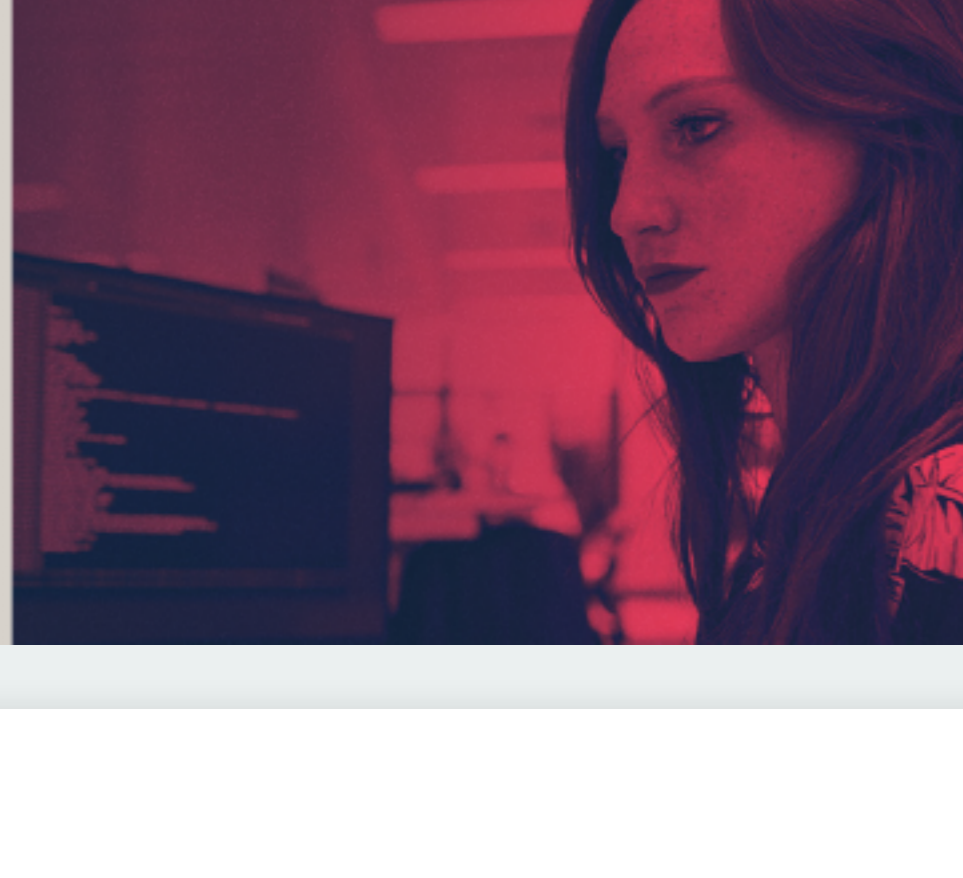


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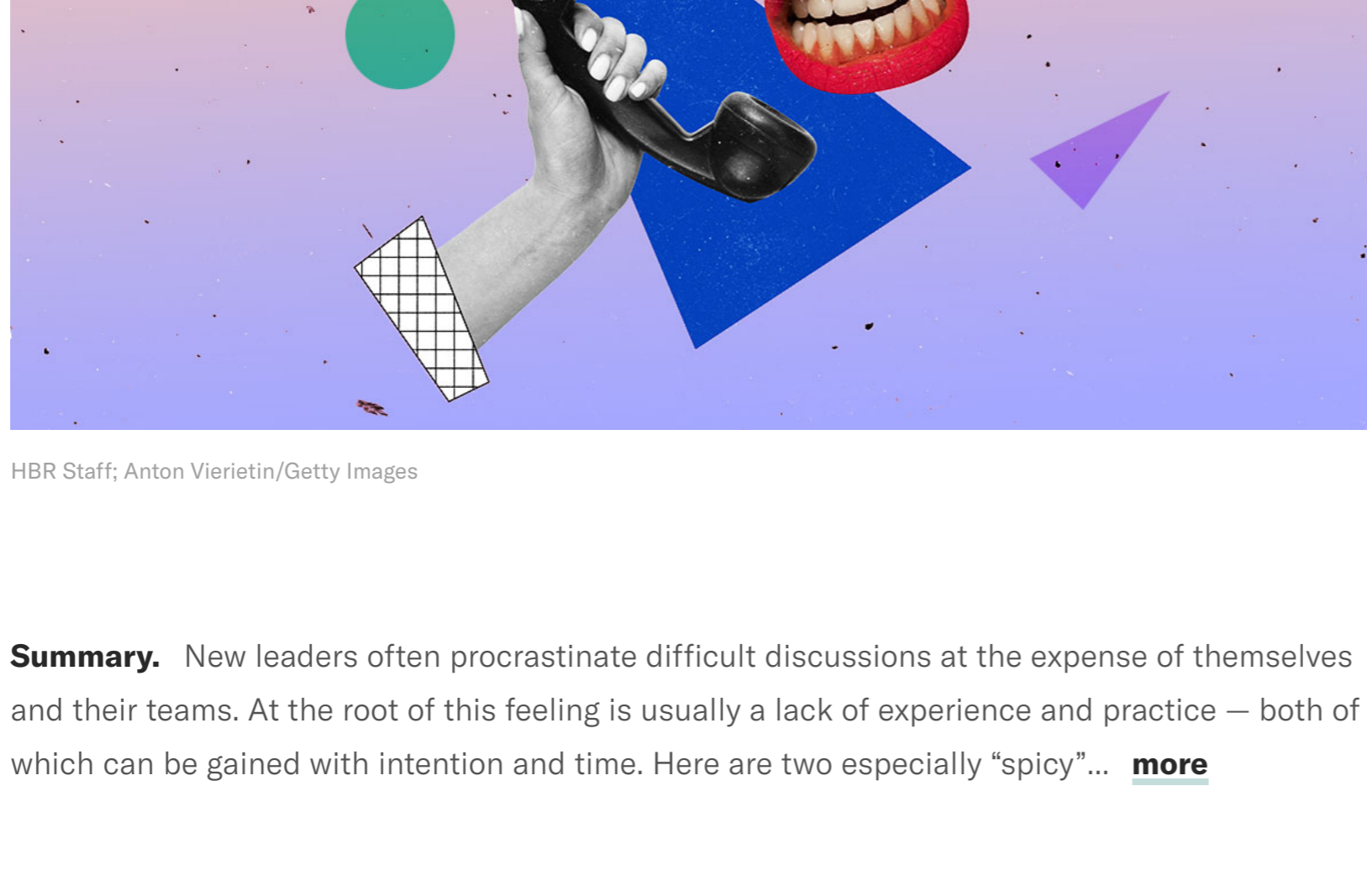


