

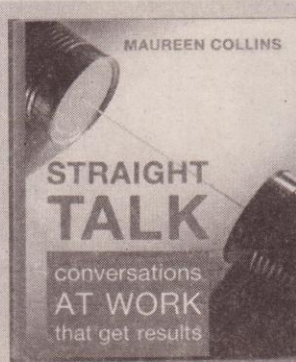
# How to handle difficult office issues

**Straight Talk at Work,**  
Maureen Collins

**I**F you don't confront the difficult issues at work, your team's functioning could deteriorate, collegial relationships could sour, and if your staff do succeed, it will be sheer luck. Few people enjoy initiating the difficult conversations required of a manager, mainly because so few people know how to have these conversations successfully.

Maureen Collins has written what must be one of the most accessible books on this subject. It has a narrative running through the book describing a year in the career of a new head of department and the issues he has to confront. The manager, Michael, confronts problems that practising managers will recognise. There is the young and ambitious Dan who thinks success comes before experience or hard work. There is Peter who didn't get Michael's job. There is the report that wasn't delivered on time, the meetings that don't start on time. The staff member who is lonely and depressed, the unwilling, sexual harassment and more.

Each situation is handled with care and the results are positive. The value of the book is in the text that describes why and how the



**RATING:**  
Readability: Light → Serious  
High ← Low  
Practicality: High → Low

situation needs to be resolved and the steps to doing it. Michael's thought process provides insights that are never trivialised by simple solutions to complex issues. Instead, there is a clear guide cautiously thought through.

The opening chapter of the book



focuses on holding the "right conversations". You cannot solve a problem if you are not clear what it is — really clear — and you are so much more likely to be sidetracked when you are unsure of where the conversation should be heading.

This clarity is the first step in having difficult conversations that produce results. Too many people leap into important conversations without doing enough preparation. Having successful conversations about sensitive issues is rarely an accident; rather, it is the result of thoughtful preparation and careful

execution. It also requires a positive assumption: people come to work to do the best they can — a negative assumption will certainly get the conversation off to a poor start.

The chapter titled *The Facts of the Matter* provides four guidelines that go a long way to avoiding the emotional muddle that most serious conversations devolve into and they are all rooted in using facts correctly. Firstly, when confronting a colleague with the facts, they must be facts, not opinions dressed up as facts: "Your performance has been poor recently" is an opinion, not a

fact. "You have missed your target by 8%" is a fact.

Secondly, use the best facts you have available, and those are usually the most recent. If the issue is an attitude decline, it too must be translated into the facts you have observed: Your punctuality has been declining as evidenced by the number of meetings you are late for and the number of times you have missed deadlines in the past two months.

Thirdly, avoid loading the facts with emotion because people who feel attacked respond with a defence or a counter-attack as a reflex. This fast degenerates from a conversation into what Collins calls "a street fight".

Finally, avoid the temptation to lay out all the facts in an attempt to

make the strongest case possible (then an unreasonable customer). It also enabled the identification of a solution for conditions like this through the use of team support.

Critical to successful conversations is having both people talk. A dialogue is not two monologues! Telling the other person what went wrong and how to correct it has limited application. Most often you work with people who have at least some experience and are closer to what went wrong than you are. Only people who feel safe will engage in a dialogue. Only a dialogue can ensure that the other person understood and has agreed on the solution.

A safe environment requires that you are clear as to what the problem is and that you want a positive out-

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