



38 REASONS

THE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS SURVEY

2016



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Globis Mediation Group would like to thank all those who contributed to make this second biennial Difficult Conversations survey possible.

AT A GLANCE:

- Over 500 managers tell us why they dodge difficult conversations
- 95% are concerned about damaging the self-esteem of others
- Over 90% are concerned about causing upset
- 75% believe difficult conversations are a part of their role
- But more than half still 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.

In the 21st century, difficult conversations are everywhere. Whether we're at home, at work or in a social situation, unwanted subjects can suddenly be raised which demand us to do either one of two things - to tackle the conversation or to dodge it. All of us react in different ways. Indeed some may choose to tackle one subject and dodge the next but, all too often in the current climate, those in management positions whose job it is to deal with potentially difficult or damaging situations, are dodging more than they are tackling.

Our survey indicates that this unwillingness to tackle problematic issues isn't just the preserve of managers however - all of us at some point

are guilty of not having 'that conversation', be it with a work colleague, a manager, a supplier or a customer. On all of these levels, our research reveals that dodging issues rather than tackling them often has a derogatory effect on the morale of individuals and the health of relationships which, in terms of a department or team, leads to reduced productivity and output, which then has an obvious knock-on effect for the organisation as a whole. Not only that, those directly involved in a workplace conflict that continues unchallenged may begin to suffer everything from sleepless nights to weight loss to depression, leading to extended periods of absence from work.

The pace and dynamics of the modern workplace has had a twofold effect on the presence of difficult conversations - they are both required more and avoided more than ever before. In a world where competition is cut-throat, different generations have different ways of working and employee performance can be monitored and scrutinised intensely. The modern day manager can be seen as part manager, part fire-

fighter attempting to extinguish all the various conflagrations that crop up throughout the average working day, addressing everything from colleague disputes to missed targets. Successful companies, therefore, require managers who are able and willing to deal with these situations as and when they arrive. It is more than easy to picture the amount of lost productivity in offices up and down the country and spanning all sectors due to managers avoiding difficult conversations.

The first Difficult Conversations Survey was launched in October 2013 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 difficult conversations. The knowledge gained from the survey was then fed into our most popular training course, Managing 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, with potential participants informed via our mailing lists, websites and existing customer contacts. The survey ran from 12th to 30th October 2015 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

Two years on and the survey was repeated; this time over 500 managers provided responses to our '38 Questions' survey. Many of the responses were largely the same: in 2013, the top three most influential reasons behind the decision to dodge a difficult conversations were concern about the associated levels of stress for the other person, concern about damaging other's self-esteem/confidence and concern about causing upset. In 2015, the top three were consistent with 2013, with concern about damaging other's self-esteem/confidence this time topping the list. When asked about their perceived views of why others were dodging difficult conversations, some new external factors were revealed as being more influential.

Training and practical experience were identified as a continued need; 30% feel they lack training and 55% feel they lack experience. The figures are even higher when considering their colleagues.



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: unsure, none, marginal, moderate, significant and highly significant.

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.