Difficult Conversations

How to Give (and Receive) Critical Feedback

by Patrick Thean

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HBR Staff; Anton Vrijetin/Getty Images

Summary. New leaders often procrastinate difficult discussions at the expense of themselves and their teams. At the root of this feeling is usually a lack of experience and practice — both of which can be gained with intention and time. Here are two especially “spicy”... [more](#)

What’s the biggest challenge new managers face when trying to grow in their roles? Answers could include broad, complex, and difficult-to-qualify problems like figuring out how to fulfill the company’s vision, retain clientele, or lead a productive team. While these goals are worthy of pursuit, there is one overarching skill needed to see them come to fruition: building strong relationships with your direct reports.

As a new manager, your job is no longer just to guide yourself. It’s also to guide others. This means you’ll be having more tough conversations than ever before. To help your direct reports stay productive, positive, and deliver the work you need to reach your collective goals, you’ll need to be a masterful communicator and give them the feedback they need to grow. You must do all of this with positive intent and the objective of building trust. Your relationships will be foundational to your ability to gain influence, motivate others, and succeed in your role.

The problem is that new leaders often procrastinate having difficult conversations at the expense of themselves and their teams. At the root of this feeling is usually a lack of experience and practice — both of which can be gained with intention and time.

Here are two especially “spicy” conversations that all new managers face, and how to navigate them now and in the future.

Conversation #1: Giving Feedback to Direct Reports

The first piece of advice I like to give to new leaders is: Feedback is love. Feedback isn’t some scary monster out to destroy the self-esteem of your team and make them hate you. Instead, I like to think of giving and receiving useful feedback as a bond-builder that creates relationships able to weather the storms a market change, recession, or other organizational road bumps may throw your way. If there is an issue, you want to resolve it before it turns into a bigger problem. (Who knows, it may even get resolved in 10 minutes, but you’ll never know if you ignore it!)

A successful leader recognizes that candor is a worthy skill to hone. It takes courage to show up for your people and be honest about their performance. It takes practice to ensure that critical feedback comes from a place of non-judgement and respect.

How to Have the Conversation

As a new leader, you should be having regular weekly or biweekly one-on-one meetings with each of your team members to check in on their work and offer your support. This is a great time to share feedback (both positive and negative). Don’t wait until your year-end review — give people an opportunity to listen, learn, and grow before then.

You should go into a feedback discussion with a welcoming energy and remain present throughout it, giving your undivided attention to the person in front of you. You might start off by saying something like, “I have some feedback I’d like to share with you about [topic]. Is that alright?”

When delivering critical or negative feedback, take a coaching approach. Instead of telling your direct report, “Hey, you filled this report out all wrong. I need you to fix it,” begin by giving them the benefit of the doubt and then offer them guidance. For example, better language to use would be: “I know this might be an unfamiliar process. Here are some areas where I see room for improvement.” Explain the impact these improvements would have on the project, team, or goal to ensure your direct report understands the “why” behind your feedback. Then, allow them space to respond. You can even prompt them with a question like, “How does that sound to you?” or “What’s your reaction to this?”

