



MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AND UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR

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CONTEXT

To protect the confidentiality of our client, we have anonymised this overview of how holding high impact conversations can have a profoundly positive impact on the people working in an emotionally charged working environment. The training programme highlighted was for an enterprise level organisation that provide support to the customers across a wide range of challenging situations.

An inevitable aspect of these events mean that people are often in distress, going through traumatic events are therefore likely to show a range of emotions including frustration, desperation, panic and anger. Because of the emotion involved, these situations can sometimes be very challenging for staff to manage. It's important that they are able to recognise this, and are equipped with the skills to deal with those difficult communications, both practically and emotionally.

To enhance the learning experience, this organisation decided that preparing their customer facing teams to tackle these situations in the real world through Practice Sessions would be the most effective strategy. This is where we come in: bringing these situations to life with professional actors; providing in-the-moment feedback and coaching in a psychologically safe space; and facilitating peer-to-peer learning and support, as the learners draw upon their own experiences (anonymously of course) to give feedback to their colleagues.

Our client highlighted that for their customer facing teams, difficult conversations tend to manifest in two distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, ways. Firstly, conversations that are emotional, which can involve delivering difficult messages and dealing with customers who are going through periods of extreme stress. The second type of difficult conversation may well stem from the first; in cases of high stress or fear, people can defer to anger, blame, and in some cases abusive or offensive language and behaviour, in order to cope. This is often directed at the staff providing the support services. The emphasis of this learning programme is not only to support the learners in professionally and empathetically supporting and communicating with these individuals, but also to help them recognise their own boundaries, draw the line at unacceptable behaviour, and protect their mental wellbeing.

DEVELOPMENT

As is typical of our approach to bespoke projects, our Production Team and Designer scheduled group research calls with the client's learning team and a selection of their highly experienced staff from various locations. We wanted to ensure that the forum theatre script and practice scenarios were sensitively, but realistically, written, and that they were covering the most valuable and relevant topics for participants.

We agreed with the client on these scenarios, utilising language and insight from customer facing staff to ensure that they felt real and recognisable to participants. In particular, the forum theatre script depicting a call from a person under extreme stress was carefully constructed using experience from support staff. Our Writer/Designer is also a mental health first aider, and drew upon that training to ensure the language and learning was appropriate.

It was key to the psychologically safe space that was integral to the success of the programme. Participants were told from the start that they could stop the practice at any time, request breaks at any time, and whilst they should challenge themselves, ultimately they could do what they needed to feel safe and supported.

INNOVATION

The biggest technological challenge that this programme faced was the implementation of a virtual rollout. It goes without saying that these types of conversations, particularly around stressful topics, are typically best done in person. However, with such a large number of learners in different locations to deliver to, this wasn't going to be an option.

In particular, the forum theatre script depicted a phone call, as this is a common way for users to engage with customer facing staff. This is more challenging to manage, as there are no body language cues, or facial expressions, and it can be hard to read emotion if the connection is erratic. For this conversation, our actor playing the customer facing staff kept their video camera on, as if they were a colleague of the participants, sitting next to them at a desk, whilst the actor playing the service user kept their camera off. This meant that the actor playing the service user had to convey the complexities of the brief through voice alone, details of which were facilitated out in discussion after it played out.

Ultimately, we used the technology in our favour, rather than seeing it as a hindrance; if we could more accurately depict the likely communications that customer facing staff would have with a service user via virtual technology, then that would make the experience all the more beneficial.

For each delivery, we also had a Wellbeing Room set up, which was a separate breakout room should a participant feel overwhelmed and want to talk to a Facilitator away from the rest of the group. However, we never needed to use it; any participant who needed a moment felt comfortable expressing that in their breakout room, which we felt to be a positive reflection of the supportive environments created in those spaces, despite being virtual.

