

FAST ASK: Simplifying Challenging Conversations



How to handle difficult discussions with tact and respect.

BY AMANDA ORTLIP

>> One of life's biggest challenges—both professionally and personally—is opening yourself up to difficult conversations. While such discussions are rarely fun, they play a crucial role in building and maintaining meaningful relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to have the means to approach and handle these discussions tactfully and respectfully.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Personally, I can recall having a challenging conversation with an employee that didn't go well. At the time, I was giving annual performance evaluations to the 10 employees I managed, and I had to tell one of my direct reports that he was not meeting expectations in three of the five core competencies. Despite him and I having worked together for a year to improve his performance, he was continuously missing his goals with no signs of improvement.

Rather than lead this review—which was a “make-it-or-break-it” conversation—with facts, my natural tendencies took over, and I led with my feelings. I started the conversation with “I feel badly,” “I can only imagine how you feel,” “This always seems to happen,” and so on. While I did feel all these things, as I valued this employee and wanted to see him thrive, my focus on feelings and blanket statements did

not effectively get my message across that changes were needed.

The conversation would have been much more effective if I had opened with the facts, clearly outlining missed deadlines and sales goals, and stating how I had received multiple internal and external customer complaints about him. Stating facts, which cannot be disputed, and then sharing my feelings and story, I imagine would have resulted in a far better outcome than what was actually achieved—a highly charged, debated conversation that needed to be revisited several times.

“FAST ASK” APPROACH

These days, I follow the “FAST ASK” acronym when having any type of uncomfortable discussion. I was introduced to this acronym by its creator, Marty Babbington—a highly decorated and respected industry trainer. She created this acronym to help the team prepare for and deliver challenging, yet meaningful, conversations. FAST ASK stands for:

- FA = Facts
- ST = Story
- ASK = Ask the question.

Basically, it serves as a reminder to (1) simply state the facts; (2) tell your story, including how the topic may impact people around you; and (3) ask for the behavior change that needs to

happen. It's that simple—and it works! Let's take a deeper dive into each component of FAST ASK.

FA = Facts. Bringing emotion into a difficult conversation can derail your message quickly. Emotion is subjective and can easily be debated depending on each person's perspective. Stick to the facts! Facts cannot be disputed and help keep emotion out of the conversation.

Prior to the conversation, gather all the facts that surround the scenario you will be discussing. Be specific about the scenario and list the facts that support your claim. You may have a dozen examples to share, and it's good to be clear about those details, but I would advise selecting only three that will drive your message home. You want to make a point, not break someone's spirit.

ST = Story. The story is typically where a challenging conversation can fall apart, especially if it's where you begin your discussion. The story is what you tell yourself is happening based on the behaviors of the person being coached. It's your perception.

By first providing the facts, you now have the foundation to share your story in the conversation. Explain how that person's behavior is impacting him- or herself, you and/or the team,

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and/or patients. This “story” should help the person to understand why his or her behavior might need to be corrected. It is an opportunity for you to explain how things may be perceived.

ASK = Ask. At this point in the conversation, you must ask for what you need from that person. To do this, you need to have a clear understanding of what you are trying to get out of the conversation. Is it a change in behavior? Is it simply an answer to a question? Ask for what you need to help change that person’s behavior and/or move your relationship forward.

APPLYING FAST ASK

Now that you understand each component, let’s examine how you would apply FAST ASK in a practical setting. Below are two scenarios that you may encounter—an employee who is consistently late for work and an employee who is asking for a pay raise. Here’s what you can say to manage each conversation successfully following the FAST ASK approach.

SCENARIO NO. 1: A TARDY EMPLOYEE

FACTS

Leader: Megan, we need to talk about what’s been happening with you showing up late to work. This has been a consistent problem that has been happening for three months. Here is a list of dates you have shown up late with the excuse you provided:

- 12/20/2018: “There was an accident on the roadway, and I got stuck in traffic.”
- 1/14/2019: “My child’s school

had a delayed opening, and I had to stay with her.”

- 2/8/2019: “My car wouldn’t start this morning.”

STORY

Leader: When you show up late to work and use excuses, it paints a picture to me and the rest of the team that you don’t care. It sets the wrong example for others and gives them the impression that showing up late to work is okay. This also creates extra work for your team members and incites hostility. In addition, showing up late to work impacts the patient experience, and this is a critical part of our business.

ASK

Leader: You are a valuable part of the team. We need you to be here to help out and provide our patients with an excellent experience. Starting now, through the end of the year, you will be expected to show up to work on time. If you show up late again, you will receive a verbal warning. The second time you are late, you will receive a written warning, and the third instance will be grounds for termination. What is your commitment to what we are asking you to do?

SCENARIO NO. 2: AN EMPLOYEE ASKS FOR A PAY INCREASE

FACTS

Leader: Sally, you have been asking for an increase in your compensation, and I wanted to meet with you to discuss this. As you know, the practice conducts performance reviews on an annual basis. The purpose of those reviews is to give us a specific time to discuss performance and compensa-

tion. In the two years you have been with us, you have exceeded expectations, and you have received two increases in pay since we hired you. At your current salary, you are paid above the industry average.

STORY

Leader: You are a valuable part of this team, and we take great strides to make sure that we compensate everyone well. The fact that you’re asking for an increase in pay at this time comes as a surprise, and it seems that you feel you are being underpaid for the job you are doing.

ASK

Leader: I would ask you to continue your excellent work, and we will revisit compensation at our annual performance review.

CLEAR PATH FORWARD

In an ideal world, difficult conversations wouldn’t have to take place. The reality, though, is tough conversations—like those mentioned above—are a necessary part of life, especially in a leadership position. When having challenging conversations, apply FAST ASK to remove any unnecessary drama from the situation and reach a clear path forward. ■

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