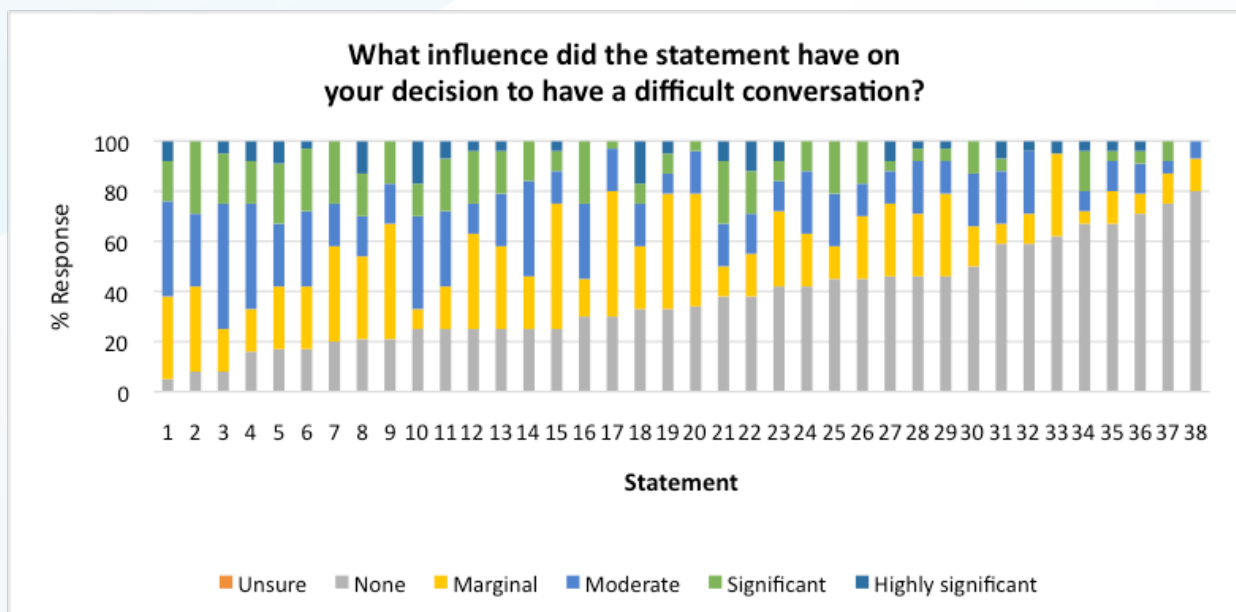
SURVEY RESULTS

A) Personal responses – n=527

We received over 500 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 damaging the confidence/self-esteem of the other person (95%). This is an increase of two percentage points, and one position, from 2013.

In 2013, the top reason that managers were avoiding difficult conversations was concern about the associated level of stress for the person they were having that conversation with - 97% of managers listed this as having influenced their decision. This year, 92% cited this as an influencing factor, making it the equal second with concern about causing upset (which equals its impact in 2013).

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.



Top 10 Influencing Factors on Your Choice

1. Concern about damaging the other person's self-esteem/confidence - 95%
2. Concern about causing upset - 92%
3. Concern about associated levels of stress (for the other person) - 92%
4. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough - 84%
5. Desire to maintain a positive reputation as a 'people person' - 83%
6. Issues were left unaddressed for too long - 83%
7. Concern about an angry response - 80%
8. Concern about long-term or permanent damage to the relationship - 79%
9. Concern about the effort required to see the issue through - 79%
10. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue - 75%

Private Sector n=169

Nearly one third of respondents (32%) advised us that they work in the private sector, including retail (14.6%) and financial services (7.7%). In 2013, concern about associated levels of stress for the other person topped the list of reasons why a manager might dodge a difficult conversation (96%); in 2015, this reason was still prominent as the second most influential (93%), but concern about damaging the other person's self-esteem/confidence was the most influential (95%).

Top 5 Influencing Factors on Your Choice to Have Difficult Conversations (Private Sector)

1. Concern about damaging the other person's self-esteem/confidence - 95%
2. Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person - 93%
3. Concern about associated levels of stress for you - 85%
4. Issues were left unaddressed for too long - 85%
5. Lacked confidence the organisation would support tougher actions against the individual - 83%

Public sector n=316

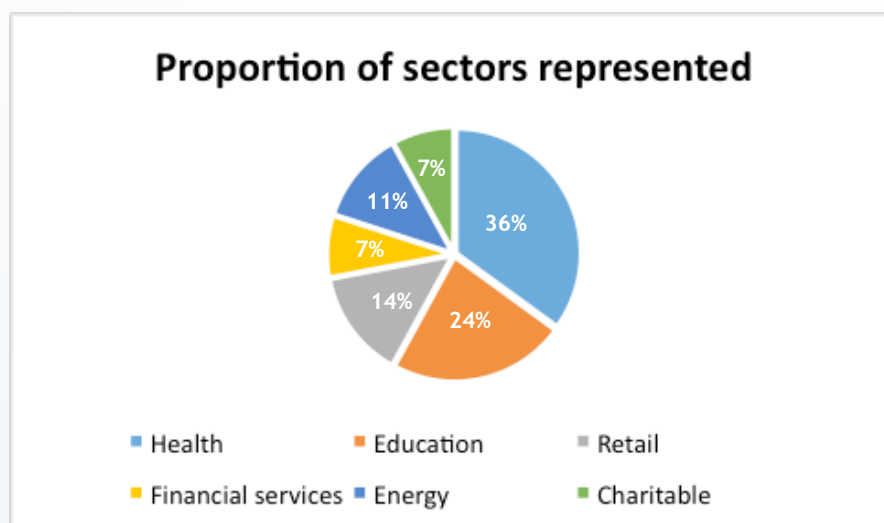
A much larger proportion of respondents in 2015 told us that they work in the public sector (60% compared to 36% in 2013). The top three reasons why managers in the public sector may dodge a difficult conversation concern feature the same three responses as in 2013; concern about the impact of the conversation on the health and well being of the other party is of even bigger concern for public sector managers in 2015.

