

SUMMARY

THE DISCOMFORT ZONE

HOW LEADERS TURN DIFFICULT
CONVERSATIONS INTO BREAKTHROUGHS

MARCIA REYNOLDS



Summary of “The Discomfort Zone” by Marcia Reynolds

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The Discomfort Zone (2014) outlines Marcia Reynolds’ vital new method for tackling tough conversations with compassion and finesse.

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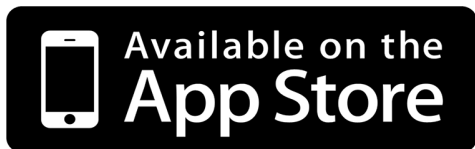


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Introduction

What makes you uncomfortable? Although we all probably have a few different situations that make us a little squirmy, I'm pretty sure that having difficult conversations is on the list for just about everyone. Whether you have to remind that family member to pay you back the money you loaned them or, in a professional capacity, you have to call out an employee for unacceptable behavior, difficult conversations are never fun, but always necessary. So, because they're necessary, it's vital that we identify some key strategies for making them more bearable in our daily lives.

How can we do it? Well, according to Marcia Reynolds, that's where "the discomfort zone" comes in. You can think of it as a state of comfortable discomfort, in which you're not just super happy about what's going on, but where you can successfully handle tough conversations with dignity, tact, and respect. Arguing that this strategy will give you the freedom and flexibility to interact openly and honestly with friends and employees alike, Reynolds suggests that the discomfort zone can help you create a safe space for conversation, learn how to listen with both logic and emotion, and change your partner's thinking through the power of dreams.

Change Thought Patterns, Change The Conversation

How do you get someone to agree with you? It might sound like a no-brainer, but the simplest answer is to realign their thought patterns so that they're thinking the same thing as you! And one of the best ways to do this is by flipping negative emotions around to replace them with a positive outlook. However, that doesn't mean we should simply take a "flip that frown upside down" approach that avoids dealing with reality. Rather, we can use negative emotions as a tool for helping others to achieve positive results.

Take, for example, a scenario in which a colleague is feeling down about her job. Perhaps she feels that she's not doing well enough or that she isn't valued by the company or maybe she's struggling with personal problems that are affecting her performance. Whatever the trouble is, our easiest-- and often instinctive-- solution might be to simply assure her that she's doing a great job or that everything will be okay. But that might not always be the best way to help. Because although these responses are well-intentioned, they might also backfire and invalidate your co-worker's feelings, making her feel silly or like she's gotten emotional for no reason. It might also have the unintended effect of supporting inappropriate work standards. Because if your colleague really is underperforming at work and knows she could be doing better, encouraging her to lower her standards isn't really the most helpful thing to do.

So, the first step in providing meaningful help is to change your thought patterns. Once you train your brain away from its instinct to placate others and encourage yourself to confront negative feelings, you can then enter the discomfort zone. So, in this example, that might mean that you initiate an honest and open discourse with your co-worker, one which begins by acknowledging the validity of her feelings and invites her to probe their origin. As she takes the step to examine her feelings more closely and consider why she's unsatisfied with her performance at work, you can listen and support her. Helping her to confront reality and brainstorm ways to

convert her negative feelings into actionable solutions can help to facilitate positive change. In short, when you help people change their thought patterns, you can help to change the situation!

Listen With More Than Just Your Ears

Okay, that might sound a little bit corny, but we all can tell the difference when someone's really listening to us, can't we? It's the difference between sound simply passing through someone's ears and information resonating with their heart. Because we all know that listening requires so much more than just our ears. We need our minds, which allow us to logically understand what someone is saying to us. And we especially need our hearts, which enable us to empathize with another person and share in their experiences.

Listening with our hearts also helps us to read between the lines and intuit nonverbal clues which are often unstated, yet may be vital to understanding what someone else is going through. For example, if a friend is telling us they're really happy in their new relationship but little things they say hint that they may also be nervous, apprehensive, or even afraid of their partner, we can intuit that they may be in an abusive relationship. This, in turn, can help us to probe beneath the surface of the conversation and ask questions that may bring genuine healing to our friends.

