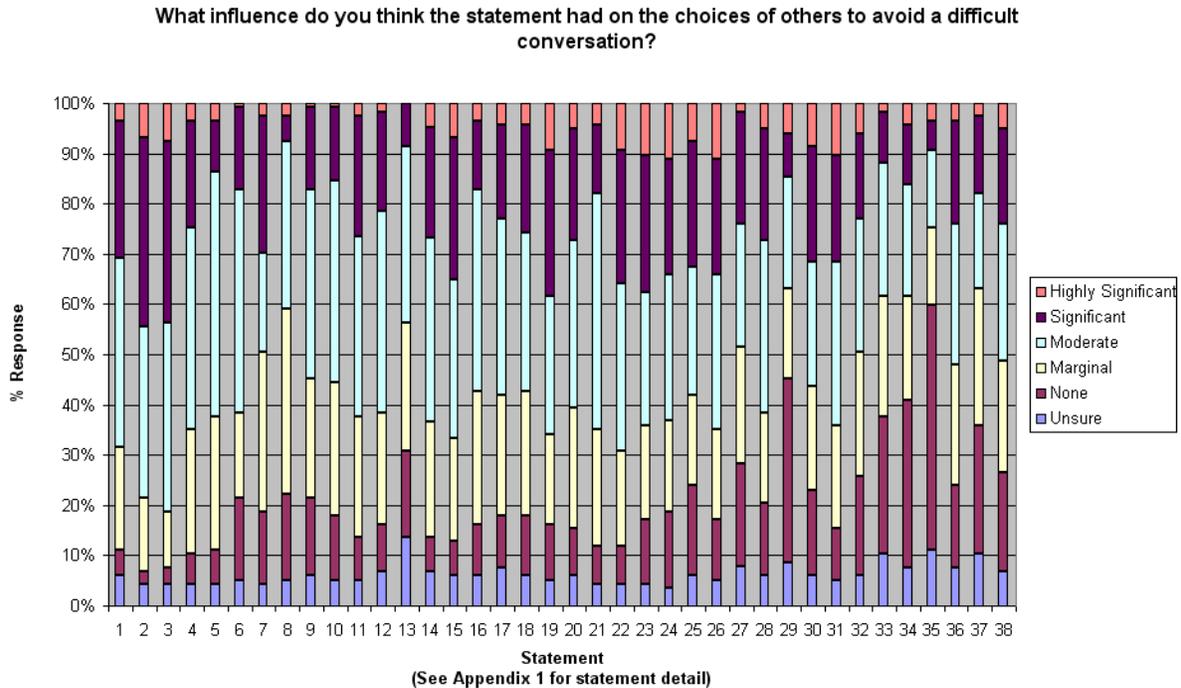
1. Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 97.7%
2. Concern about causing upset – 90.7%
3. Concern about damaging others self esteem – 90.7%
4. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 90.7%
5. Concern about being fair – 81.4%
6. Concern about an angry response – 81.4%
7. Concern about long term or permanent damage to the relationship – 79.1%
8. Concern about associated levels of stress (for you) – 76.7%
9. Concern you may have got the wrong end of the stick – 76.7%
10. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue – 76.7%

A further 10% of respondents were from the third sector, and 4% undisclosed.

B) Perceived responses – n=236

In addition to asking respondents how these 38 reasons influenced their choices about tackling difficult conversations, we also asked them to consider if they influence others at their organisation. There is a degree of estimation involved in the ratings of other people’s influences; however these opinions are invaluable for providing a more wholesome picture of the culture at organisations.

This chart represents the responses we received in relation to each of the 38 reasons – provided in statements – for avoiding a difficult conversation. The top ten most influential reasons are highlighted in the table that follows.



According to the responses we received, concern about anger (93%) and upset (92%) from the other party are the two most significant reasons why managers think their colleagues are dodging difficult conversations. In fact, just under half (44%) rated concern about an angry response as a highly significant or significant reason why others were avoiding difficult conversations.

