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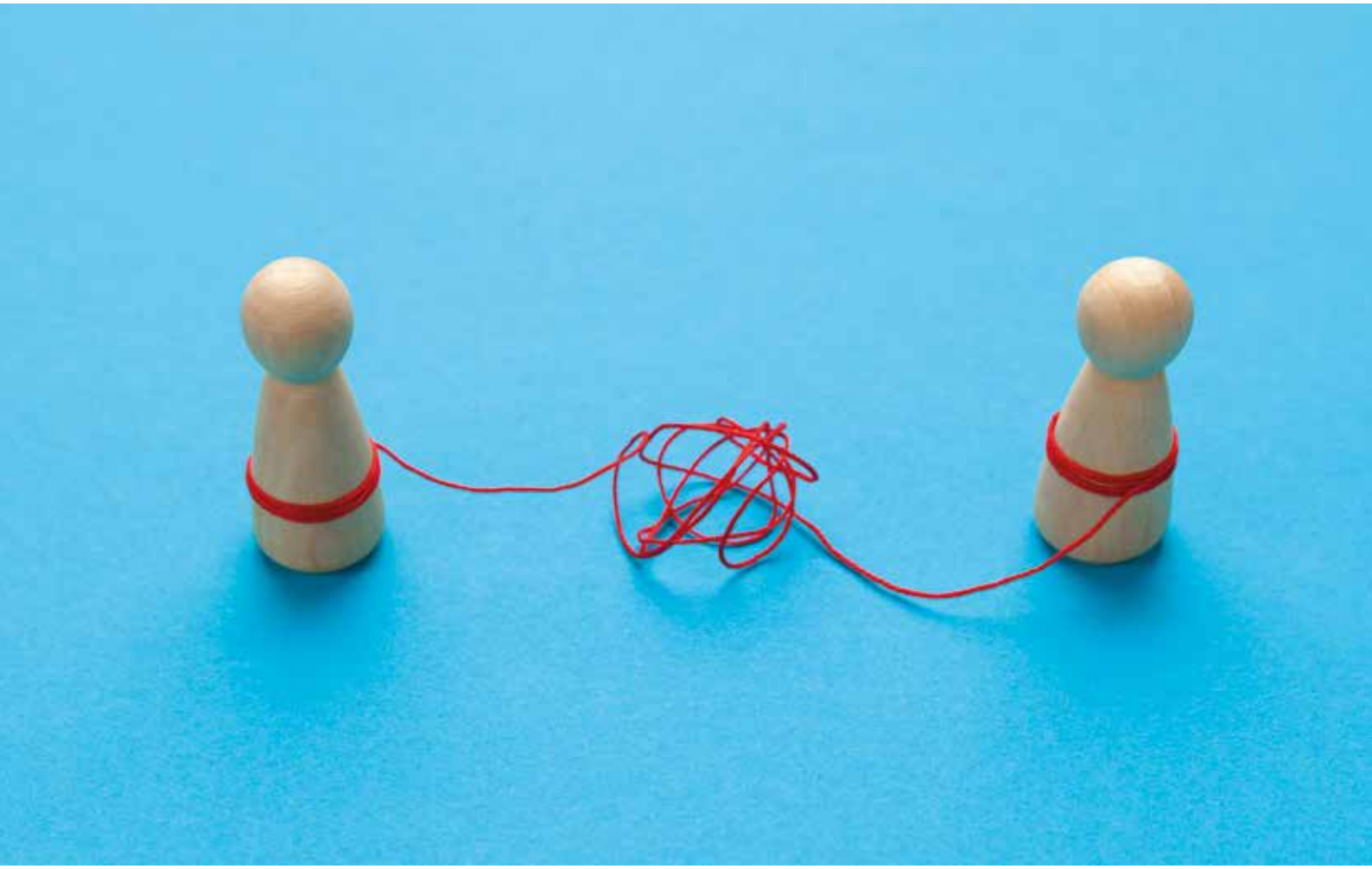
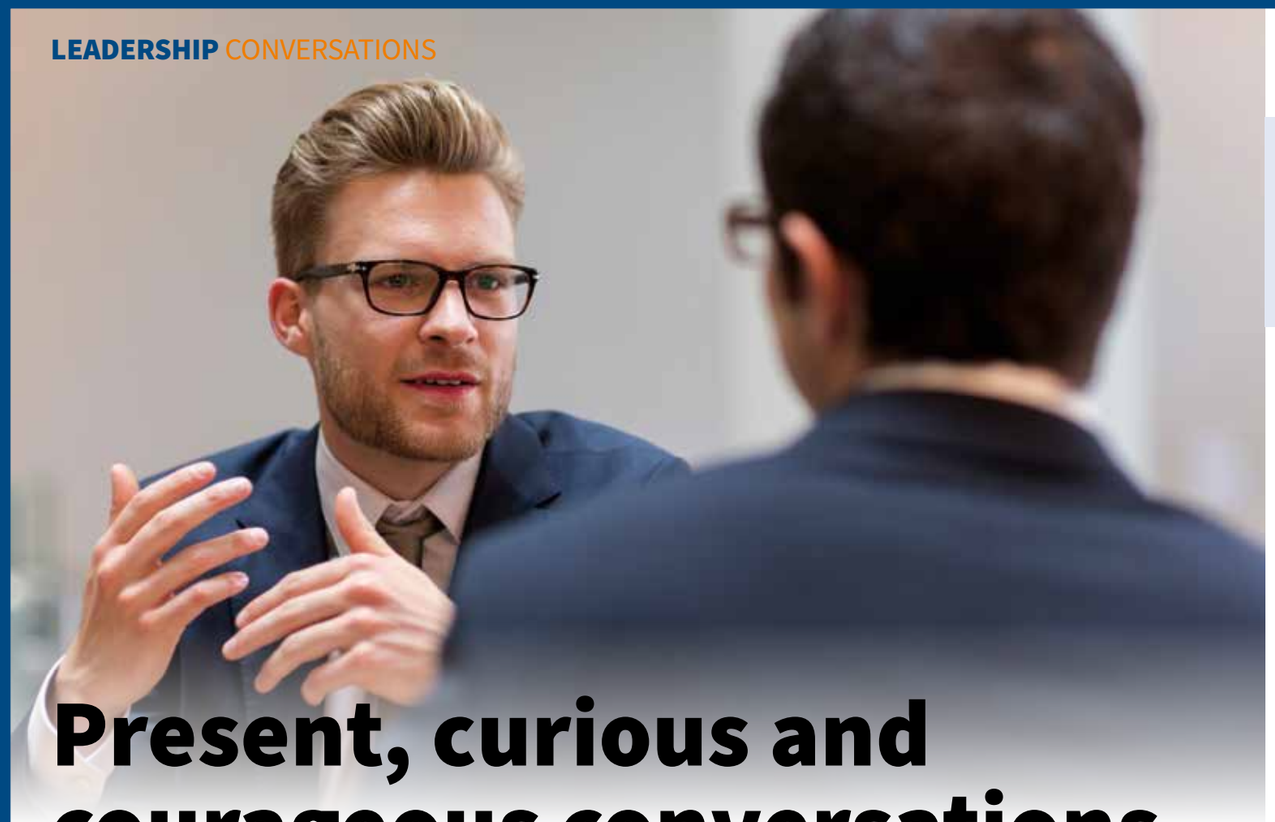
BEST PRACTICE FOCUS 16 Spring 2025 www.headteacher-update.com



