HAVING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

A toolkit for students, early career architects, practices, and Schools of Architecture

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THE POWER OF LEARNING

EMPOWERING MINDS, SHAPING FUTURES

WHAT THIS LICENCE MEANS

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INTRODUCTION

Frequently, I have been approached by architecture students who are having a difficult time during their practice experiences. This is because they are facing working cultures which don't align with their values and are experiencing behaviours which are not conducive to getting the best out of them.

Sometimes, these behaviours are in the form of microaggressions, rooted in racism or sexism or homophobia. Sometimes, the working culture is excessive hours for no pay. Sometimes, it's just out-and-out bullying.

When we're trying to make our way in a new career, we need to be able to call-out and call-in these behaviours, in a constructive way, so those responsible can take responsibility, and those receiving can manage their way forward.

This is what this resource is here to help you with.

Having challenging conversations isn't easy – that's why they're challenging!

There can be a number of factors at play; the subject matter of the conversation, the power or authority dynamic between employee and employer, racial and gender dynamics, cultural values around hierarchy, direct and indirect communicators, styles of leadership and conflict management approaches… and the list goes on.

A resource like this is a starting point for developing better working relationships where you fully understand the perspective of the other in the conversation, and can navigate the factors at play, and come to compassionate and workable solutions.

There is no single answer to how to have challenging conversations well, but when you have nothing to help you, such challenges can go unchallenged, and that leads to other problems and frustrations.

The conversational frameworks provided here are a guide, not an answer, and I recommend you seek to improve your own emotional and cultural intelligence, mindful that leadership, as well as speaking up, requires vulnerability, so compassion should abound on all sides.

The tools included here are an abridged version of some of the tools and wider explanations around inclusive behaviours which are in my book, *Building Inclusion: A Practical Guide to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Architecture and the Built Environment (pub: Routledge, August 2024)*. You'll be able to find out more on what is cultural intelligence and how cultural intelligence is a key behavioural skill for leaders and teams, in there.

GIVING CHALLENGING FEEDBACK

Both the giving and receiving of feedback can be discomforting.

If we need to give feedback to others about their behaviours, we need to do this contemporaneously. Ideally in person, face-to face. If that is not possible, it should be on camera. If, for whatever reason, it cannot be done contemporaneously, it needs to be properly noted at the time, so the feedback can be accurately given. Feedback should always be specific and targeted. When it's vague, it may be rooted in unhelpful bias.

First of all:
Specify that you'd like to have a feedback conversation. Ask if you can do it, there and then. If not there and then, ask when would be a good time, as soon as possible.

You may have come across the COIN or BIFF method of having difficult conversations, and I subscribe to these when it comes to delivering feedback, focussing on the incident and specific example, rather than generics and not imbuing feelings with value judgements.

Context: the circumstances, event or issue that you want to discuss.

Observation: specific, factual descriptions of what has happened.

Impact: how the event or issue that you're discussing affects others in your team or organisation.

Next steps: a clear agreement on the changes or improvements in behaviour or performance that you expect going forward.

Or

Behaviour: Describe the behaviour that occurred

Impact: Describe the impact of that behaviour on you, others, wider circumstances, short/medium/long term effects

Feeling: take ownership of the feelings the impact had on you and share those

Future: How would you like things done differently in future?

For example, *"During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and you cut me off and spoke over me. When you did that, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group. It made me feel devalued and that my opinion wasn't wanted. Next time, I would like to be allowed to finish my point before you begin yours. Would you agree to that?"*

This is very direct. I recognise that those who have more indirect communication styles would find this more difficult to do. However, when it is less clear the recipient may not understand what you are trying to say. If your indirect style doesn't allow you to feel this technique can work for you, I would urge you to ask the recipient of the feedback to reflect back at you what it is they think you are saying to them, so both parties can be clear what is being said.

MANAGING YOUR DISCOMFORT
WITH THEIR DISCOMFORT

When giving feedback, about a microaggression or behaviour that has made you uncomfortable, this does require you to be vulnerable. I recognise this is not easy. Trust me, I know, it can be very uncomfortable, and it doesn't get easier, especially if you have to speak to a close colleague or friend, but we have to give people the opportunity to learn and change.

You can prepare by talking it through with a supportive ally (not a person who will tell you "Don't bother, they didn't really mean it"). Have the ally to hand to practice the conversation and think through the different responses.

