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WHAT'S YOUR TOUGH STUFF?

Getting clear on what's tough for you

Leadership can be a lonely place at times. Sure, there are few experiences more enjoyable than leading people towards great outcomes for both themselves and your organisation, but then there's the other side of leadership. There are the times when you won't see eye to eye with others. Conflict is inevitable. That's when the loneliness of leadership truly presents itself. It certainly is a tough gig being responsible for dealing with the tough stuff.

It's worth taking the time to be clear on what the tough stuff is for you: those key work conversations that you have to have and that you would like to be better at. What are they for you?

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CERTAIN:
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what we don't
ACKNOWLEDGE.



Each of us has a unique set of skills, abilities and experiences that we bring to any tough conversation. What's tough for one person may not be tough for another. Having the personal insight into which situations are particularly tough for you will help guide you towards making relevant changes in your behaviour. One thing is certain: we can't change what we don't acknowledge.

Finding out your tough stuff

To be able to prioritise what requires the greatest attention for improving results in your key conversations, rate yourself on the following questions and their corresponding continuums (see figure 1.1, overleaf).

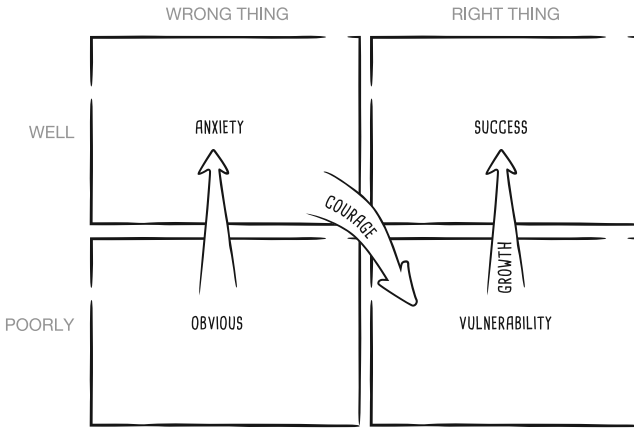
Your answers to these seven questions will give you greater clarity on which tough-stuff situations you have strengths in, and which areas may need some attention. When you identify these areas to work on, you may be tempted to turn away from them because in the past you possibly avoided these situations. We urge you not to slip into old habits but to instead take the courage to change your approach.

Vulnerability is the pathway to growth

As you move through the process of dealing with the tough stuff, at some point you will face a state of vulnerability. It's inevitable, and you should welcome it because it will set you on the road to success. Vulnerability is the readiness to take risks, to change behaviours and to do the 'right' thing, even in the face of uncertainty. Vulnerability is being okay with getting it wrong and making mistakes, particularly in front of your colleagues and co-workers. It's the courage to step up and try something that you believe is the right thing for your team, organisation and customers, even when you're unsure of what the outcome may be.

In a *Harvard Business Review* blog, Thomas J. DeLong, Professor of Management Practices at Harvard Business School, suggested that vulnerability plays a powerful role in behavioural change, both at an individual and at an organisational level. DeLong outlined a matrix that offers four options for performance. We have adapted DeLong's matrix to suit your individual process as you move through changing your behaviour and helping other people to change theirs (see figure 1.2, overleaf).

Figure 1.2: the vulnerability matrix



The vulnerability matrix is a simple quadrant model that provides four options for performance. In the column on the left, you have the opportunity to do the wrong thing well or the wrong thing poorly. And in the right-hand column, you have the choice to do the right thing well or poorly.

You will also notice that the bottom left quadrant is labelled 'Obvious'. Generally speaking, when we do something poorly and it isn't right for us it presents itself quite clearly as something that obviously needs to change.

The top left quadrant (doing something well that's not right for us) represents something that human beings can put up with for a very, very long time. Contrary to Sigmund Freud's main theories, people don't necessarily move away from anxiety: many can put up with it for years. Although we can be resilient in the face of anxiety, the cost can be considerable to our mental and physical states, as well as our relationships.

What's your tough stuff?

As with most quadrant models, most people aspire to be in the top right section, since doing the right thing well is assumed to lead to significant achievement. It makes sense that we would aim to master a skill and deliver it when needed. The challenge is making it to this quadrant. But as DeLong states, 'The only way to get there is through the bottom right quadrant. The only way you can do something well is to do something poorly first. There's no other way'.

We don't entirely agree with DeLong's absolute belief that the only way to reach the top right quadrant is through doing right things poorly (bottom right quadrant), as there are rare cases of naturals who don't have to achieve growth through failure. Some people just get it. But they're the minority, and the majority of us generally pay a toll for mastery through having to do the right thing poorly at least a few times.