Crucial conversations: A field guide for leaders

Every single day school leaders are faced with challenging yet crucial conversations – conversations that if handled badly can damage morale, relationships, trust in your school... In this Best Practice Focus, ***Robbie Burns*** decodes the structures and principles of good dialogue and offers strategies and examples for getting leadership conversations right



Present, curious and courageous conversations

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An angry parent. An underperforming member of staff. A student who is close to exclusion. A staff meeting where tough messages need to be shared...

Each of these conversations happen regularly for school leaders, but if you're anything like me you rarely feel prepared. The problem is each one of them is not just "part of the job", each one of them can make or break morale, relationships, trust, culture – each one of them is crucial.

As school leaders, we walk a tightrope every time we open our mouths: we balance challenge with praise, task with relationship, improvement with stability. Every one of these requires highly skilled conversational tactics that are tough to master.

Knowing how important crucial conversations are, I have become obsessed with making sense of what excellence in this area looks like. As such, in this *Best Practice Focus*, I offer my insights, drawn from experience of getting it wrong, right, and everything in between. I want to decode the structures and principles of good dialogue and offer a model for thinking them through. I will then offer some practical strategies and examples by applying them to two types of conversations that happen on a weekly basis for all school leaders.

Leadership is a conversation

Leadership is a present, curious and courageous conversation. Before we decode the structures of crucial conversations, pause for a moment and consider the quality of your own dialogue.

