

MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: FLEXING YOUR LEADERSHIP APPROACH

If you face a difficult conversation with a colleague, is your instinct to get straight to the point, or do you craft your message to avoid a strong reaction from them? Our default styles in this respect can be strongly influenced by upbringing and culture, as well as by personality. Perhaps you learnt early on that disagreements need to be confronted, whatever the fall-out, or did you make your way in the world by seeking to accommodate others?

It's valuable to be aware of your default and how it can be driven by your emotional make-up. It can help to stand back and ask yourself if this approach will always get the result you need.

Leaders whose instinct is to be blunt have told us they have learned to:

- Find out where the other person is coming from and what could motivate them to receive the message positively
- Ask for, and listen to, their perspective. Show respect for them as a human being.
- Avoid taking a fixed position and accept that compromise is sometimes needed
- Recognise that directness can sometimes be received as intimidating
- Stay calm when things get emotional and avoid retaliating.

Leaders whose instinct is to be accommodating have learned to:

- Go into the conversation being clear about what the team or the organisation needs them to achieve – so that satisfying the wider purpose becomes more important than appeasing an individual
- Imagine how someone with a more direct style would handle the conversation – could that approach be appropriate in these circumstances, with this person?
- Have strategies for staying calm in response to an unexpected personal attack
- Be ready to press the pause button if a break would help the conversation

If time allows, leaders tell us it helps to rehearse for a challenging conversation – as long as that doesn't mean they keep putting it off. Delay can lead to escalation, and an even harder conversation further down the track.

Our current series of Praesta Prompts explores how we flex our leadership approach, recognising our default style.