Top 10 Influencing Factors on Others’ Choices to Have Difficult Conversations	
1.	Concern about an angry response – 93.2%
2.	Concern about causing upset – 92.3%
3.	Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 89.8%
4.	Concern about damaging others’ self esteem – 88.9%
5.	Concern about being fair – 88.7%
6.	Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 88%
7.	Concern about the effort required to see the issue through – 88%
8.	Concern about long term or permanent damage to the relationship – 87.2%
9.	Concern about short term awkwardness in the relationship – 86.8%
10.	Concern about associated levels of stress for you – 86.3%

Respondents' Comments

A) Other reasons for avoiding a difficult conversation

"When the difficult conversation is with a line manager [and about] their behaviour"

"Sheer embarrassment – not wanting to the other person to feel awkward about trivial topics [such as] dress code"

"Lack of HR and legal clarity from within the organisation and positive support [about] what you are trying to do. HR tend to focus on negative implications rather than the positive outcomes of the action"

"Union presence during the conversation can be intimidating"

"Pace of change is so fast and there are usually many factors involved in issues. Most issues resolve themselves or factors change so making judgement of what difficult conversations to have is a real challenge. People aren't perfect and I have a fear it will bring to light actions I haven't taken due to the volume of work I have to do or, with difficult conversations with senior managers, they won't listen and I will be seen as a person moaning"

"Time pressure and prioritisation"

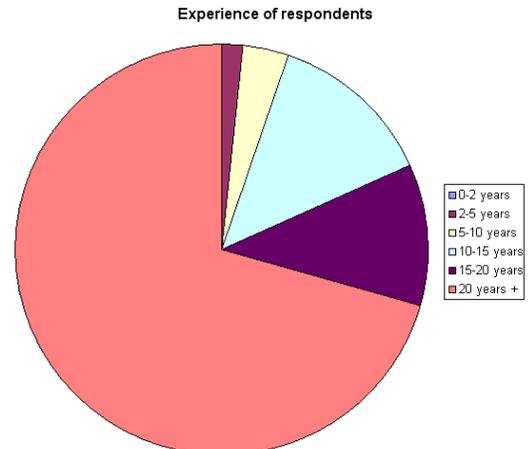
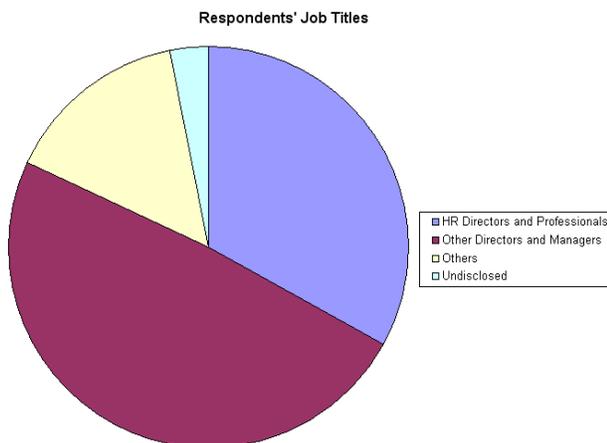
B) Additional comments

"Is avoiding difficult conversations the reason why recruitment agencies fail to give news to unsuccessful candidates, or if they lose an interim opportunity?"

"Most organisations don't want to acknowledge the real issues getting in the way as it is so complex to work out who and what needs to change"

About the Respondents

The survey was completed by 236 respondents. Of these, a third (33%) were HR Directors and other HR professionals and another nearly half (49%) were other directors and managers including chief executives and managing directors. Over 70% of respondents had 20 plus years of work experience.



Conclusions and Recommendations

This survey has highlighted some of the key areas where managers could improve their knowledge, skills and confidence in managing difficult conversations. Above all, it seems that their primary concern is the impact of the conversation on the health and well being of the other party, with concern about the associated levels of stress for the other person (97%), concern about damaging their self esteem (94%) and causing upset (92%) the top three reasons overall.

It is clear that there is a need for difficult conversations training to address these concerns. In fact, 53% of respondents believed they lack the training necessary to handle difficult conversations, and 77% believe that other managers in their organisation are in need of training. Similarly, 56% of managers told us they lack practice or experience in dealing with difficult conversations, and 85% believe that their colleagues may avoid them for this reason.

