

# DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: SHAPING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Jennifer Abrams is an author and speaker who helps people find strategies for clear and kind communication.

**A**re you putting off a difficult discussion that needs to be had? *Having Hard Conversations* is a book that encourages clear and thoughtful communication skills.

Clear and focused communication is key to tackling difficult interpersonal situations, believes Jennifer Abrams, author of the book *Having Hard Conversations*, which was published in the United States in 2009. She also published a book about multigenerational communication titled *The Multigenerational Workplace* in 2014.

Since writing *Having Hard Conversations*, Abrams has been in demand as a speaker in the education sector. She will spend 10 days in New Zealand at the end of August and early September to run workshops around the country.

## PREPARATION AND EMPATHY

*Having Hard Conversations* describes a simple framework of preparation for tackling difficult issues with another person – whether they be a colleague, client, teacher or student. The beauty of the technique is that it can be equally applied to close relationships: a family member, a friend, or partner.

Using reflective questions and other simple protocol, this framework enables people to address issues while preserving important relationships.

Massey University facilitator Colleen Douglas runs workshops that empower people to tackle hard conversations. She says that while everyone can benefit from improved communication skills, teachers in particular are regularly faced with challenging interpersonal situations.

“Strategies for dealing with difficult conversations is an area of interest to most educators, as seen by the popularity of these sessions,” she says.

Douglas believes the approach is especially appreciated in the education sector because it is common sense, simple and highly respectful to both parties.

What exactly is a ‘hard’ conversation?

“By this we mean a particular talk you dread having; something you worry about,” says Douglas.

She describes Abrams’ approach as having a strong focus on preparation.



“The first part of the ‘hard conversations’ plan is preparation. It’s about truly looking at the situation from another person’s perspective. Try to uncover exactly what the key issue is, and then what that person can expect from you to help resolve the issue.”

The next part of the process is also empathy-based. “Think about what you need to be able to do, in order to support these expectations, and how you can help the situation.”

In her book, Abrams outlines some key questions to prepare for the upcoming conversation, and advocates making notes prior to talking.

“Then it’s about planning the conversation. Write down what you want the outcome to be, and what you are going to say, obviously not to hold it during the talk, but just to prepare,” says Colleen. “It’s about feeling confident, and properly organising your thoughts beforehand.”

Another very simple – but often overlooked – element to this approach is the honing in on the true kernel of an issue, and committing to resolution of this issue together.

“It’s a collaborative approach to working through problems. You’re not just having a go at someone, it’s about being constructive and sharing a problem.”

In an education context, this applies to teachers, students and staff at a school.

“The method can be used in any situation or context: professional conversations among teachers, RTLB clusters, and working with colleagues, clients, kids, parents. And of course it’s very useful in your own private life as well.

“If you’re going to have a hard conversation, as someone who is initiating it, it helps to be well prepared and have thought it through thoroughly. Because then you have confidence to take it in whatever direction it happens to go. I like it because it’s a respectful, and a collaborative approach. And it resonates with people because it’s so simple.”

Jennifer Abrams is arriving in New Zealand at the end of August. The first workshop is happening at Albany on 27 August. ★

**By Melissa Wastney**

## ARE YOU PUTTING OFF THAT HARD CONVERSATION? IS IT TOO HARD?

Jennifer Abrams, author of “*Having Hard Conversations*” is touring New Zealand from Auckland to Dunedin, 27 August to 5 September 2015. Join her to gain the skills and confidence to have that difficult conversation.

**Cost:** \$350.00 +GST per person - includes morning tea, light lunch and resources.

Places are limited - there are only a few places left at each venue. Don’t miss out - register today! For more information and to register, go to: <http://ced.massey.ac.nz>

**Final registrations close 4.00 pm Wednesday 12 August 2015**

