

When Mum is Not the Word!: How to have those difficult conversations

Open communication is simply the sharing of information in an honest, dependable, and transparent manner. It occurs when information flows freely and openly. Thoughts and ideas are not just exchanged, they are built on. Sounds easy, right? But what happens when bad news needs to be shared? Suddenly it is not so easy, is it? The thought of having to have a difficult conversation for most of us is something that we really dread. And unfortunately, too often one party downplays, disguises, and even ignores their responsibility to speak up and communicate unsettling news that really does need to be shared.

Remember when two Boeing 737 jets collided on a runway in the Canary Islands, instantly igniting them both into flames? It is known as the worst accident in the history of civil aviation. What is worse, it could have been avoided. Although the junior copilot knew that his senior captain misunderstood important air-traffic control takeoff instructions, he did not feel “comfortable” challenging his captain! Similarly, the crash of NASA’s Space Shuttle Columbia back in 2003 occurred because an engineer, who identified damage to the shuttle’s wing minutes before the flight was scheduled to take off, did not notify anyone of his discovery as he saw himself as “too low down” in his role at NASA to speak up.

Prefer a less tragic example? Do you recall office manager Michael Gray Scott from the popular American sitcom *The Office*? His off-the-chart need for acceptance and fear of rejection severely hindered his ability to convey even the most vital negative news. In one episode, Scott waits an entire month to notify an employee that the employee has been laid off, and then he attempts to deputize a less senior employee to convey the news.

The Value of Open Communication

Outsourcing engagements come with their own unique challenges, and the success of an outsourcing venture depends on a variety of factors. One such factor is the need for free-flowing communication. Frequent and open communication between a service provider and client fosters a strong outsourcing relationship that ultimately leads to increased value, efficiency, and innovation for the client.

This paper explores what makes difficult conversations between outsourcing parties so challenging and offers guidance on how to prepare for the inevitable difficult conversation along with how to create an environment that makes it easier to “speak up”.

Why is Open Communication so hard?

So, if open communication is key to creating high functioning/productive outsourcing engagements, then why do outsourcing partners have such a hard time communicating difficult information effectively?

Delivering bad news to superiors, to business colleagues, and in personal relationships can be extremely challenging – and outsourcing engagements are no exception. Social psychologists coined the hesitation that most people have about delivering bad news to others as the Minimizing Unpleasant News Effect, also known as the “Mum Effect”. Robert Sutton, an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor, teaches that the *Mum Effect* is due to people simply not wanting to deal with negative emotions from the other party. He believes that the bearer of bad news, even when they are not responsible for it in any sense, fears being blamed and having negative feelings directed at them. The failure for the copilot and

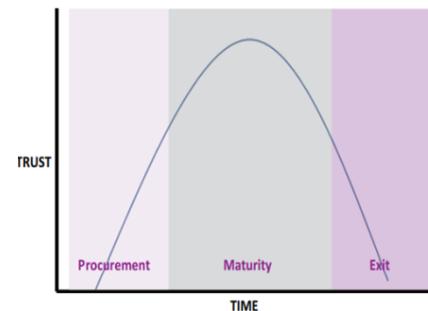
the engineer to sound the alarm and stop a tragedy is attributed to the *Mum Effect*. And don't forget about our *Office* friend, Mr. Scott.

Often fearful a difficult conversation will precipitate bad feelings or create conflict in the relationship, outsourcing partners will avoid these types of conversations. But tough conversations in outsourcing relationships are unavoidable. These relationships have high and low points as the client and service provider's organizations evolve, business circumstances change, and new challenges emerge that impact the outsourced services. Being able to effectively have crucial conversations with your outsourcing partner is fundamental to successful outsourcing. Otherwise, trust erodes between the parties and impedes the engagement from thriving and reaching its full potential.

Psychologists Sidney Rosen and Abraham Tesser conducted an experiment to understand more about what made people so adverse to sharing negative news. In this study, participants were told they would be comparing various products. While working on the task, one group overheard a message that said, "Glenn Lester, please call home immediately for some great news". The second group heard a similar message, but the reference was to bad news. The researchers then had Lester walk right into the room. Only two participants gave him the full information for the bad news condition, compared to nine participants in the good news condition. Those in the bad news condition group were more likely to tell Lester to call home for "news" and they left out what type of news he would be calling about. Rosen and Tesser concluded that the *Mum Effect* occurs specifically because people take purposeful steps to avoid sharing negative information.

Factors that impact Outsourcing Relationships

To complicate matters even more, the length of an outsourcing engagement and the level of trust present is directly correlated to how comfortable the outsourcing partner is with communicating openly. There are three key phases to an outsourcing engagement: the procurement/contract phase, steady state when the relationship hits its maturity phase, and when the contract comes to an end. The Global Outsourcing Association found that the highest level of trust is present during the maturity stage since the delivery environment, governance cadence, and the relationship are usually well established.



So, what can you do?

To feel comfortable to communicate openly, there needs to be what Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson refers to as "*psychological safety*" – the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, mistakes, and most importantly as learned from the previously referenced air disasters concerns. For psychological safety to be present both parties create a safe environment to "speak up". As Edmondson puts it, "it's felt permission for candor."

