

Feeling you need to have that conversation?...Help is here

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Photo: Allie Lehman

The other day I asked a scientist from a research company about what was important to him in employing new people. Unhesitatingly he replied:

“More and more, I’m finding that the way we communicate with all sorts of people is really important. This is actually what we’re looking for – people who can communicate with each other so they can collaborate and also with the ability to work with our diverse clients to ensure their needs are met. So they need to be good listeners first. We can get ten people with the knowledge background we need, but we need communicators ...”

We’re hearing this everywhere. So what does this mean for our learning places? For learners in the classroom and for teachers and leaders needing to provide good role models? What does it mean for the raft of others working in schools — community workers, advisors and facilitators?

In an era where interpersonal communication is the lifeblood of people working together to think, create, and build new solutions to old problems, it certainly seems worth paying a little extra attention to.

But we know that changing the way we communicate is hard. It's a bit like trying to change the way we walk. While you're concentrating and thinking about it – you can manage to do it differently – but lose focus, or have something trigger your automatic response – and wham – you're right back in that old mode again.

This doesn't happen because we're not trying hard enough – it's because our emotions trump facts. (You know that statistically air travel is way safer than driving your car but you can still be afraid of flying – and yet you probably think nothing of driving on the motorway every day). Neuroscientists say this is because our brains are 'wired' this way with many connections running from the emotional limbic system to the language and thinking area of the neocortex.

Despite all this, we can learn new ways of operating – but it needs to be quite intentional and it takes some effort. The actual language we use is one of the most powerful levers we have for change. It's a kind of trip switch that affords us a different view of a situation. Different language gives us a different 'picture' of something in our mind's eye.

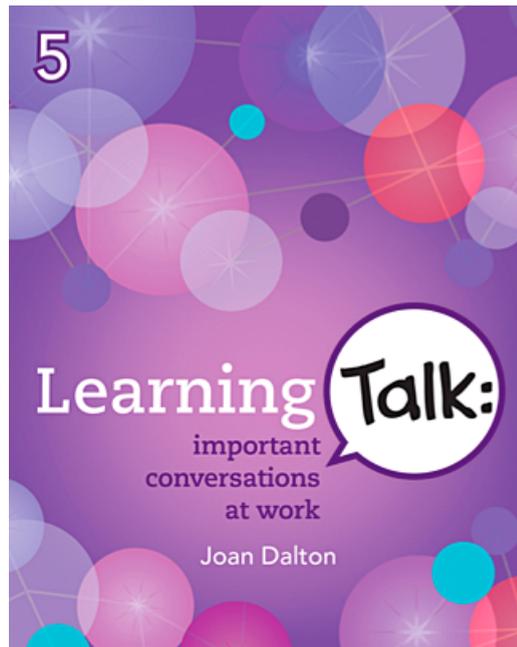
It's the power of language that is at the heart of 'Important Conversations at Work', Joan Dalton's fifth book in the Learning Talk series. This book is a treasure trove of suggestions all aimed at helping us improve our conversational expertise. With the sure-footed approach we're accustomed to in Dalton's approach, she takes us across the yawning stressful chasm of the 'difficult conversation' and sets us down safely on the other side by changing our perspective on words.

- The difficult conversation becomes the important conversation
- Hard, fierce and tough translate into significant

Her most important advice comes early in the book – “Start with yourself” she advises, “your ability to understand, relate and interact effectively with others depends on your own self-awareness and the work you actively do on yourself. The mind frames and mental maps you bring to a conversation significantly influence how you approach conflict, your willingness to challenge thinking, and the results you achieve.” (Dalton, 2016, p.6)

Self-awareness enables each one of us to be agile learners and leaders, able to modify our own thinking. Our conversations are important — let's do them well.

Inspiration for this post came from Joan Dalton's latest book:



Dalton, J. (2016) Learning Talk: Important conversations at work, Hands-on Educational Consultancy, Victoria.

You can obtain a copy from:

www.leadingadultlearners.com

Or order directly from Joan Dalton at

handsed@ozemail.com.au



Liz Stevenson

[Liz Stevenson](#) supports Kāhui Ako/Communities of Learning as an Expert Partner. Previously co-leading the Learning with Digital Technologies project, Liz has also developed an online coaching room for sportspeople with AUT and, at the University of Waikato, designed an online mentoring programme for secondary school art students and professional artists. Recently, as a result of her ongoing research into Learning Circles, Liz developed the peer learning process, Story Hui – a method now being used by [teachers](#) to describe learners' achievement in play-based or project-based learning, and by students to talk about their learning strengths and capabilities.