Communication skills like these are vital to the pursuit of meaningful relationships, deep conversations, and the cultivation of character traits that make us kinder and more compassionate people. Developing our ability to listen with our heart may not always be easy and asking difficult questions won't always be fun, but they do strengthen both our character and our relationships. And that's exactly what the discomfort zone is all about!

Difficult Conversations Require Trust

At first glance, that might sound like an oxymoron. Because if you've ever had to have a tough talk with an employee, you know firsthand that the employer/employee relationship is often fraught with feelings of distrust. However, you probably also know that criticism is never going to be received well if it's being offered by someone you don't trust. So, how can you break through those barriers in the situations that matter most? Well, Marcia Reynolds posits that in difficult conversations where you're trying to create trust, it's important that you don't start off in the discomfort zone right away. Because while that might be successful in a chat with your colleague about improving work performance, an employee might have a different response.

So, the next time you're facing a difficult conversation with an employee, don't start off with, "We need to talk" or by telling them you've noticed some problems with their work. Because if you start this way, it's understandable that your employee might feel as though they're being attacked or bullied, which in turn may lead to them disregarding everything you say. So instead, attempt to engage with them first, and make a habit of connecting with your employees on a personal level long before any difficult conversations need to be had. Focus on cultivating an atmosphere in which your employees feel valued, respected, and that you have their best interest at heart. Because if their relationship with you is based on these feelings, they will automatically be 100% more receptive to any constructive criticism you might offer. After all, it's kind of a no-brainer, right? We all feel a little more positive when we know that someone isn't out to get us.

But even if you haven't made a habit of cultivating this atmosphere for your employees, you can still create a safety bubble for difficult conversations in future. Start by focusing only on the present moment and abandoning any preconceived prejudices or opinions you may have about that employee in particular. Allow yourself to be open and consider the inner world of your employee. What hopes, dreams, fears, and stressors might they carry with

them every day? What personal factors might be affecting their performance at work? It's important to remember that when you open yourself up to considering these aspects of your employee's life, you give yourself the freedom to really listen to what they have to say. (Remember our earlier chapter on listening with your heart?) And when you follow these steps for having difficult conversations, you'll be able to meaningfully engage with your employee and work together to create lasting, positive change.

DREAM

So, now that we've talked about the basics of the discomfort zone, let's have a look at putting them into practice. We can start by examining the actionable steps that make up our discomfort zone technique, and these are all represented through the handy acronym DREAM. (Even if you're not one for acronyms, by the end of this chapter, you might have to admit it's a pretty helpful mnemonic device!)

D stands for "determine the goal of the conversation." If you've ever felt yourself getting lost in a difficult conversation or growing angry while you wonder what the point is, this is the step to help eliminate that! So, start by establishing a clear and concrete goal of what you want to accomplish in this conversation. Remember that this isn't the time to get lost on a rabbit trail of everything this person has done to annoy you or everything with which you can find fault.

If the primary issue at hand is that they're consistently late to work, then talk only about time management and the factors which may be making them late to work. One handy technique that might help keep you on track is to ask yourself, "What do you want to happen as a result of talking about this problem?" If you want to ask someone else that question, it may help to phrase it as, "What do you want to be easier for you after we've talked about this problem?" Keeping your conversation within these parameters can make a big difference in your focus!

And that brings us to the "R," which stands for "reflecting on the past to learn why the goal hasn't yet been achieved." This is another crucial step that can help keep you on track and guide you toward a healthy resolution. Because those who forget the past are pretty much guaranteed to repeat it, it's critical that you get a sense of the thoughts, feelings, and motivations that have influenced someone else's previous problems.

However, it's also important to remember that your listening responsibilities aren't over once you feel like you've gotten a handle on the situation. To ensure successful communication, run your newfound knowledge by your conversation partner through summarizing. You can do this by saying something like, "So, what I hear you saying is that the reason you're struggling with this is....."