Top 5 Influencing Factors on Your Choice to Have Difficult Conversations (Public Sector)

1. Concern about causing upset - 98%
2. Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person - 96%
3. Concern about damaging the other person's self-esteem/confidence - 95%
4. Hadn't gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the problem - 94%
5. Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough - 94%

Breakdown of Sectors

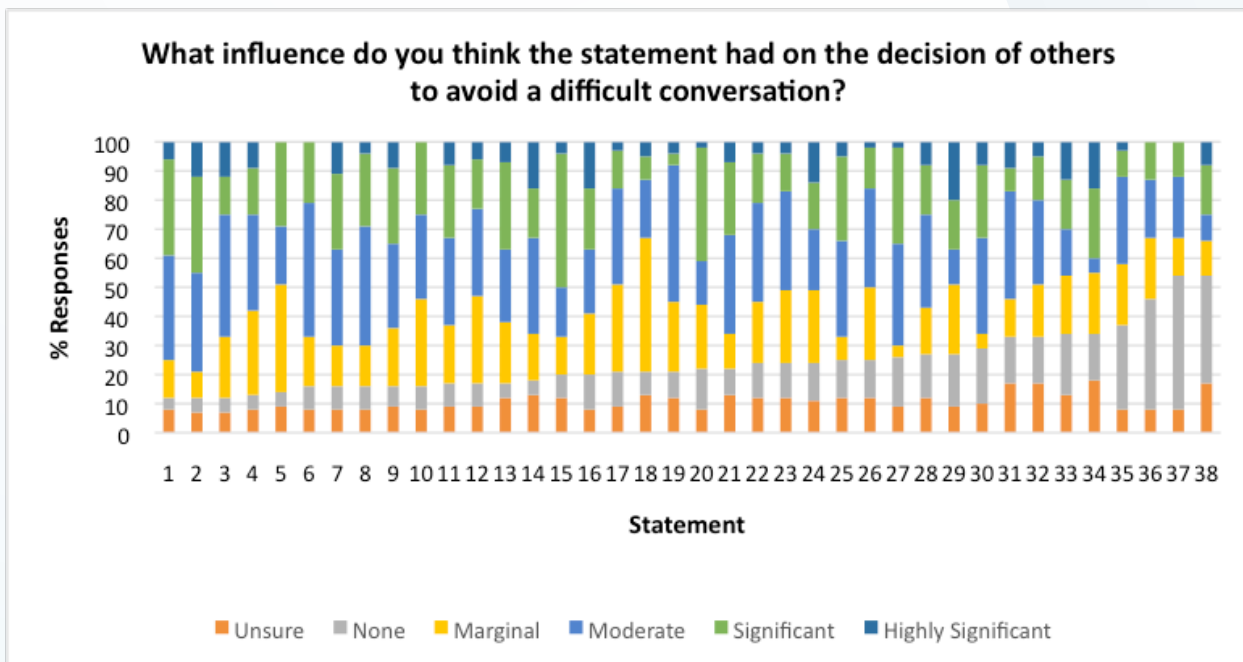
Survey respondents represent a wide variety of sectors, in particular health (35.6%), education (23.8%) and retail (14.6%).



B) Perceived responses – n=527

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 10 most influential reasons are highlighted in the following list.



Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person (89%) was the factor that featured the most in the responses about why managers think their colleagues are dodging difficult conversations, marginally less influential than in 2013 (90%). Respondents believe that their colleagues are concerned about the well being of the person they are having the conversation with, but there are also organisational concerns (concern about the complexity of the performance/disciplinary process - 83%) and uncertainty about their own position (desire to maintain a positive reputation as a ‘people person’ - 86%) featuring the in the top ten most influential reasons. Respondents own concerns and those they perceived their colleagues to be experiencing, differed more in 2015 than 2013.

Top 10 Influencing Factors on Others' Choices to Have Difficult Conversations

1. Concern about association levels of stress for the other person - 89%
2. Issues were left unaddressed for too long - 88%
3. Concern about effort required to see the issue through - 88%
4. Concern about damaging the other person's self-esteem/confidence - 87%
5. Desire to maintain a position reputation as a 'people person' - 86%
6. Concern about being fair - 84%
7. Concern about long-term or permanent damage to the relationship - 84%
8. Recognition that concerns were not made clear enough - 83%
9. Concern about the complexity of the performance/disciplinary process - 83%
10. Lacked belief that the conversation would make a difference - 82%

Context Concerns

We have broken down the main themes of why people tackle rather than dodge difficult conversations into four categories:

**Well Being
Concerns**

**Impression
Concerns**

**Response
Concerns**

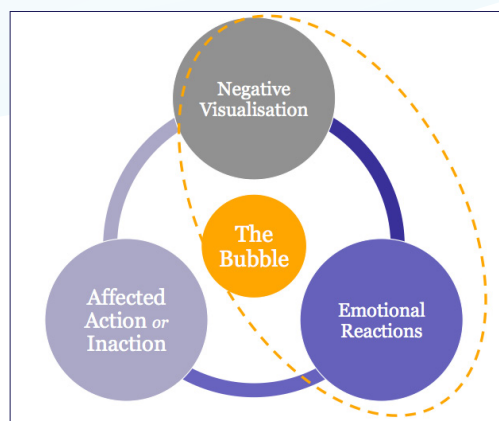
**Relationship
Concerns**

Our survey highlighted the fear people associate with facing a difficult conversation. The first hurdle to clear then is this instinctive reaction to defer, put off, sideline or avoid. When confronted by the need to engage in something unpleasant there are usually two opposing forces at work - your own desire to avoid a potentially unpleasant experience pitted against the desire (or the need, depending on your position) to have the situation resolved and dealt with. Needless to say, dodgers often set their self-preservation above the need to have the situation resolved. Interestingly, the weighing up of these odds usually doesn't even occur to a tackler. They don't perform the same mental balancing act before dealing with the situation, they just act. Although this process isn't 100% effective (certain 'gung-ho' tacklers could in fact learn a thing or two from the dodgers on this front), but what you can guarantee is that concerns about any unpleasantness fall so far down their list of priorities that they usually don't feature. To them there is no decision to make - they want the situation addressed, dealt with and in the past.

Negative thoughts about a difficult meeting or conversation are usually the first step on one's ladder to avoidance. One negative thought is usually followed by another and another and another until you've dug yourself into a pit of irrational negative emotion associated with the event so deep, that you'll find it impossible to escape. Suddenly, the thought of tackling makes you physically ill. Tacklers are adept at setting these fears aside the moment they surface, to the point where, with practice, thoughts of their own discomfort become a distant second, or third, to their sense of duty and responsibility.

Our emotional reactions to such situations are similar to our physical reactions when presented with danger - fight or flight. Our basis for decision- making is obviously different than when confronted by danger, in that difficult conversations are rarely likely to endanger our well being at a physical level, but we know inherently what is 'bad' for us and will act in either of those two instinctive manners. Choosing to 'fight', to have the difficult conversation and get it out of the way, is not something that comes naturally to many people, but those who learn to adopt the mentality, soon discover that it provides the basis for much easier and more productive working and social relationships and, therefore, greater levels of success than those who skirt around issues.

Respondents indicate a reluctance to face difficult conversations due to anxiety and concern that any attempt will go badly. Therefore, the best perceived option is to avoid it and the potential pain that may be associated with the discussion. There appears to be a real need to help people visualise more positive outcomes that can accompany becoming a tackler, not a dodger.

