# Discovering Methods of Giving the Tough Feedback and Getting it Accepted

By Karin Hurt & David Dye

"Delivering tough feedback is fun," said no one ever. No one wakes up thinking, "You know what I'm really looking forward to today? Talking to John about how his dysfunctional behaviors are impacting the team."

We avoid the tough conversations because we're scared, or we rely on outdated models like the "sandwich technique." We like to call this, "diaper genie" feedback because it is when stinky issues are covered up in self-protecting layers of spin, avoidance, and nice words that let the real issues fester.

Here's the question: If you knew your manager really cared about you and wanted you to be successful, would you want to hear her perspective? Would you want her to tell you the truth—even if it was difficult to hear? When we ask this question across organizations to managers around the world, we find the answer is an overwhelming, "yes!" Yet, in those same organizations, we consistently find managers avoiding important performance conversations, either because they're afraid or don't know how to have them.

Help Your Managers Master the Art of the Tough Conversations

TIME TO iMPROVE
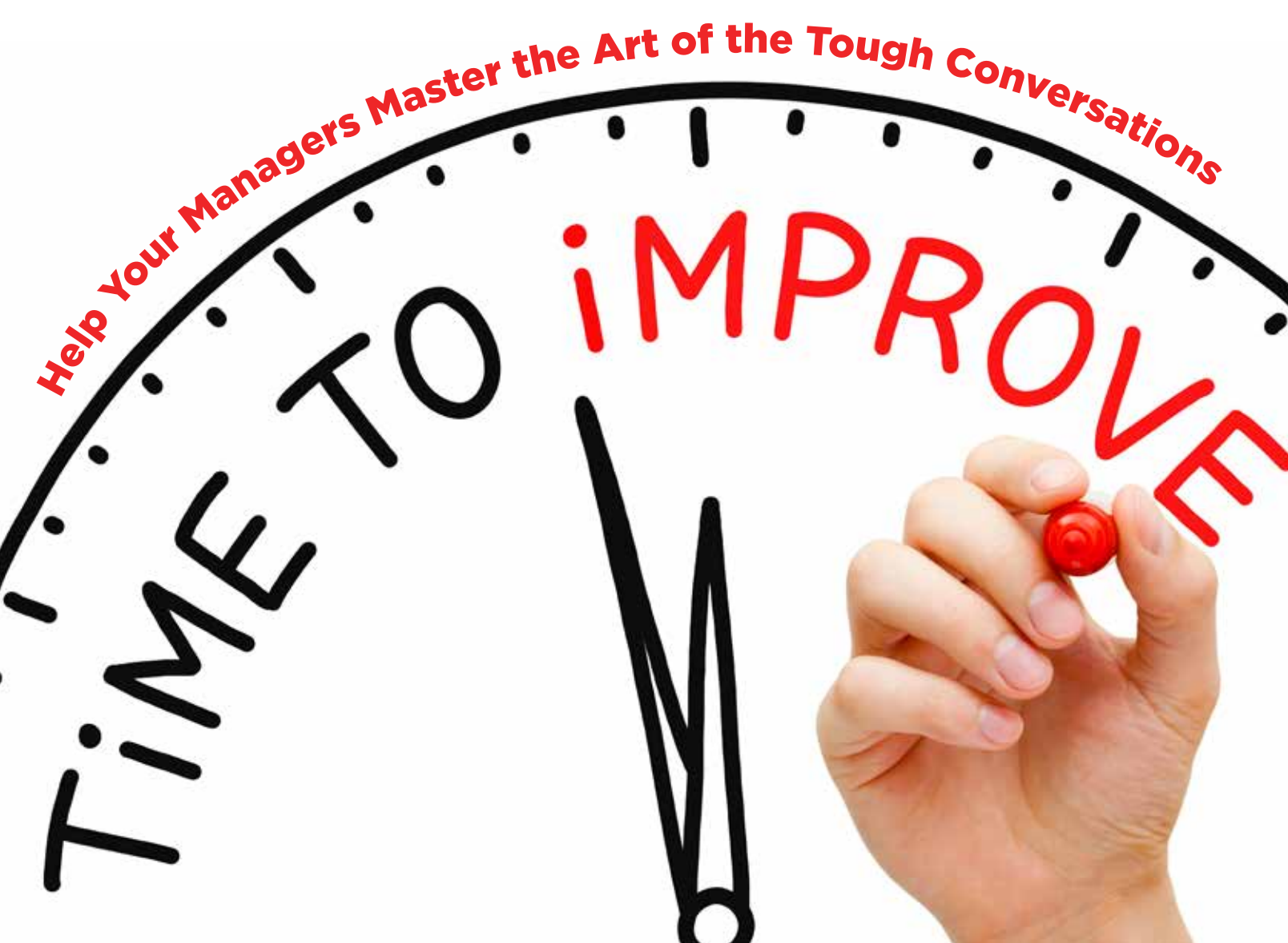
It's the same phenomena Zenger and Folkman discuss in their 2014 Harvard Business Review article where 92 percent of people agree that, if delivered appropriately, negative feedback is effective at improving their performance. In other words, people want to know when they're messing up—but in a way that inspires, rather than deflates, their motivation to improve. But how is this done effectively? Next, we go over various ways to build a culture where people embrace the tough conversations.