This helps to re-establish clear communication by ensuring you're both on the same page. It also shows that you've been listening closely enough to rephrase your conversation partner's ideas in your own words. Not only does this promote trust and respect, it also helps your partner to hear their ideas repeated back to them so they can reflect one more time.

Explore Blind Spots Together

Whether we realize it or not, we all have blind spots in our thinking. Maybe it's a toxic behavior we constantly excuse or unhealthy habits that we might not be aware of. They look different for everyone, but we've all got a few blind spots, and they're usually behind the behavior which necessitates a difficult conversation.

That's why the next step in our DREAM acronym is "Explore the blind spots." Because when you enter the discomfort zone, you have the opportunity to engage your conversation partner in a judgment-free exploration which can help you examine and break through those blind spots together. Following an honest discourse in which the whole story is on the table, you can now take a better look at the struggles and biases which influence your partner's thinking and prevent them from finding a solution to their problems.

So, as you're reflecting on what your partner's said and listening with your heart as well as your head, you can help them identify conflicts they might not even be aware of. Remember to avoid placating your conversation partner or simply saying the nice and easy thing, and instead ask gentle, guided questions which invite them to discover these conflicts on their own. As you begin to probe those blind spots together, you can help your conversation partner turn the negative emotions associated with these blind spots into positive action steps.

Make an Action Plan

But now that you've initiated an honest conversation, determined the goal, and encouraged your partner to reflect on their struggles and explore their blind spots, where do you go from here? It might seem like you've done a lot of work already and you have! But to navigate your way to the end of a successful discomfort zone conversation, a few more steps are required. (You've probably noticed we're not yet finished with our DREAM acronym!)

So, what can you do next? Well, you can start by implementing the "A" part of DREAM, which stands for helping your partner to acknowledge what she's learned at the end of your conversation. Keep in mind that this acknowledgement goes beyond a mere, "I get it now," or, "Oh, thanks!" because both of these are vague and are unconnected to actionable steps for change. Your aim is to motivate your partner to move beyond those noncommittal responses and towards a more concrete solution which will allow them to demonstrate what they've learned.

If it helps, you can think of your objective as being similar to a professor helping a student with a math problem. If your student was struggling with a tricky equation, you wouldn't just give them the answer and be satisfied with a simple, "I've got it now!" Instead, you'd wait patiently with them and ask them to demonstrate their understanding for you. And that's exactly what you should be doing here.

You can put this into practice by asking questions like, "What would you say was the most important part of our conversation?" or "Which part of our conversation was most meaningful to you?" Phrasing the question in different ways such as, "What do you want to differently now, as a result of our conversation?" or, "What did you take away from our talk?" can also help your partner articulate what they've connected with.

And once you both feel that you've come to a satisfying agreement, you can move on to the fifth and final part of our DREAM strategy. Last but not

least, the M represents the importance of making a follow-up plan for successful results. This is where it comes full circle, because in the first step, you determined a goal for the conversation. Now, you can return to that goal and examine how to put it into practice. If your goal was to make a decision, you can now look at how you'll live into that decision and a solidvdate for when that decision will be put into practice. If it was to improve something like time management or performance at work, you should now have actionable steps and a timeline for when and how you'll improve that thing.

However, it's also important to remember that your timeline should fit your partner's needs. If you're wrestling with a really difficult conversation, your partner may need more time to think than can be allotted in the space of one conversation. So, be sensitive to the issue at hand and to your partner's needs, but don't let the conversation end without a plan to develop some concrete action steps— even if that's as simple as scheduling a time to have another discomfort zone conversation.

Final Summary

The discomfort zone can revolutionize the way you conduct difficult conversations by giving you the tools to create a safe space, listen with your head as well as your heart, and to DREAM. Employing these practices will not only make your conversations more successful, they can also make your conversation partners more comfortable and more receptive to what you have to say.



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