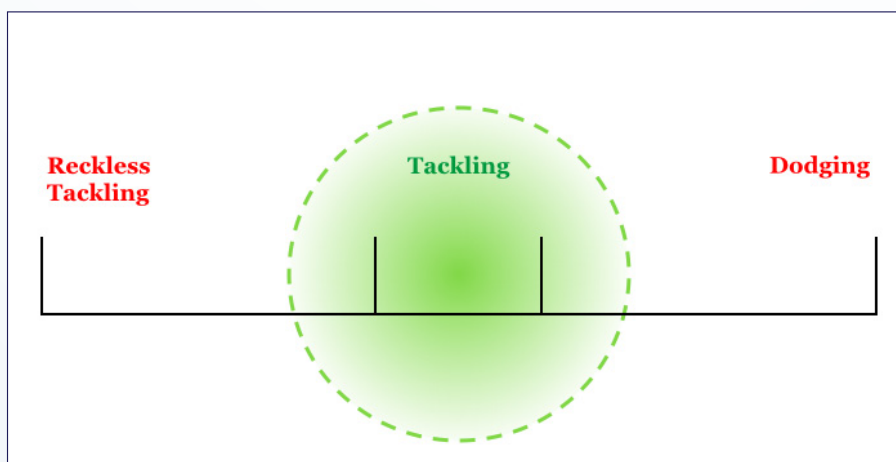


We also have evidence from engagement with training delegates that past experiences have left their scars. There a balanced between dodging or avoiding and ‘reckless tackling’ or being unprepared.

Respondents indicated that jumping into a difficult conversation unprepared usually ends in one of a number of unpleasant ways. Having these sorts of conversations thrust upon us catches us off guard, makes us panic and forces us to try and make sense of all the thoughts that come bounding into our head in that moment, which regularly results in a jumble of mixed messages and nothing being cleared up. One important thing to remember with the preparation aspect is that you get your facts right. Reeling off unsubstantiated gossip when trying to have a serious discussion is going to undermine your position, so ensure that you stick to what you know, or at least strongly suspect, to be true. Facts, particularly those backed up with evidence, can form the backbone of your argument and can often speak for themselves, but the tricky part can come if you’re investigating unsubstantiated claims or

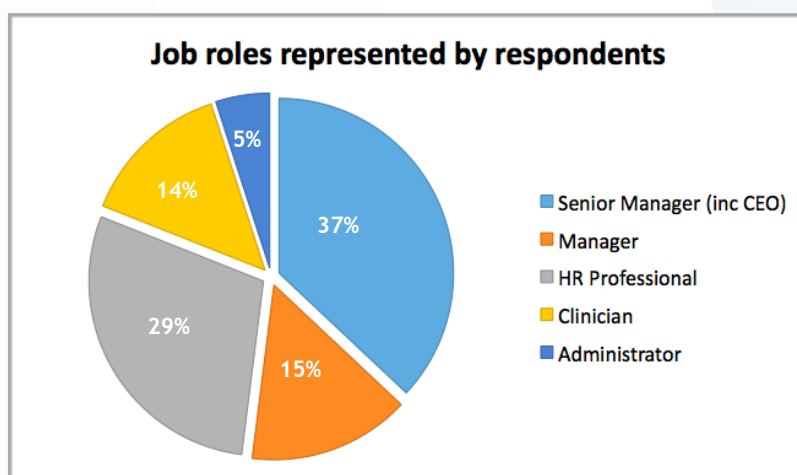
complaints. In these cases it might be wise to prepare a shortened, diluted version of what has been passed to you and ask the individual for an explanation of these events. Their response, and the way in which they deliver it, should give you an indication of how close to the truth you are.

Many fears regarding difficult conversations stem from concern about the reactions of the individual(s) being addressed; fears of anger, bitterness, high emotion, rejection and other potentially uncomfortable responses that one would rather not risk. There is no denying that, in some situations, these fears will be realised, but preparing for the likely reaction in advance and planning what to do or say if they occur can ease the burden tremendously. Facts again can be useful here. Providing individuals with any pertinent data or information that has necessitated the meeting takes the blame off you personally and shifts it onto the ‘evidence’ itself.