Meet Them Where They Are

As an HR leader, you know the nuances of giving difficult feedback. So how do you develop your managers and help them diagnose what's needed most as they prepare for a tough conversation?

Managers should take a step back and consider what's needed most on a confidence/competence continuum. Is your employee highly confident and competent and maybe just a bit bored or frustrated? Then consider how you can challenge her. On the other hand, if her confidence overshadows her competence, a coaching conversation is your best bet. Of course, if the reverse is true, and your competent, hard-working employee is struggling with a lack of confidence, encourage them. And if they're lacking both confidence and competence, it's time to get more directive through training and performance management.

The I.N.S.P.I.R.E. Model for Giving Tough Feedback

The I.N.S.P.I.R.E. feedback model draws attention to performance issues, encourages mutual discussion, and confirms commitment to new behavior. Through short, specific conversations about what must change, leaders turn negative feedback conversations into engaging accountability talks. These talks preserve—and, over time, enhance—the health of their relationships with the people they lead.

Initiate

Initiate the conversation in a respectful manner. Traditional feedback models often start with the person giving the feedback asking for permission. For example, you might ask a colleague, "Can we talk about what happened with this deliverable?" Feedback is best received when you've been welcomed to provide it.

Sometimes, though, the conversation isn't optional. You may need to be more direct. Even in those instances, you can still establish respect. For example, you might say, "I need to talk with you today. Is this a convenient time or would you prefer this afternoon?" Initiate accountability conversations as close to the moment of concern as possible. Don't wait three days to address a missed deadline or heated conversation. Take care of the issue at the first opportunity.

Notice

Next, share your concern or observation. Imagine you were watching a video of the concerning behavior, what would you see? Describe that scene. Some examples are as follows:

> (a) "I've noticed that you agreed to a deliverable beyond this project's parameters."

> (b) "I've noticed that you haven't weighed in on the contingency plan I posed."

We're very deliberate in using the word "notice" because we want to focus on concrete behaviors/evidence. You can't notice an attitude; you can only notice a behavior.

Support

Provide specific, supporting evidence of the behavior you'd like to change. Continuing our examples:

> (a) "We agreed that all additional requests from the client would be discussed before being agreed to. That discussion did not happen."

> (b) "I asked for your feedback or approval within two weeks, but I haven't received a response from you."

How to Have a Tough Conversation

Knowing the right conversation to have is an important start, but having the tough conversation takes additional skills.

Giving critical feedback isn't easy, especially if you're new at it. But it doesn't need to be half as hard as many managers think. One tip is to keep it short, specific, and timely. Every good feedback conversation has to accomplish three goals:

1. Draw attention to the issue

2. Create a two-way dialogue about it

3. Inspire and confirm the commitment to new behavior

How do you do all that as efficiently as possible without leading to hurt feelings? The I.N.S.P.I.R.E. model below includes seven steps that can help you prepare for and deliver your feedback in a way that's a bit easier to hear and is more likely to lead to sustained behavior change.

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Probe

After you present the situation, the other person needs a chance to talk. Ask a question in a neutral, curious tone to allow her to share, like, "What's going on?" or "Why did you miss the deadline?"

Occasionally there will be an understandable reason for the poor performance. For example, the person may be struggling with family issues. The probe helps you to gain a more thorough understanding of the whole scene and what must happen next.

Invite

Once the other person has had a chance to share his thoughts, invite him to solve the issue. Start with a review of the expectations, and then ask for his thoughts on how to resolve the problem. If he can't come up with an effective solution, you can provide specific suggestions on how the situation could be handled.

Sometimes you may discover that people simply need more training about how to manage their emotions, energy, and time effectively.

Review

Next, ask one or two questions to check for understanding. You want to make sure your message and solutions were interpreted correctly. Also, ask him to secure commitment and to recap the specific commitment (e.g., "Would you please recap what you're going to do next time?").

Enforce

The final step is to enforce the behavior while reinforcing your confidence that the employee can do this. For instance, you might conclude with: "I have all the confidence that you can do this well."

When behavior doesn't change, it's often because the feedback is too vague, or the conversation goes so long that the employee forgets what she needs to do.

Helping your managers get better at the art of the tough conversation will lead to stronger results and build more trusting and productive relationships.