When you have the conversation, you may face tears from the recipient of the feedback, especially if the situation is about racism. In which case, you have to have some patience, but it doesn't mean you shouldn't continue with the conversation, or row back on the impact their behaviour has had.

"Research shows that talking about racial issues with people of other races is particularly stressful for whites, who may feel they have to work harder to sidestep the minefields. Their physical signs of distress are measurable: Heart rates go up, blood vessels constrict, their bodies respond as if they were preparing for a threat. They demonstrate signs of cognitive depletion, struggling with simple things like word-recognition tasks".

I'd argue that this is not just true of some white people, but people socialised in whiteness too.

What we all do about this requires deep thought, care, and humanity. We are all victims of the system of racism, as recipients or upholders. This is why I don't think it's possible to be 'comfortable with being uncomfortable'; instead we can only recognise, be self-aware and consciously lean into our discomfort to achieve the opportunities in learning and growth. That isn't a comfort process.

If we think we're comfortable, we're probably being complacent.

RECIPIENTS OF FEEDBACK

It is very important to note power and authority, gender and racial dynamics in these conversations, and be hugely self-aware of how it may feel for the person giving you the feedback. Ask yourself, how much of a step out of their comfort zone might this be for them? Think about these things before, during and after such conversations.

If asked for a feedback conversation:

- Prioritise it and try to take the initial feedback immediately.

- If you really can't do there and then, find time for the initial feedback, even if just 5 minutes, within the next few working hours.

- You can hear the initial feedback and seek another longer meeting for clarification.

MISTAKES

When you are receiving feedback embrace the learning opportunity and lean into the discomfort.

Sometimes we know we've made a mistake, and the moment can eat us up inside, sometimes haunting us later at unexpected moments; remember Maya Angelou – forgive yourself for not knowing something before you learned it, and laugh at yourself, "how silly I was to do such a thing! Thank goodness I now know to do better!" Repeat this to yourself and the anxiety will pass.

My framework for managing mistakes, helps achieve its goals if delivered contemporaneously. If you realise the mistake before it has been fed back to you, say sorry, straightaway, and show you mean it by describing the mistake and what you'd be doing differently to avoid it in the future. I developed this framework after considering what it means to be cancelled and the difference between being cancelled and not.

If mistakes are raised with you, or feedback is given, I recommend the following:

Acknowledge - when being told things have gone wrong, try not to be defensive. Instead, recognise the impact as having been different from the intention and acknowledge a mistake has been made and apologise with meaning.

Listen - really hear what is being said to you about the issue and what that impact has been. Listen to understand, not to respond.

Learn - thank them and tell them you're going away to learn from the experience. Take away that feedback and go away to learn more about the context and any wider issues at play.

Reflect - reflecting on what has been learned makes experience more productive. Reflection builds one's confidence in the ability to achieve a goal, which in turn translates into higher rates of learning.

Return – go back to the person who gave you the feedback and tell them what you've learned and thank them for providing you with the valuable opportunity. Growing from such a journey is powerful and you can feel the benefit of personal change when you do so. The more you accept when you are wrong, the easier it is to deal with discomfort and defensiveness in future.

If you find yourself making the same mistake again, you have to go through the cycle again. But it becomes more difficult each time if you keep on making the same mistake, to be taken seriously if you apologise, so then you have to find the procedural change that will stop you from repeating the mistake over and over again in future.

ORGANISATIONAL MISTAKES
& REPUTATIONAL DAMAGE

Organisationally, if the mistake is a public or an internal one:

- Keep acknowledging the mistake for as many times as necessary, as promptly as you can. Make sure the acknowledgement is on all appropriate platforms.

- Reiterate your acknowledgement even when people come to your defence. Remember, being inclusive isn't about the loudest voices or just the ones we agree with.

- You can apologise for the impact of your mistake when you have a good intention that needs to be reframed or better communicated in future.

- State your process for reviewing what happened.

- Give a timeline for reverting with learnings and clear next steps.

- Invite a working party to review with you, especially if your usual internal processes involve the same people who created the issue in the first place.

- Stick to the timeline with a clear response with procedures to avoid the same in future.

This places your organisation in a far stronger reputational position than repeatedly making the same mistakes and hunkering down when you do. It also helps with your attracting a diversity of talent to your organisation, as underrepresented groups, in particular, appreciate transparency, learning, and seeing evidence and demonstration of an inclusive culture.