About the Respondents

The survey was completed by 527 respondents. Over 80% of respondents had 20 plus years of work experience.



80%
RESPONDENTS HAD 20 PLUS YEARS OF
WORK EXPERIENCE

Conclusions and Recommendations

Two years on from the first Difficult Conversations Survey in 2013 and it is clear that difficult conversations remain a challenging and necessary role of managers at all levels. The survey has highlighted some of the key areas, and many of these reflect the results of the 2013 survey. Managers are still primarily concerned about the impact of the conversation on the health and well being of the other party. The following table compares the top ten results from respondents in 2013 with the top ten from 2015.

It seems too that companies have finally begun to realise the damage that dodger managers

can do; a recent study found an encouraging 61.5% of employers increased manager training in the area of difficult conversations over a five year period. This is a very positive statistic, but the fact still remains that there are thousands of managers out there who are unprepared to deal with situations when they arise, at huge cost to their respective organisations and the economy as a whole. Changing any embedded behaviour rarely meets with instant success, but the main thing is to concentrate on the positives and continue to try and kick ones habit to avoid difficult scenarios instance by instance.

	2013	2015
1	Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 97%	Concern about damaging the other person’s self-esteem/confidence – 95%
2	Concern about damaging others self-esteem – 94%	Concern about causing upset – 92%
3	Concern about causing upset – 92%	Concern about associated levels of stress (for the other person) – 92%
4	Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 91%	Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 84%
5	Concern about being fair – 85%	Desire to maintain a positive reputation as a ‘people person’ – 83%
6	Concern about an angry response – 80%	Issues were left unaddressed for too long – 83%
7	Concern about permanent or long term damage to the relationship – 80%	Concern about an angry response – 80%
8	Concern about short term awkwardness in the relationship – 79%	Concern about long-term or permanent damage to the relationship – 79%
9	Concern you may have got the wrong end of the stick – 78%	Concern about the effort required to see the issue through – 79%
10	Hadn’t gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue – 78%	Hadn’t gathered sufficient evidence to tackle the issue – 75%

Some interesting differences arose when respondents were asked about why they thought their colleagues were dodging difficult conversations. Concern about the well-being of others remains a prevalent influencing factor, but there were several more external, organisational factors that have risen in prominence: issues were left unaddressed for too long (88%), concern about the complexity of the performance/disciplinary process (83%) and lacked belief that the conversation would make a difference (82%). The following table shows how the top ten responses to this question have changed from 2013 to 2015.

	2013	2015
1	Concern about an angry response – 93%	Concern about association levels of stress for the other person – 89%
2	Concern about causing upset – 92%	Issues were left unaddressed for too long – 88%
3	Concern about associated levels of stress for the other person – 90%	Concern about effort required to see the issue through – 88%
4	Concern about damaging others’ self-esteem – 89%	Concern about damaging the other person’s self-esteem/confidence – 87%
5	Concern about being fair – 89%	Desire to maintain a position reputation as a ‘people person’ – 86%
6	Recognition that expectations were not made clear enough – 88%	Concern about being fair – 84%
7	Concern about the effort required to see the issue through – 88%	Concern about long-term or permanent damage to the relationship – 84%
8	Concern about long term or permanent damage to the relationship – 87%	Recognition that concerns were not made clear enough – 83%
9	Concern about short term awkwardness in the relationship – 87%	Concern about the complexity of the performance/disciplinary process – 83%
10	Concern about associated levels of stress for you – 86%	Lacked belief that the conversation would make a difference – 82%

The results of the 2015 survey have shown that the concerns of managers remain largely the same and that there is still a considerable training need around difficult conversations: 30% of managers believe a lack of training affects their decision and 79% believe this issue affects other managers in their current (or most recent) organisation. Similarly, 55% believe that a lack of practice/experiences affects them, and 80% believe the same issue affects their colleagues.