Susan Scott, in her book *Fierce Conversations* (2002), sees conversations as the key to breeding success in all walks of our lives: "Our careers, our companies, our relationships, and indeed our very lives succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time."

The quality of our conversations as leaders, one-by-one, little-by-little, day-by-day, might actually make the indirect difference to the outcomes of our students. But this is easy to say when emotions are settled and stakes aren't high. It's far more challenging to address underperformance, misalignment around a vision, or toxic behaviour in the moment. We jerk from matching the ferocity that we perceive in the other person, to shutting down and apologising and trying to smooth things over. Neither are helpful and only push problems down the track.

It is important to place effective leadership within the idea that it is an on-going conversation. Rather than a directive given that ought to be received and followed, leadership is dialogue-based: it is impossible to lead without talking; it is impossible to talk without things eventually getting heated.

Our leadership ought to be seen as a relationship rather than a structure or a role. This is the first step in understanding crucial conversations – they are not one-offs, they are part of the on-going leadership discourse.

So, if leadership is a conversation, how should we approach it? Our attitude towards our conversations ought to be "present", "curious", and "courageous".

Present: We ought to work hard as leaders to genuinely listen to words, emotions and body language – three layers of communication. Whatever actual behaviour follows on our part is irrelevant. The best way to show that you are listening with presence is to actually do it. Your body and your words will follow because your attitude is there in the moment and nowhere else.

Curious: We ought to ask more questions as we listen. When conversations are over, consider how many questions you asked. Did you really understand what they were saying? Were you interested enough in their words, emotions, and body language to ask simple clarifying questions? Did you already have things in your head to say instead of being adaptive and seeing it as a dialogue?

Courageous: Sometimes we sit behind ourselves (or our roles as leaders) thinking that we can't share our own feelings or stories. This is a mistake – one I have often made. I guard what I think, thinking no-one will see. But in reality, people are perceptive and what happens is that others end up worrying about whether you're giving them your real thoughts. Some people might even end up trusting you less and then holding back their own true thoughts. So show courage. Find (professional) words for what you feel and tell people why you feel this. Ask for others to share their own perspectives. There are times when this isn't appropriate, but in my experience, leaning in and being open and honest, taking that risk to show yourself beneath the role, really does build rapport, respect and openness.

Decoding conversations

When the stakes are high and emotions coarse through us, how do we make sure that we keep the direction of the school and the students central?

I propose a five-step process (see table 1) for crucial conversations. It's not perfect. It's also not completely linear as, of course, conversations rarely go exactly to plan. However, I have found these steps helpful as I consider what needs to be said and how I ought to say it. The steps provide scaffolds for thinking about the conversations you have and I hope they might enable you to avoid leading conversations which cause more harm than good.

Step 1: Prepare

It is vital to prepare. Before diving into crucial conversations, you need to work through three questions – for yourself and also considering the responses the other person may give:

What happened? We begin from our point of view. We need to recognise that we simply cannot understand and see the story of the other person accurately. Therefore we need to get our own story in order first by working through the information we have about what has happened. Once we've worked through the timeline, we then analyse the impact the issue has had (on us or the school perhaps). By naming this, we pin it down clearly and make the problem as tangible as possible.

We then consider their intentions and our own. We often lurch to thinking the worst, when in fact often the other person has simply not understood, has misinterpreted communications, or has (shock horror!) simply made a mistake. We need to be ready to understand that there may have been things we have missed or information we didn't gather due to our biases.

We must consider how we can remain curious about the perspective of the other person and the intentions they had. We also need to be ready to hear and consider the impact of our actions and intentions on them. As leaders, we must be prepared for tough truths, too. By working through the facts, the intentions, and the impact of our story and the stories of others, we build a shared understanding of the situation.

How do you feel? It is important to consider our emotional footprints collaboratively. This ensures that pent-up emotion is aired, even if it doesn't fully make sense or align with what happened. By allowing space to air these emotions with one another, we create the space and capacity to tell our stories as accurately as we can.

By simply stating our emotions, written down or said out loud to a trusted friend, we can put them in order. We might realise they are not actually the most important thing, even though they often dominate our thoughts.

As leaders we can sometimes shy away from doing this. Granted, we must be wise about the emotions we share, but it is important that we bring our whole selves to our leadership and being honest with colleagues is worthwhile. It shows we are human, we are real, we have hearts and hurts and hang-ups. It feels like a paradox, but we become far more trustworthy when we are vulnerable – a risky business but something to consider carefully and strategically.