By changing your approach and providing focus and understanding, you’re communicating to the employee that you care about their opinions. It’s also possible that there’s another side of the story you aren’t considering. Maybe your direct report needs more resources. Maybe they’ve received insufficient training. Whatever it is, hearing them out will help you provide them with the support they need.

You can end the conversation with an offer to help: “How can I support you better in the future?” If you indicate that you’re thinking deeply about their response, they’ll be more likely to come to you for advice down the line.

Conversation #2: Receiving Feedback from Direct Reports

The wonderful thing about feedback is that it flows upstream as well. Some managers may be tempted to take a “what I say, goes” attitude when it comes to their leadership style, but part of that bond-building comes from being open and welcoming feedback from your direct reports. The more honest and detailed direct reports are about their feedback, the stronger the bond. Open communication is a good indicator of integrity, trust, and a healthy work environment.

By giving direct reports the opportunity to provide feedback, you’re also showing them that their opinions and frustrations are important to you. Being receptive to productive feedback, good or bad, and taking it seriously, is a hallmark of a successful leader.

How to Have the Conversation

First, you need to create a psychologically safe space where your team members feel comfortable expressing thoughts, doubts, and perspectives without the fear of a consequence.

When leaders are close-minded and dictatorial, employees can easily build up resentment and fail to communicate their displeasure. Cultivating a culture of honest communication between yourself and your direct reports is crucial. You can do this by sharing vulnerably when the opportunity arises and openly appreciating team members who do the same.

For example, if a direct report comes to you with a problem, tell them a story about a time when you were in their shoes, facing a similar challenge. Let them know that you recognize it’s not easy to ask for help, and thank them for having the courage to approach you. If relevant, you can also openly tell stories about receiving difficult feedback from team members in the past. Share the ways these discussions ultimately benefited your relationships. This will let your direct reports know that you’re open to feedback and that you don’t always have all the answers.

If people still seem hesitant to approach you, ask [directly ask for feedback](#) and show your appreciation by taking it seriously when received. Even small shifts in language, like starting your one-on-ones with, “Please tell me when I’m wrong. I want to have all the information here to make sure we are both successful in our roles,” is a huge step in the right direction. When a direct report expresses their opinions and frustrations, repeat back what they say to you to be sure you’re on the same page. For instance, you can say, “I’m hearing that you’d like me to send out the agenda before team meetings so that you have more time to prepare. Is that right?”

Finally, work on [implementing the feedback](#) thereafter and follow up with your team member about the steps you’re taking to improve the situation. Doing so will prove that you’ve taken action and are truly open to positive change. Eventually, the bond between you will grow stronger and the conversations will lose a little bit of their bite.

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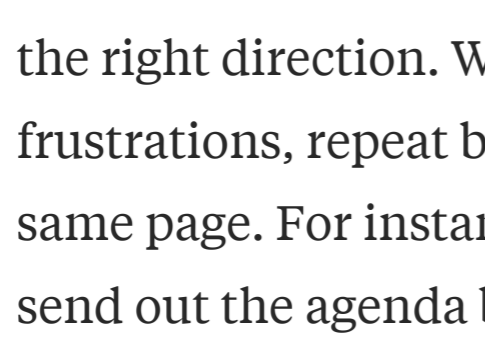
“Spicy” conversations are no one’s cup of tea, and every leader’s privilege. Remind yourself that effective communication is something many people struggle with and it will take practice to master. As a first-time manager, you need to develop this skill to be successful. Once you do, you’ll find it much easier to maintain healthy and open communication with your team, leading to a better work environment, a happy and joyful staff, and a growing and sustainable business.

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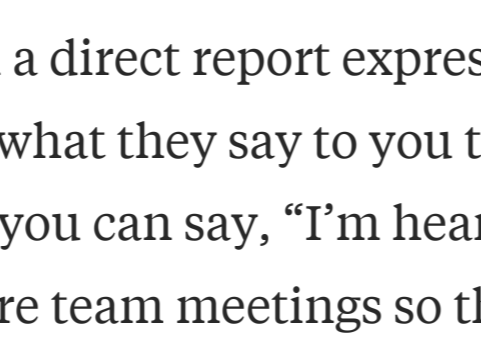
Patrick Thean is an international speaker, USA TODAY, and Wall Street Journal bestselling author, CEO coach and serial entrepreneur. He is the author of *Rhythm: How to Achieve Breakthrough Execution and Accelerate Growth*.

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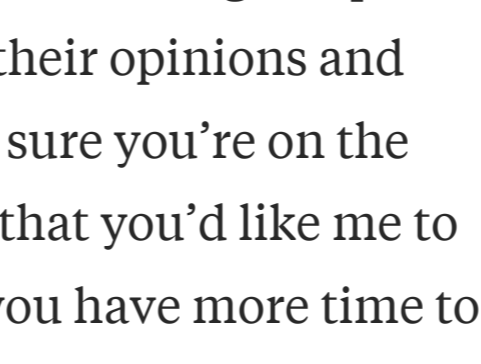
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