Vulnerability is hard; doing things poorly is a risk. The easiest thing to do is continue doing the same thing you have always done and not allow yourself to be vulnerable. The problem with doing what you have always done is that you'll only achieve what you've always achieved. It's a much tougher option to actually change what you're doing: to try something new, such as a new direction, a new strategy, new technology, a new mindset or attitude, or even to have team meetings in a different location (sometimes the small changes can make a big difference). To change and know that, at first, things will feel weird and uncomfortable and that you'll feel a little vulnerable, is difficult. But it's the choice to move away from doing the wrong things well and towards doing the right things poorly that leads to the greatest reward.

Embracing vulnerability:

**WALKING AWAY
FROM THINGS**

you know well

**IS THE SIMPLEST
DEFINITION
of COURAGE.**



What's your tough stuff?

Unfortunately, most managers, supervisors and leaders in our organisations are reluctant to try something new for fear they will look silly, hesitant or even awkward. So a defensive mindset kicks in. They regress. And the result? They stick with what they know at the expense of taking risks, stretching themselves and being innovative. Our research shows that few people who focus on achievement, goals and outcomes (particularly short-term wins) would willingly entertain the idea of doing the right thing poorly. But to do so is to embrace vulnerability.

Your level of anxiety in embracing change is important to acknowledge, but you need to move your thinking towards embracing vulnerability rather than running away from it. Without being brave enough to take a risk, you won't get to this lower right quadrant. The reward is progressing to the upper right quadrant, to success and growth. That's where we play the game we really want to play—and play it well.

Moving away from doing the wrong thing well to doing the right thing poorly takes a huge amount of courage. In advance, congratulations for taking this significant step.

Conclusion

Being able to deal with the tough stuff starts with getting clear on what the tough stuff is for you personally. Knowing which conversations you may be avoiding at times but would like to be better at will bring a greater awareness to what you can change in these situations. Once you have some clarity about which key conversations you find tough, it's important to start being comfortable with being vulnerable. Taking the courageous step to changing your behaviours will be the pathway to growth and success.

Darren's insights

Apathy. That's my tough stuff. I don't mind anger, tears or other heightened emotions—I actually enjoy the energy that's present in

those circumstances. But a noncommittal attitude, lack of ownership or inaction drives me crazy.

It would be easy for me just to avoid dealing with apathy. I can easily surround myself with people who have energy and passion. Yet, I have found that through dealing with my own tough stuff I have become good at dealing with apathy. In fact, colleagues say the way I deal with apathetic behaviour is a great strength. No-one is immune to the tough stuff, but we can all achieve successful outcomes by building our skills.

Alison's insights

For me the tough conversations are those that often do not have a clear right or wrong answer. Having a greater awareness about the conversations that I naturally avoid has helped me make a courageous choice to tackle them. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates famously said 'know thyself', and in my personal and professional experience, I find the more individuals know themselves, the greater the chance for personal growth and change. It all starts here: get clear and specific on what's tough for you and make the courageous choice to tackle it.

Sean's insights

What riles me is when people say 'I can't'—a non-possibility mindset. I can handle 'I don't want to', but when people say 'I can't' it gets under my skin, probably because it seems to go against everything I stand for. I believe in people's potential, I believe there is more in a person than you can see in any given moment, and I believe we can always get better.

Similar to Darren, my life might be easier if I simply avoided the 'I can't-ers' and chose to align myself with only the positive, possibility thinkers, but I haven't. I have gone the other way and become a psychologist—a profession where I deal with the non-possibility mindset all the time.

I have survived by tackling my own tough stuff head-on, learning the skills of acceptance and empathy, and applying the tools in this book to help make a difference with those tough conversations I struggle with most. By confronting my tough stuff, I have found that I get to live within my purpose: there is nothing better for me than helping a person break through a limiting belief and transform from 'I can't' to 'I can'.

Chapter summary

- Identify the specific key conversations that you find tough. This will help you work out which areas need most attention.
 - You will have to have key conversations—there's no way around it. Becoming skilled and confident at these conversations will see you succeed for years to come.
 - Vulnerability means taking risks without knowing the outcome. It means being okay with making mistakes. Being equipped to deal with the tough stuff means being vulnerable at times.
 - Moving away from doing the wrong thing well to doing the right thing poorly takes courage, and the rewards of this courageous step are success and growth.
 - Remember that there are no perfect managers or leaders—we all make mistakes.
 - Avoid procrastination, aim for perfection and be okay with 'perfectly good enough'.
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