Who are you? A strange question, but in the conversation that you are dreading, what is at stake for you? Grounding yourself in this is important. Without acknowledging the risks of a crucial conversation, you may pick the wrong approach.

Do you worry you'll risk status and respect? Do you worry things might not go to plan and you might end up hurting people? If there is one thing I've learned, it is that we get too hung-up on ourselves, our fears, or what people will think of us if we say that thing or ask that question.

In *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott talks about "coming out from behind yourselves and entering the conversation". So stand firm, lean in and take the risk to be open and honest with those around you. Being present and fully in a conversation enables you to be curious, to learn more about the person you are talking to (and about yourself in the process).

Equally, acknowledge that identity issues may be coming up for the other person, too. Don't ignore this. Just because you may feel confident and good in who you are, it doesn't mean your colleague does. Hopefully you know enough about your colleague's life to be able to temper how you communicate – but if you don't, ask. Be curious. They might answer the questions you've had about them this whole time, which in turn may allow you to see that their intentions weren't insulting or disrespectful, they just perhaps communicate in a way that clashes with you because of differing experiences or approaches.

Table 1. A five-step process to help you prepare and deliver crucial conversations

	Step	Question	Summary
Before	Prepare	What happened? How do you feel? Who are you?	Organise your story, intentions, contributions, emotions and identity issues, making sure you also consider others
	Check	Is this conversation worth having?	Consider carefully whether this conversation is worth having in this way at this time
During	Start	Can I share something that is on my mind with you?	Share your story and make sure you listen deeply to theirs. Support them to tell their own version of events
	Explore	Can you help me understand this?	Ensure you are completely understood and that you understand them before you begin to solve the issue
	Solve	With all of this in mind, how can we fix this and move forward?	With the problem out in front, rather than between us, consider ways forward and actions that can be taken to put things right

Step 2: Check

The first thing to consider is why you want to have a conversation. Why this conversation in this way at this time? What is the point of the conversation you are raising? Is it to improve student outcomes? Is it related to professional practice? Or do you just want to get something off your chest?

We need to see our conversations through the lens of ensuring students have the best education. Your stance should be about learning, sharing with one another, and problem-solving to enable staff and students to thrive as part of a healthy school culture.

Any other reason for having the conversation then it is probably not worth having. There are things that may simply be best left unsaid, regardless of how hurt you feel.

If you decide that the issue does need addressing, the next step is to consider how you do this. Is a conversation the best way or is there something that can be developed in the culture of the school that could deal with the issue more effectively?

Importantly, if you don't end up raising the issue for good reasons, you then need to consider how you will let go of the emotions you have. We cannot harbour resentment towards a colleague, especially if it skews your approach to that person later on.

Step 3: Start

"Can I share something that is on my mind with you?"

Ending up in a "blame ditch" is not helpful, so describe the ➤

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problem, according to you, as the difference between each of your stories, rather than attempting to shift the blame to them or take the blame yourself.

It is important to include both viewpoints as a legitimate part of the discussion and value both sides of the conversation. Sure, someone may need to apologise or acknowledge the impact they have had, but both parties contribute to the relationship.

This is why when you start the conversation you must enable the opportunity to step outside a situation that could result in an argument if we took a different approach.

You should also share your purpose. Being open about your reasons for raising the issue helps the other person to have complete clarity. There's nothing worse than a hidden agenda or a conversation where you never get to the heart of what you want to say. So invite them into the conversation to share their story and help you sort out the issues and the situation together – towards the common purpose that you have shared.

Step 4: Explore

"Can you help me understand this?"

When you listen make sure your aim is to understand them. Not just their words, but their emotions and the way they have organised the events you are discussing.

Again, be fully present. Acknowledge the feelings they have behind the words before responding to the arguments or the accusations they make. This is important because it takes the crucial conversation to a deeper level, addressing the whole person and the way the event has impacted them.

Show that you have understood by paraphrasing back what they have said in your own words. Often when I do this the person I'm speaking to has then gone back over what they've said to clarify. There is nothing worse than feeling misunderstood by the other person. This exploration means that you can then stand side-by-side in a conversation and look at the problem out in front of you rather than between you, keeping the purpose and possible solutions central to the dialogue.

Another layer in a conversation like this, particularly if there was a miscommunication that led to the issue, is reflecting how you got to this point in the first place. What sorts of habits did you fall into or were not aware of in the way you communicated?

Only once you have done this should you share your side of the story. This enables you to act out that timeless principle – to seek to understand before you are understood.