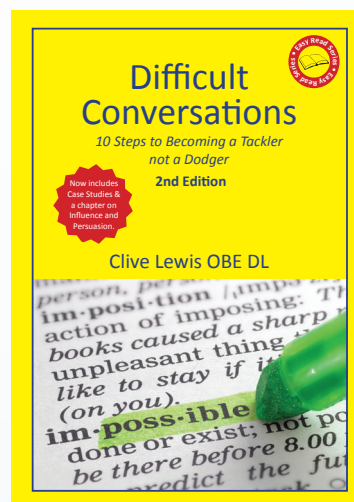
Our research also indicated that peer-peer scenarios are perceived to be more unpleasant than manager-employee ones because of the equal status of all those involved, so preparation here is even more important. Participants told us that practising what you need to say, perhaps with an impartial third party, can be a very useful way of measuring how you're coming across and can help you find the right wording so you sound like the concerned team member that you (hopefully) are. Trying to think of the discussion as a meaningful conversation with purpose, rather than a difficult conversation, may help. Remember, your version of subtle may not be the same as someone else's. Someone who has read and rehearsed their lines will be much better equipped, much more relaxed and much more focused on the intended outcome than someone who is trying to attempt a difficult conversation ad-hoc.

Our survey informed us that people who prepared felt that their meeting would go more smoothly, no matter what the subject matter. Any topic can be tackled if the groundwork is done and professionalism is retained at all times. 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' most popular training course. The course is based on the handbook written by Clive Lewis OBE DL which featured in the Sunday Times. 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

In response to feedback from delegates and the 2013 survey, Globis introduced a new two day training course, to give delegates more opportunity to put the principles into practice during the second day. 98.7% of attendees rate the course as 5 out of 5. The workshop includes a range of learning methods including expert input, self-evaluation techniques, challenging practice sessions (using professional business actors), detailed feedback and opportunities to reflect on and plan for real-life situations.

98.7%
RATE COURSE AS 5 OUT OF 5

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

*“Putting off an easy thing makes it hard.
Putting off a hard thing makes it impossible.”*

George Claude Lorimer

*“The dread of doing a task uses up more time and energy
than doing the task itself.”*

Rita Emmett

REFERENCES

- CIPD Conflict Management Survey Report March 2011

APPENDIX 1

News Release London, England, 31st March 2014

Globis to help bridge UK Skills Gap by training 10,000 people each year until 2020 to “Become a Tackler not a Dodger™” and offering free courses to school pupils. Globis Mediation Group has today announced its intention to help bridge the UK Skills gap. It will work with businesses to train 10,000 people each year until 2020 with improved skills to tackle difficult conversations. The Leitch report recommended that the UK should dramatically raise skill levels and commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020; the ability to tackle difficult conversations is a key skill for employees at all levels and in all organisations.

Globis will also be offering a free Difficult Conversations workshop for school pupils aged 12-16 who qualify for Free School Meals for every in house course booked by an organisation. Equipping young people with the skills to tackle difficult conversations will enhance their confidence and employability as they transition into the workforce or further education.

Clive Lewis OBE DL, author of Difficult Conversations: 10 Steps to Becoming a Tackler not a Dodger said “Our vision is to make a significant contribution to helping the UK meet its 2020 skills target. Our research shows that there is a significant skills shortage in effective management of difficult conversations. This new and exciting initiative will help organisations in an area that most of us struggle with. Training young people in tackling difficult conversations will build stronger communities and is a sound investment for the UK’s economic future”.

The ‘38 Reasons’ Difficult Conversations Survey undertaken last year showed that 97.4% of managers dodge difficult conversations out of a concern about the impact it might have on the other person. Productivity levels in some organisations are held back due to people’s reluctance to deal with more tricky situations.

The UK productivity gap with developed nations is now at its widest for 20 years according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Over the last year, Globis has worked with many organisations including large corporates, schools and healthcare trusts.

A whole range of subjects have been discussed by delegates including;

- performance
- sickness and absence
- project management
- bullying and harassment
- board room disagreements
- local health authority planning
- appraisals for teachers and
- redundancy

Delegates who sign up to become a tackler are trained and coached in how to see these situations as opportunities rather than difficulties. The initiative is being launched on Wednesday 2nd April 2014. About How to Manage Difficult Conversations: 10 Steps to Becoming a Tackler not a Dodger was published in 2011 and featured in the Sunday Times.

For further information on how to get your organisation involved call Clive Lewis on 0330 100 0809 or visit www.tacklingdifficultconversations.com



www.globis.co.uk