CONTENT

Experiential learning, in the form of forum theatre and breakout practice with actor-facilitators, is an excellent tool to play out difficult and stressful scenarios in a safe and controlled environment. This type of theatre allows participants to explore intense emotions and situations, without the risk of causing actual psychological harm. Using this method of experiential learning delivery is an excellent way to let our clients engage first-hand with the reality of difficult situations, and to help them develop these skills without the fear of real life consequences.

Forum theatre can be an immensely powerful tool for making positive change, both on an individual and on a customer experience level. It eases participants into the idea of engaging with actors, without asking them, in this instance, to step too far out of their comfort zone to begin with. Following on from forum theatre in plenary, engaging in real-play or practice in smaller groups allows for individual feedback, the chance to redo sections of their chosen scenario, and ultimately try different ways of approaching and managing a difficult conversation, without consequence. Participants could choose from one of the research scenarios, for which the actors had learnt briefs, or they could create an entirely bespoke scenario in the breakout room with their Actor-Facilitator.

Rolling out this training creates an aligned customer service reach for our client. Employees are armed with the same knowledge and learning, no matter where they are located. This ensures that there is a consistent human approach to their work, with consistent messaging. In addition, having a standardised learning programme makes it easier to onboard new employees and transfer existing employees to different locations. As a result, our client is able to provide high-quality customer service.

FEEDBACK



The client shared with us some of the written feedback that the participants sent to them directly. It's worth noting that the below feedback was volunteered, not solicited, by the participants and is quoted verbatim.

"I attended the skills practise session with an actor yesterday. I found it very useful, actually not scary at all. I completely understand colleagues who have said that they are not keen to do roleplay, but this was not roleplay, more like an opportunity to practise difficult conversations. I took away some really useful tips, and I am happy that I took part."

"Thanks so much for the opportunity to do this. I don't know what I was expecting when I joined the call yesterday but I was surprised by the kindness, warmth and professionalism of the actors we had. Their expertise is amazing and it was great to have such tailored and individual coaching and feedback on our customer interactions. I did find the role play difficult and challenging, even uncomfortable at times but the encouragement, positive reinforcement and really useful reflective points that I could take away and use made it all worthwhile. It really was up there with some of the best learning experiences I've had so, honestly, thanks so much for the experience."

"I also joined the session yesterday and found it to be very interesting, I really enjoyed it and felt very much at ease with the actors."

"I really enjoyed it as well. Really insightful. I was a bit exhausted after my 2 hours with the actor but well worth it!"

"I have completed the workshop today and would just like to share my positive experience and encourage colleagues to sign up for the full session. I am happy to have chosen to stay all the way through and take part in all exercises. It was not as nearly stressful as I expected it to be, far less than any of the role play exercises I took part before. Work in breakrooms with one of the trainers/actors and 2-3 colleagues felt to be a safe, friendly, supportive environment to practise different scenarios together. I loved the possibility to pause conversations even after just couple of minutes, discuss it, get comments from trainer and colleagues, then rewind the same situation if you would like to do try it differently or simply continue from there. I found all the conversations in the breakout room with the trainer/actor and colleagues in my breakout room helpful and valuable. I have felt relaxed and glad to be there, to be given a privileged opportunity to try out myself and observe conversations from everyday situations we experience in our work, but this time with some additional insight and tips. Thank you for designing and organising this for us."

"I completed the workshop yesterday, I found it extremely useful, especially the breakout groups. It gave me a great opportunity to learn new skills and to receive constructive feedback from both the trainer and from few but valuable and experienced colleagues. Thank you."

OUTCOMES

Whilst no quantitative ROI or evaluation was collected, the client shared with us that internally our Practice Sessions received 100% positive feedback from all 11 deliveries, rolled out by our associates.

These sessions will continue to be run at regular intervals throughout the year going forward, to ensure that new support staff are provided with the same learning and practice opportunities as their colleagues. Their jobs remain challenging but we will continue to work to ensure they are supported in dealing with those pressures.





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