Ways to do this include raising things from your perspective and even reframing some of the things said by the person as they spoke, turning them into positives or offering an alternative outlook.

Step 5: Solve

"With all of this in mind, how can we fix this and move forward?"

Only once you've understood what each person cares about is it worth beginning to share options that meet each side's concerns. This means that you can proceed within the conversation on an equal and shared understanding of each of your perspectives.

Then it is worth looking to a standard for what should happen beyond the people involved in the conversation. Job descriptions, clear codes of conduct, and employment handbooks are all valuable sources for information like this. Does anything need to change? Talk about how to keep the communication flowing in the future to mitigate the need for more difficult conversations.

DIFFICULT LEADERSHIP CONVERSATIONS

This recent episode of the Headteacher Update Podcast features a panel of three school leaders discussing how to handle challenging conversations as a school leader. They discuss common types of "difficult conversation", general principles for how to handle these discussions, and how we can best prepare ourselves and others for these conversations. Listen at ***https://buff.ly/3UcFzlA***

Applying the model

I now explore two types of crucial conversation that will happen regularly in most schools. These examples are completely fictitious.

Conversation 1: Jacob's mum

It happened at lunch on Friday. Jacob had been swearing at other students repeatedly in class. You were in your office when Mrs Hannah came to let you know what had happened. She had told the phase leader, who agreed – in alignment with the behaviour policy – that this issue should be sent directly to the headteacher.

The students were lining up to go into the canteen and you felt it was a good idea to talk to Jacob straight away. You knew the consequence you may need to give but wanted to understand whether there was anything to shed light on why Jacob was behaving thus (sadly, this isn't the first time).

After a brief conversation with Jacob, in which he swore at you, it was clear the wider context did not explain anything else. You decided you had no choice but to suspend him for the afternoon.

Jacob's mother came to pick him up and you stood outside reception to briefly explain what had happened, wish Jacob and mum a good weekend, and invite them to a re-integration meeting on Monday.

Silence from mum and Jacob. Then as they walk away, mum turns back, angrily points, and says: "If that's all you've got to say sir, then we'll clean all this up on Monday and I'll be bringing my husband."

And that was that. As you walk back to your office, there are a lot of initial emotions. You are also thinking of the students in Jacob's class and Mrs Hannah, who seems a little shaken. You know that the first step is to check with her and ensure she is okay for the next lessons. Then you need to think about Monday.

Preparing for the meeting

What steps should you take? It would be easy to feel threatened, worried, concerned about the way mum may approach the conversation. You have not met

dad before but have heard he can be challenging to talk to.

The first step is to prepare. It would be easy to fester in your emotions. This would be an error. Unpick, maybe on paper, what actually happened – before, during and after the event.

Then and only then, filter through your emotions. You can hopefully pinpoint the events and how they made you feel. It might well become clear that some of your feelings are irrational and irrelevant and you can try your best to discard them.

Think about the identity issues coming up for you. Did you deal with this situation competently? You took the correct steps that were needed in the decisions you made, based on the evidence you had, and took swift action to safeguard students, taking your duty of care seriously. So you could probably answer "yes" to this question, but acknowledge that you don't have every fact and, above all, remain curious.

The re-integration meeting can help you to unpick things further. To be ready for the conversation, it is important you have a clear timeline of events to hand and are prepared to share them and the reasons for the actions you took, particularly if mum disagrees with what you did.

Finally, check whether the conversation needs to happen or not. In this case, this is easy – it is school policy that when a student is suspended a re-integration meeting takes place.

During the meeting

Monday morning, 8:10am. Mum, Jacob and dad are waiting to see you at 8:15am. You feel better having mapped things out in note form and are prepared to be present, curious and courageous in your work with this family.

"Good morning, Mr and Mrs Johnson, Jacob, come and have a seat in our meeting room."

The meeting begins. You are just about to speak when Jacob's mum speaks: "We both want this suspension taken off his records. He doesn't deserve it," she says, hurried and angrily.

You could allow mum to run this crucial conversation on her terms. The compassionate part of you thinks this might be best. However, your better judgement kicks in and you agree in your mind to follow the process for the meeting that you have already envisaged.

There's a practical aspect too – your duty begins at 8:35am and you're leading assembly at 8:50am.

"Okay Mrs Johnson. Thank you for sharing a possible solution to the issue we're addressing in this meeting, but I think we need to look at the timeline of events and consider how we can move forwards together for Jacob's sake so he can happily re-integrate back into school life. I'd like us to first look at what happened and the consequence. Once we've done this, I'd like to hear your views and listen to Jacob."