HOW TO LISTEN

There are different ways of listening which we all adopt at different times for different reasons. It can be useful to explicitly understand this in order to do it effectively, especially when being told something we'd rather not hear.

LISTEN AS AN ALLY

Deb Barnard of Relational Dynamics 1st, an incredible coach and mentor, refers to The Five Levels of Active Listening, which is useful to understand when coaching someone or supporting as an ally:

Level One: Me Now – waiting for our turn to speak: This is us planning what we're going to say while the speaker is talking – so not really listening at all. We're just waiting for the other person to draw breath so we can interject

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and I was cut off. When that happened, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group."

"Yeah, the project is progressing and we should think about other work we should be winning."

Level Two: Just Like Me! – Sharing our experience: Relating what they're saying back to your own experience, so your reply is about you. This is how most normal conversations are conducted. And when looking for validation and sharing, it makes sense.

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and I was cut off. When that happened, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group."
"Ugh, that happens to me all the time. Last week, I was with them and I was trying to talk about…"

Level Three: Do It Like Me – giving advice: Listening to what the speaker is saying and giving them advice. This is still about you, not them, and possibly as irritating as Level One.

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and I was cut off. When that happened, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group."

"If I were you, I'd just keep talking, getting louder until you're heard…"

Level Four: Encouraging – eliciting more: This is listening to what the speaker is saying and inviting more. This can expand thinking. People often work these things out while they are talking. If you interrupt with anything other than encouragement, you may disrupt the process.

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and I was cut off. When that happened, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group." "What happened next…?"

Level Five: Active Listening – engaging with silence: This is listening behind the words and between the words; listening to the silences; using your intuition:

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and I was cut off. When that happened, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group."

"So you felt unheard. What else was going on there for you?" "I withdrew into myself and I didn't end up sharing my idea." "What are you thinking of doing about this?" "Next time, I could try sharing again, but in a different way, or at a different time, making the point that I tried to do so earlier when I was interrupted". "Let me know if you'd like to practice that".

LISTEN WHEN
RECEIVING FEEDBACK

If you are the recipient of feedback putting yourself at Level Five listening can be a stretch, but I urge you to practice this type of listening constantly, so that when feedback comes, you're able to adopt the right listening style.

There may well be reasons for your behaviour, but by listening and understanding first, the other person feels heard and you can more effectively progress the conversation when you reflect on the impact - not intention – of your behaviour.

You may well feel defensive, but be self-aware, and force yourself to listen to what is being said to you.

e.g. "During the project meeting just now, I was trying to share my idea, and you cut me off and spoke over me. When you did that, I wasn't able to contribute, and I had something very important to say to the group. It made me feel devalued and that my opinion wasn't wanted. Next time, I would like to be allowed to finish my point before you begin yours. Would you agree to that?"

"I understand. You're saying when I spoke over you, you felt quite unheard. You do have valuable contributions to make. It's very good of you to let me know this. I need to go away to learn from this how I can support you to share your ideas in future. Your idea is a fair one and I need to consider how to curb my enthusiasm".

REACTING TO
GOOD LISTENING

As the person who delivers the feedback:

- Thank the recipient for listening to you.

- Be willing to listen to them on their reflections about their intentions at a later time, with Level Four and Five.

- Be prepared to develop the conversation.

- React with understanding, be cognisant of their learning experience.

- Feedback can't always just be one-way, it can be a mutual learning experience, so you can effectively work and relate with your colleagues

BEING ABLE TO SAY "NO"

Saying 'no' can be very difficult, and it takes acts of vulnerability, and the safety of your environment, in order to do so.

If you don't feel safe, I ask you to consider what's the alternative to it? I was once advised, when you say 'no' to something, you're normally saying 'yes' to something else, e.g., your health or doing other jobs well. The setting of boundaries might feel late if you've already set expectations about how you work, but it's never too late to say, "I'm going to do things differently from today, which will ensure I'm happier and more productive overall at work".

Sarah Cartwright, a leadership coach, says it can feel unhelpful and confrontational to say 'no', but in order to get comfortable she suggests trying the below:

Say the name of the person making the request. Acknowledge the request they're making, repeating it, and follow it with "and I'm going to say no". Give one reason as to why. And, offer an alternative.

e.g., "Marsha, I understand you want me to stay for that meeting and I'm going to say no because I have another commitment this evening. I'm happy to help you tomorrow."

