



*Building High Performance in People and Organizations.*



# Stepping into Difficult Conversations with Confidence and Skill: The D-I-R-E-C-T Model

*An Accelerating Excellence White Paper*

In the 1990s, a woman reported to me who managed an Adult Day Health Center. At the time we had about 6 seniors but had the capacity for 40. From time to time I would ask her what could be done to increase the patient population. She would give me reasons why the census was so low. She talked about the lack of public transportation, the poor marketing, and insufficient hours the center was open. One day, out of frustration, I said to her, "You know, you really have a victim mentality."

She was insulted by the comment. For the next hour we had an emotionally draining, non-productive conversation. I suggested we suspend the discussion and take it up later when we were in a different frame of mind.

At 8 o'clock the next morning, she knocked on my office door. She sat down with tears in her eyes and a dictionary in hand. In an effort to convince me that she was not a victim, she read the literal definition.

I handled a difficult conversation poorly. I made the conversation much bigger and worse than it needed to be. What if I had simply asked, "given the obstacles you are facing, what could you specifically do to increase patient census?"

Do you see how that approach is much simpler, more direct and constructive?

Most managers do a poor job of addressing poor employees or they avoid the conversation altogether. They are either too blunt and general, like I was in the example above, or they are too nice and indirect.

I believe the reason is lack of training. Many managers are promoted from staff positions with little training to prepare them for their new job. Their new job requires a completely different skill set.

It has been my pleasure for the last 15 years to teach managers how to conduct difficult conversations. The goal is to help managers step into these challenging conversations with confidence and competence.

## The D-I-R-E-C-T Model

I have created a model that guides managers through difficult conversations and often leads to positive behavior change. I call it the DIRECT Model. Here's the structure.

### **D stands for Describe the behavior.**

Stick with the facts. Describe what you saw or heard. Don't generalize or label. Think of the difference between these two statements:

- You are constantly late. It doesn't seem like you care about your job.
- In the last two weeks you have been late 3 times by an average of 10 minutes.

Keep the conversation focused. Don't make it bigger than it needs to be. Facts are most persuasive and least insulting.

### **I stands for solicit Input.**

Once you describe the facts, ask the reason for the behavior. The conversation should be a dialogue not a lecture. Frequently, employees will give a lame excuse or point to someone else's bad behavior, but there may be a good reason. What if an employee has been late because their mother is dying, and they don't want to leave the house until the hospice nurse arrives?

## **R stands for Remind of the goal.**

Whether it is a lame or legitimate reason, it is important to remind the employee of the desired behavior.

### **For example:**

- It is important that you are here at 7 am every morning.
- It is important that you are collaborative and easy to work with.
- It is important that you convey to our customers that they are valued.

## **E stands for state the Effect.**

Tell the employee the consequences of their behavior: on the customer, on the department, on the organization or on them. Many employees don't see the connection between their behavior and the negative impact it creates.

### **Be specific. For example:**

- When you are late, you miss out on important information communicated in our daily huddle and you keep customers waiting.

## **C stands for Collaborate on solutions.**

Most managers think they need to come up with a solution to the poor behavior. That is up to the employee. It is their responsibility to own the behavior and make positive change. Ask the employee what they plan to do differently to improve their performance.

### **For example:**

- What can you do to insure you are here at 7 am every morning?
- What can you do differently next time, so the customer is pleased with your service?

## **T is for follow Through.**

Rather than just hope that the employee responds appropriately, it is important to follow up. Set a time to meet again to discuss progress. If the employee has responded positively, give them recognition. If the issue persists, it is time to turn up the intensity by explaining the consequences of continued poor performance.

If you feel an employee doesn't understand the urgency of the issue, here is a great phrase to use:

I need someone in this position who will. . . .

- . . . be here at 7am every morning.
- . . . be collaborative and work well with others.
- . . . consistently deliver outstanding service to our customers.

There is a lot of focus today on employee engagement and employee accountability plays an important part. High performers look at poor performers as excess baggage as they often have to pick up the slack. If managers don't candidly and professionally address poor performers, good employees will resent the unfairness.

Failure to address performance issues will also hinder organizational excellence. Team collaboration and service to the customer will suffer. One person cannot make a team, but one person can break a team. It is important for managers to step into difficult conversations with confidence and skill.

Del Gilbert is the founder of Accelerating Excellence. He speaks, trains and consults on building high-performance in people and organizations. His dynamic communication style is clear, practical and engaging. He delivers nearly 100 keynotes, workshops and presentations annually.

Del has held leadership positions in several organizations for 30 years. He served as Chief Learning Officer at St. Joseph Healthcare for 15 years. While at St. Joseph, employee engagement ranked in the upper 20% nationally. In addition, all 6 service lines were ranked in the upper 30% in Patient Satisfaction.

Del holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a Masters of Business Administration. He is a Certified Leadership Coach and a Certified Master Trainer.



### **The Accelerating Excellence Podcast and Blog**

Del's bi-weekly podcast, Accelerating Excellence with Del Gilbert, can be heard on iTunes, Google Play, Spotify and Stitcher. He also has a bi-weekly blog that can be found at [delgilbert.com](http://delgilbert.com).



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