> *"By stopping the conversation here, you would miss the chance to put Jacob back on the right track and work towards restoring a relationship with mum"*

Silence – but you can see that she is willing to oblige you leading the meeting. Dad at this point is silent and doesn't look like he's going to be talking anytime soon.

You then proceed to unpack the lead up to the swearing in class at multiple students and the swearing at you. You then explain that the consequence, as per the behaviour policy, is suspension. You explain that it is part of the home-school agreement that parents will support the school in decisions about behaviour. Carefully, you outline the feelings of the students in Jacob's class after hearing him swear at them and Mrs Hannah's views.

As part of this, you share that the school's intention is never to suspend a student unless it is necessary and look to provide support in whatever way is possible to promote good student behaviour – but incidents like this need to have consequences to show how serious they are.

You finish by apologising for the inconvenience and upset this has no doubt caused the family, but want to make clear that your role is to serve all students, and you are responsible for the school and not just Jacob.

You could end this meeting here. You've said everything that needs to be said and there might seem no reason to hear Mrs Johnson's story or enable her to work with you to "fix the problem". This would be an error – it would not acknowledge the other problems that have surfaced. One of them is the fact that this is the third time Jacob has been suspended for aggressive verbal abuse; it is also not the first time that mum has been unhappy with decisions of the school about his behaviour.

Something within you worries that Jacob's behaviour isn't going to get better and your relationship with mum is going to worsen. By stopping the conversation here, you would miss the chance to put Jacob back on the right track and work towards restoring a relationship with mum.

"I'd love to understand this situation from your perspective. Mum, dad, could you tell me more about how things are going at home with Jacob, and whether there is something I am missing? We want to support Jacob and enable him to thrive."

You go silent. A few agonising seconds pass. It's dad who speaks: "I lost my job just before Jacob came back to school this term." His voice is strained and emotional. "I think it's impacting me and my boy. Our whole house in fact."

Mum is tearful: "You're not helping Jacob. He's finding it hard seeing his dad so sad at home and he doesn't feel like he can talk to anyone here. He's struggling with friendships, and he doesn't really bond with Mrs Hannah. He hates coming and the worst is that he doesn't feel like he can tell anybody. No wonder he's acting out. Suspending him won't help and I don't agree with it."

You stay present and want to press in on what's been said. This is good and this openness is new. However, it is sad to see a family so upset and you struggle holding back your own emotions: "Can you tell me more about this? Jacob, I'd love to hear from you, too."

"I just get so angry, sir. Mrs Hannah is so annoying and she's always on my case."

"How can I help you, Jacob? How can we help you succeed at our school and solve these problems together? Do you have any ideas?"

Jacob looks down at the floor: "I just feel trapped in."

"I have some ideas, Jacob. Can I share them with you?"

He nods but does not speak. You offer some solutions as options, not saying that this is what will happen. This is important and invites them into the conversation to solve the issue together. But you feel there is still something missing. You press a little further, just to check you understand Jacob.

"Before I share them with you, can I check – do you know when you're getting angry? Can you feel it coming?"

"Yeah. I know when I'm getting mad, I can feel it in my tummy."

"Okay. That's a good thing. What I'm going to suggest is that you catch that feeling before it gets too big. A way you can do this is I can give you a card or you can make a hand symbol to Mrs Hannah to let her know that you are getting mad so that you can take a break, to re-set, to relax again, so that the feelings don't get so big they get out of control.

"You can walk down the corridor for five minutes and then come back to the room. This doesn't mean you don't do your learning or work hard for Mrs Hannah; it just means you can help yourself to regulate your anger, so we don't end up swearing. What do you think?"

"Okay. That sounds good."

"What do you think mum and dad?" They nod and seem calmer.

"Jacob, if you're happy with this, and we work together, we can see ➤

this as the first step. You can work with Mr Johns (SENCO) and talk to him a bit more about how you're doing, and we can see if there's other support we can provide, but we can begin here."

"Is there anything else you'd like to say, or discuss with me Mr and Mrs Johnson?" They shake their heads, calmer still.

"Okay. Jacob, to confirm, today you can work with Mrs Hannah to agree a symbol or a card you can hold up when you're getting angry so you can step out of the room for five minutes to calm down. You can walk on the corridor with Mrs Green (a teaching assistant) and then return back into class. Just a reminder that you will need to complete all your work as normal. Are we clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Super. Well I think that's everything. Mr and Mrs Johnson, I want to let you know that I acknowledge once again how difficult this time has been for you both. I want you to know that we want to continue to work with you and you can call the school whenever you need to and we can set up a meeting."