Note the use of 'and', not 'but'.

It's clear and it's assertive and it sounds less like an excuse that's up for negotiation.

If they push back, you can ask, "what alternatives can we look at to address this situation? Who else have you asked?" and adopt a coaching style, to reiterate you're sticking to your 'no'. If it's someone else's poor planning which has landed the issue at your desk, it is worth also calling that out, "I understand that this wasn't planned/ expectations weren't set differently, so we could have managed this situation better. Like I say, I have capacity to help you with this issue tomorrow".

Of course, none of us want to overdo saying 'no', but if you overcommit to 'yes' you can burn out. People who say 'no' tend to be more productive, are less stressful, and have happier lives.

Unheard Voice

WHEN YOU HAVE TO SAY "YES"

John Amaechi, the renowned psychologist, suggests you can say 'yes' to extra work, if you make clear what you'll be sacrificing in order to do the new work e.g. "I can do this but I will put aside the task you asked me to do earlier". He reiterates, organisations that are asking one person to do the job of three is exploitative, and they don't deserve you. He adds that not everyone has the privilege of simply walking away from a place that's doing that to you.

There is some cultural framing here, because if you have a cultural value which suggests you don't challenge hierarchy (known as High Power Distance) or you tend to be context focussed in your communication style (known as, Indirect) then this would be harder for you, you may need to flex your preferences, and it's up to your leaders to understand you too.

If you are the one trying to say 'no', acknowledge your discomfort and practice with an ally. If on delivering the response you are met with derision, you will have a clear example of the culture you're in, and I refer you back to BIFF and COIN.

LEADERS: ROLE MODELLING RESPONSES TO "NO"

Know your team and if they're trying to say 'no' to you, allow them to do so. Role model that it's ok to do so with other team members who would be more assertive, so they can see this is acceptable behaviour.

Good leaders think deeply about how to get the best out of their teams, this often means sitting with the reality you have to be many things to many people. Being a great practice leader is a completely different set of skills to being a great architect.

There are now up to five generations in the workplace and "Boomers" grew up with an entirely different societal context to the one Gen Zs have inherited. Consequently, the different cultural approaches to communication, work life expectations, and respect, should be anticipated.

Older people sometimes interpret this as "entitlement", but it's not that at all, quite frequently, it's just a different perspective.

FACILITATING OTHERS'
CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

If asked to mediate between others when a challenging situation needs to be faced, this is a particular skill, and only do so if you feel able to facilitate it well, otherwise you could end up in the tricky situation of being part-blamed if things escalate, or for taking sides.

- Bear in mind the frameworks described and encourage the parties to stick to them. Ensure each party has their say without being interrupted.

- Encourage each party to listen to understand and process, not to respond. Allow thoughtful, not intimidating, silence.

- Encourage each party to reflect verbally what they think they've heard.

- Help the parties focus on the outcomes and changes needed to work well in future.

It is also useful to check in regularly with both parties, to assess the need for follow up conversations that might need to be facilitated, and remind people that it's natural to go away and reflect on things, and find oneself feeling defensive again, but to remember to come full circle by turning to what they can learn and do differently to be more effective in their relationships with others.

SUMMARY

Being effective at working and relating with others means we have to work hard at our behaviours, especially when things go wrong.

It can be difficult to raise issues, but practicing with others can help you to do this. Build a network of supporters around you if you feel you are often having to raise issues.

Leaders, be prepared to acknowledge you're not always right; this can be the difference between a positive culture and one that is straining.

Even in implementing some of these strategies you may not always get it right, but it's in trying, apologising, improving, and trying again that matters can get better.

Leaders should role model learning, growth and vulnerability, so everyone can know it's ok to make mistakes, but listening carefully, and as long as we learn from them too.

If you want to be better at working and relating effectively across all kinds of difference, I recommend you develop your cultural intelligence, this is a key behavioural skill which helps. There will be a lot more on how to do this, some wider context on the necessity of inclusive behaviours, and which organisations are doing a great job across the sector with inclusion, in my book, Building Inclusion: A Practical Guide to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Architecture and the Built Environment (pub: Routledge, August 2024).

For now, I hope you find this resource useful and applicable.

KEEP IN TOUCH

If you would like more information on these topics, or to be alerted when the book comes out, Building Inclusion: A Practical Guide to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Architecture and the Built Environment, please follow:

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