Edmondson first developed this concept while researching the relationship between error making and teamwork in hospitals. She hypothesized that the more effective the team, the fewer mistakes would be made. Makes sense! But what she found is that teams that reported better teamwork experienced more errors. As she continued her research, she discovered that the sense of safety and willingness to speak up

is not an individual trait, even though it's something you do feel and experience at the individual level; it's an emergent factor of the group/relationship.

Why is it important?

Unmistakably the stakes are not as high in outsourcing engagements as an air disaster, but the relationship does suffer when one party does not feel safe to share both the good and the bad news. Psychological safety is the key factor to fostering healthy outsourcing engagements. The consequence of choosing to stay silent ("mum") has a ripple effect that reaches far beyond the initial difficult news. One party may start using the word "cover-up" to describe the lack of timely and transparent communication and even question the other organization's credibility in other areas of the relationship. *"If they haven't been upfront about this, what else is being hidden?"* Trust erodes.

High levels of psychological safety lead to both parties feeling that their contributions matter and they speak up without fear of retribution – they are confident and comfortable. It also leads to better decision-making, as each party openly voices their opinions and concerns, leading to a more diverse range of perspectives being shared, considered, and built on.



Creating psychological safety, at any phase of an outsourcing relationship, involves being respectful, actively inviting input from the other party, and responding productively to any type of news that is shared – the good and the bad. It is not about being overly nice; it is about behavior. By practicing the behaviors listed below open and timely communication is encouraged from the other party.

- Being respectful and appreciative
- Having each other's backs in all situations
- Providing information timely
- Openly admitting mistakes
- Owning your part of the problem/issue
- Offering honest feedback

What happens when psychological safety does not exist?

As mentioned earlier, we are likely to gravitate towards avoiding difficult conversations because we fear that the outcome will not be pleasant. We hope that the issue just goes away on its own, even though we know that the chance of the issue just vanishing is rather slim. The relationship is put at risk. We have all heard the phrase "*mum's the word*", an expression derived from the humming sound a closed mouth makes, indicating an unwillingness to speak. While keeping quiet may be acceptable in some situations, when it comes to successful outsourcing relationships silence is not golden.

And even worse, when we do overcome the aversion of sharing bad news in a relationship that does not promote experimenting and learning, we end up not preparing for the conversation and jumping right in. It ends up going poorly and impacts your organization's (and your own) credibility. When conversations turn from routine to difficult, our instincts conspire against us. Adrenaline starts pumping, taking away our ability to converse effectively. We react to interpersonal threats the same way we do to physical ones. With a threat registered, the body's instinct is to prepare for physical safety. The brain diverts blood from activities it deems nonessential like thoughtful and respectful communication, to safety tasks like running

and hitting. The large muscles of our arms and legs receive more blood and our poor brain gets less. This diminishes our ability to think clearly - when we need it the most. It's as if our bodies conspire against us. We end up facing the conversations with less intellect and don't articulate well what we are trying to say because the body is preparing to deal with something like a saber-toothed tiger, and not the other party. Sound familiar?

Lessons from the Medical Field

The good news is that these not so good-news conversations don't have to be so hard. By changing your mind-set and learning a few tips, these interactions can turn into productive "comfortable" conversations, even in the absence of psychological safety.

Much of the research on how to effectively deliver bad news is derived from the medical field. Healthcare providers are faced daily with sharing difficult information to their patients, many that they do not know well. These strategies can be easily applied to outsourcing engagements. Healthcare professionals are taught – from the receiver's perspective – that there are four factors to how the patient will receive the news: (i) The news-givers attitude, (ii) the clarity of the message, (iii) the person's ability to answer questions, (iv) and privacy. The first three are vastly relevant to outsourcing.

- i. **Attitude.** Attitude and the clarity of your message are two very important components to the conversation. Although email is often the fastest way to communicate, it is a terrible channel for delivering difficult news. It is best to have a conversation so you can communicate empathically. If the other party becomes angry, show that you understand their feelings. You might say "I understand that you're angry; you have every right to be". Be prepared to propose a solution to the issue. Practice how you will articulate it. Once your meeting begins, you may struggle to think of solutions under pressure. When you have solutions ready to go, it demonstrates that you are focused on moving forward.
- ii. **Be open, clear, and honest.** When it comes to delivering the message, be authentic and compassionate and treat the other party with respect. Don't try to "sugarcoat" the truth; it's best to be forthright and honest about what has happened, and about what you're going to do to make it right. The other party will appreciate this!
- iii. **Ability to respond to questions.** Your outsourcing partner, just like a patient, is going to have questions so try to anticipate their questions in advance, prepare answers, and even more importantly have the right people present to answer them. This goes a long way!

In summary, come to the meeting with solutions, and make sure that you are honest and genuine during the discussion.

Putting it all together and getting "comfortable"

Strong communication strategies from a trusted, experienced partner are central to outsourcing success.

So, if you or your outsourcing counterpart is sharing the good news but withholding the bad news, it's time to hold each other accountable, commit to doing it better, and create an environment of psychological safety. Don't let the lack of communication keep your outsourcing relationship from reaching its full potential.