It's 8:30am. You leave Jacob with Mrs Green, briefing her about the outcome of the meeting. He has 10 minutes before the day starts to chat with Mrs Hannah, who you know will be pleased to see him and re-integrate him into the class.

Conversation 2: A wayward senior leader

Something has been bothering you over the past few weeks. One of your newly appointed assistant heads for early years, Miss Hicks, is a talented teacher and leader with vast potential but who has a frustrating tendency to undermine the decisions being made by other senior leaders and even you.

> *"You realise that some of your feelings are a little irrational. You immediately feel a little better, maybe the 'terrible intentions' of Miss Hicks are actually not as bad as you feared"*

At first it was timetabling, then staff deployment decisions, and the most recent was that her phase won't be teaching the new PSHE scheme – even though you all confirmed this in a recent team meeting.

You feel really angry about the way Miss Hicks is going about her work, even though she is a wonderful person who is a valued asset to the life of your school.

In part, this is what makes you so frustrated. You wonder whether she is actually not the person you thought she was and whether she is talking negatively about you behind your back. You feel that you need to have a conversation as soon as possible.

Preparing for the conversation

It is important to organise your story. But as you go over the decisions other leaders make – updates to behaviour policy, new curriculum implementation, timetabling – you begin to notice something: some of these decisions haven't fully considered the nature of early years teaching and learning or the fact that the framework for these year groups is different to the ones used for years 1 to 6.

You realise that some of your feelings might be a little irrational. You immediately feel a little better, maybe the "terrible intentions" of Miss Hicks are actually not as bad as you feared. You realise that you have possibly contributed to her behaviours with her team, leading her to undermine you even though she never wanted/intended to.

Knowing the sort of person she is, you begin to think that she wants to build buy-in with her team, is listening to them, and just wants the best for the children.

You know she is new to senior leadership and so maybe she is worried about speaking to you, going against your decisions, or speaking up in leadership meetings.

Another important part of this story you want to draw in is that early years teaching, learning and curriculum is "excellent", as confirmed by your recent school improvement visit.

Identity issues for you at this point are that, if you're honest, you thought you had a better relationship with Miss Hicks than you actually do. This makes you feel sad, but makes you think that there is something important to be discussed.

Within your time of reflection, sorting out your story, you are able to see that the whole situation may not be as bad as you feared. You end your reflection less angry and with a curious attitude.

During the conversation

You have one-to-one meetings with Miss Hicks on a bi-weekly basis. You decide to raise the issue as part of this. You know that early years aren't using the new PSHE curriculum and this is a good moment to ask her about this.

After a bit of small talk, you dive into the agenda: "Okay the first thing I wanted to ask you about was the PSHE curriculum and how it's going in early years. Any thoughts at this point on how effective it is?"

"Erm. About that. It's not easy to say this, but we're not actually implementing it yet. We thought we'd take a bit of time to roll it out."

Sadly, you know that Miss Hicks isn't telling you the truth. You have been told that she has said to her team that they are not going to be implementing it.

You have prepared to share your story with Miss Hicks and you're ready to be present, courageous and ultimately concerned about what's going on with this talented leader and how you can support her.

"Miss Hicks, can I be open with you and share something that is on my mind?" She looks down at her feet – she senses that you might be angry.

"I want you first to know that I think you're very talented and have so much potential for the future. I also want you to know that I know how much you want the best for your students and for your team."

"Thank you. I really appreciate you seeing that." She relaxes just a little, but she is still tense. Not sure what's coming next.

"However, there's something I'm curious about and I want to understand more. When we agreed in our senior leader meeting that we would roll-out the new PSHE curriculum, you didn't mention any issues for early years. In fact, I remember you agreeing that it would be an improvement."

It is tempting to stop here and hear her perspective. But this would miss an opportunity to go deeper, carefully yet courageously sharing your emotions with your fellow leader. You press on.

"I have to be real with you and say I've felt a little confused and concerned about whether you're being as open and honest with me about what's right for your team and students. I also wonder whether I've created a space that doesn't facilitate you being able to share your perspectives about early years in a way that you want to.

"As I reflect on the scheme, I am conscious that there are some elements that may not directly align with the EYFS. But I do need you to be open with me earlier so we can put things right quicker.

"I rate you highly and think you are doing a good job, but I had to share things that have been on my mind and get your perspective. Would you mind sharing yours with me?"

