**Preparing for difficult conversations**

**1 | Don’t avoid it**

There are few people who actively enjoy having difficult conversations. This is hardly surprising – they wouldn’t be called difficult otherwise! While there is always a temptation to avoid tackling the conversation you know you need to have, this should be avoided at all costs. Not only will an important issue remain unresolved, which could hold your team back, but it will also continue to play on your mind while the other party often remains completely in the dark. It is not reasonable to expect someone to change if they are not even aware there is an issue in the first place. Tackling a difficult conversation means that you can start to move things forward and, in most cases, they are often nowhere near as bad as you expect them to be.

**2 | Professional not personal**

Your fundamental aim in any such conversation should be to communicate that the issue is entirely professional and not in any way personal. It is about the quality of their work, not about their value as a person. As Mary Myatt says in her book High Challenge, Low Threat, ‘the underlying message is that “You’re OK, but this aspect of your work needs addressing”.’ To help achieve this, keep the conversation focused on specific examples where their work or conduct has been a cause for concern and try to avoid generalising phrases such as, ‘You always…’.

**3 | Clarity is key**

The person you are speaking with needs to be really clear about exactly what your concern is. Quite often, in a well-meaning attempt to sugar-coat a difficult message, we end up skirting around the issue. To avoid this you can rehearse delivering the key message in unambiguous terms. This doesn’t mean being unkind or impolite – far from it – but if you can’t sum the issue up in one sentence, there is a strong chance it won’t be received as you intended.

**4 | Listen and engage**

It is critical that you invite the person you are talking with to give their perspective on the issue. And, if you are going to ask for their view, you then need to listen very carefully to their response and avoid jumping to conclusions or interrupting. Seeing things from their perspective may not necessarily change your view of the situation, but it should help you understand the underlying cause and therefore improve the chances of finding a solution.

**5 | Avoid a zero-sum game mindset**

These conversations shouldn’t be about a winner and a loser. In the very best conversations, once the issue has been raised there should be a sense of joint problem solving. While this is not possible every time, the aim from the start should be to find a way forward that both parties feel comfortable with. This may require a bit of give and take, but ultimately it increases the chances of a positive long-term outcome.

**6 | Be prepared but remain flexible**

You cannot expect to walk into a high-stakes conversation without any preparation at all and for it to go well. In fact, such an approach is a recipe for disaster. Thinking through what it is that you want to communicate and how you will do this can make all the difference. You may even want to consider in advance what the likely responses will be. However, this comes with a big word of warning: preparation is important, but you need to remain flexible and able to respond to how the conversation develops. An inflexible approach or sticking too rigidly to your ‘script’ gives the impression that you are not listening or engaging with the person you are speaking to.

**7 | Location, location, location**

Think in advance about where you are going to have this conversation. Confidentiality is really important when dealing with tricky issues and should be a primary concern. Is there a quiet space or office where you can speak, knowing you will be uninterrupted? It may be that the person you are speaking with will feel more comfortable in their space rather than coming to your classroom or office.

**8 | Timing is everything**

Consider when the best time of day to tackle the conversation is. Some sencos avoid having these conversations before the start of the day as they can drag on into the morning. Towards the end of the day has the added benefit of meaning people have more time to reflect and consider what was said and then they have to pick up the children meaning there is a natural ending.

**9 | Let silence do the heavy lifting**

As Susan Scott points out in her book Fierce Conversations, there are times when we need to let silence do the heavy lifting in difficult conversations. Many of us will feel deeply uncomfortable with silence, especially in one-to-one conversations. However, try to avoid the very human temptation to fill the silence. It may be that the person you are speaking with needs some time to process what is being said and to formulate a response. It is also highly likely that they are dealing with a whole range of emotions. As uncomfortable as it can feel, silence can be just as important as the words being spoken in these conversations.

**10 | Establish a way forwards**

Bringing these sorts of meetings to a close can be really quite difficult. The aim should be to explore various options and solutions together before agreeing on a way forward. It is also vital to agree a time and date when you will get back together to review how things are going. The sencos are prepared to have these sorts of difficult, but important, conversations with parents and at times colleagues. They know that it is entirely possible to remain kind, polite and to communicate a genuine sense of care and concern for the person they are speaking with, while also addressing the issue at hand with real clarity.