The concerns of managers regarding difficult conversations can be addressed in three focus areas:

Prepare	How to prepare for Difficult Conversations so that you have all the available facts, and are confident in your knowledge and ability to secure the desired outcome
Perform	How to conduct yourself in a Difficult Conversation so as to minimise unnecessary stress, upset and anger for both parties
Prosper	How to move on from the Difficult Conversation and foster a positive relationship and attitude for the future

Difficult Conversations Training

Managing Difficult Conversations is Globis' bestselling one day training course. It helps managers understand that difficult conversations do not need to be as daunting as they appear, and highlights the benefits that managing difficult conversations can bring to the individuals involved, as well as the organisation. This course teaches delegates how to manage difficult conversations, still achieve business objectives and keep relationships intact. The course utilises the ten steps outlined in the accompanying handbook *Difficult Conversations: Ten Steps to Becoming a Tackler Not a Dodger*, covering recognition, to preparation, to successful performance and how to move on with prosperous working relationships:

 Prepare	 Perform	 Prosper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise the need • Prepare • Get advice or support • Be courageous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-void 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Be professional •Listen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Let it go •Keep going •Make it a lifestyle

To find out more about Globis' Difficult Conversations Training courses, visit our website www.tacklingdifficultconversations.com or call 0330 100 0809.

Appendix 1

38 Reasons to Dodge a Difficult Conversation – Survey Questions

This questionnaire has been designed to help us understand the most influential factors that hold managers back from engaging in a difficult conversation in the workplace. These conversations might concern conduct, performance, attendance or attitude issues. The questionnaire lists 38 *potential* factors and asks you to rate each one in two ways.

First, rate the degree to which the factor has been **influential in your decision** to hold back from giving a difficult message or challenging feedback. Then indicate the degree to which you think the factor has **influenced the choices of other managers** in your current or most recent organisation. We recognise that there is a degree of estimation involved in the ratings of other people’s influences, but please try to rate the questions as best you can.

There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will not be shown to any individual or organisation at any point. Your responses will be combined with those of many others who have completed the questionnaire to produce a statistical overview. Please answer as honestly as you can.

Factors	Degree of Influence on Your Choices					Degree of Influence on Other Managers' Choices				
	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. Concern about being unfair										
2. Concern about an angry response										
3. Concern about causing upset										
4. Concern about associated levels of stress (for the other person)										
5. Concern about damaging the other person's esteem/confidence										
6. Concern about being judged by others as harsh										

Factors	Degree of Influence on Your Choices					Degree of Influence on Other Managers' Choices				
	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
7. Concern about being labelled a bully										
8. Concern you may have got the wrong end of the stick										
9. Concern you would get frustrated and say something you shouldn't										
10. Concern that your own reputation might be damaged by the individual's narrative of events										
11. Concern about associated levels of stress (for you)										
12. Desire to maintain a positive reputation as a 'people person'										
13. Such actions conflicted with your personal values										
14. Concern about short-term 'awkwardness' in the relationship										
15. Concern of permanent/long-term damage to the relationship										
16. Concern that the relationship was already strained and wouldn't withstand a difficult conversation										
17. Positive social relationship made it difficult to broach the issue formally										
18. Issues were too small to warrant the risk/effort of tackling them										
19. Issues were left unaddressed for too long										
20. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue										

Factors	Degree of Influence on Your Choices					Degree of Influence on Other Managers' Choices				
	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
21. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough										
22. Concern about the effort required to see the issue through										
23. Concern about the complexity of the performance/disciplinary process										
24. Too busy to do it										
25. Lacked knowledge about the relevant legal implications										
26. Concern about a negative counter-action (grievance/complaint)										
27. Lacked the self-confidence in own performance to tackle someone else										
28. Anxiety about own competence in managing/communicating the conversation										
29. Didn't see that type of conversation as part of the role										
30. Lacked training in how to do it well										
31. Lacked practice/experience										
32. Lacked confidence the organisation would support tougher actions against the individual										
33. Belief that is best to wait for someone to leave the organisation										
34. The culture did not encourage honest conversations about conduct										

Factors	Degree of Influence on Your Choices						Degree of Influence on Other Managers' Choices				
	None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant		None	Marginal	Moderate	Significant	Highly Significant
	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5
35. My line manager encouraged a no conflict approach											
36. Peers did not appear to tackle difficult conversations											
37. Concern that you would be blamed if performance or conduct problems came to light											
38. Lacked belief that the conversation would lead the individual to change											
<p>Did we miss anything? Are there any other reasons that you can think of that have prevented you/others conducting a difficult conversation?</p>											

(Circle as appropriate)

Your Gender:

Male Female

Your Sector:

Public Private Third

Years of Work Experience:

0-2 3-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 20+

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.