It is important to note that you have acknowledged that you may have contributed in some way to Miss Hicks being the way that she is. This puts the problem "out in front" rather than between you, and avoids the blame game.

Miss Hicks takes a deep breath: "I wondered whether you might say this. I've wondered whether you might be cross with me for some reason." Hard to hear, but you acknowledge that this has been true.

"But yes, I have found it hard to share the perspectives of early years in our meetings. There doesn't ever seem to be an obvious place to do this and I feel early years is forgotten."

"Thanks for being so open with me. What else?"

"I guess the other thing is I that genuinely want to do the things we're developing, but then when I say yes in a meeting and go back to my team, they want something different – or I realise there are some problems related to early years that mean it just won't work. In the heat of the moment in a meeting with my team, I've sometimes just flopped on stuff and then not wanted to tell you."

> *"The conversations were embedded in the relationships of the people involved in them. The conversations began way before they became crucial and will continue long after"*

"Again, thank you for being so open with me. Can I try and put it in my own words what I think you've said?"

Miss Hicks nods, looking more relaxed. You realise she's had things on her mind for a while, too.

"I think what I'm hearing is that you have struggled to find the space in our senior meetings to be a positive voice for early years and are concerned about how you might come across. It sounds like you want to, but don't want to slow meetings or decisions down. It also sounds like you genuinely want to move the school forward."

"Absolutely. I love this school and love the team. I don't want to undercut the journey we're on."

"That's great to hear. I've also heard that sometimes your team is quite combative when you are trying to implement new things and sometimes they have genuine insights that we may have missed in our meetings. And when you have said yes to the decision, you feel stuck when your team is adamant they don't want to do it. Is this the case?"

"Sadly, yes. I feel a bit trapped, but can see both sides of the coin."

"Okay, I feel like I've understood. So how can we solve this problem together? What solutions can we find?"

After a short pause, you ask: "Can I suggest something? Would it help if in our senior team meetings we build understanding of early years for us all to help us make good decisions? Every few weeks, why don't you give us a five-minute update on early years policy, frameworks and pedagogy. That might help us all understand the phase better.

"Also, I want you to feel empowered to make good decisions with your team and not feel like you've got to 'side' with someone. How about, if we do make decisions and you're not sure about them, you make a point of stalling and thinking things over for a little longer.

"Now I understand you more, I could give you a few days to deliberate over decisions to talk to your team to support us to make good decisions for all of our students. Does this sound good?"

"Yeah, I think this is a great way forward. Thank you."

"Okay. Great. I just want to reaffirm that I think you're doing a great job and you are a valued member of our team. I hope you don't mind me being open and honest with you about my feelings at times. It's important to me that we can be open with each other, for the children's sake."

"No, I get it. I was worried but it's been helpful talking this through. Thank you."

"Thanks so much Miss Hicks. Shall we move on, or would you prefer to leave our one-to-one there today?"

"Let's move on. I have some other things to raise with you."

You feel pleased with how this conversation has gone. You have to be honest with yourself, though. You want to see Miss Hicks follow through with the things you've agreed here. You make a note to monitor this carefully and check that she keeps her word.

Because you have built a relationship with her, you are hoping that you will be able to raise things in the future if needed. You are pleased that you have also learned a lot about yourself and the way you lead.

Final thoughts

What have we learned on this journey into crucial conversations? It is worth drawing together some of the themes that have emerged.

The first is the attitude we have towards our colleagues and the conversations we have. We must always and relentlessly, even though it is tough, be present, curious and courageous.

From there on in, it is important to prepare well and do the work to make sense of what happened, your emotions connected to it, and the intentions you had.

You then need to make sure you consider the contribution effect rather than who was to blame. One of the great successes of both of the examples I have discussed was the learning both parties did. Both parties were able to see how they could grow. Both conversations kept the problem out in front, rather than in-between, making it something solvable together, collaboratively. This enabled change that contributed to greater levels of motivation, given both parties were equally involved in the process.

To bring us full circle, both conversations didn't really feel like there was a complete start and a complete finish. The conversations were embedded in the relationships of the people involved in them.

The conversations began way before they became crucial and will continue long after. They may become crucial again, which is normal and human. But, importantly, the depth of the reflection and discussion will hopefully mean that, in the end, healthy relationships between people will be maintained.

And when we think about schools, we must always remember that this matters to our students. When we as leaders tackle crucial conversations effectively and with increasing skill, everyone wins – parents, students and staff. hu