

FAST Pathways Example Successes – Challenging Conversations

An experienced journalist, Becky was confident and outgoing. Conversations with strangers and working to tight deadlines were both second nature, until she went freelance. Then everything changed. Because now she wasn't representing a big organisation, just a cog in the wheel. She had to talk about herself and her business - and even when she was talking to potential clients who she knew she could do great things for, she hated it.



She recognised how much it was holding her back, but would still find anything and everything to do instead. Her desk was never tidier than on days when she'd phone calls to make! As soon as she thought about picking up the phone, her confidence would evaporate, and the more she tried to talk herself round, the worse it got.

The inner argument between the voice of reason, setting out what she needed to say and why it was important, and the other one, telling her she'd sound stupid, that they'd resent the interruption (even if it was someone who'd asked her to call them), and she'd only fluff it anyway, so why bother.... Those two voices had quite a fight going on between them.

Becky spent less than an hour experimenting with a few FAST Pathways techniques, and adapting the details to the perfect fit for her: She neutralised the unhelpful mind-pictures of the other person's possible reactions, and adjusted the mind voices, making the critical one really quiet and giving the helpful one a tone of assured authority. Then she imagined a few of the conversations she'd been putting off, going just the way she wanted them to.

That small time she invested in making those changes paid itself back in days, as the procrastination evaporated. Now she's no problem at all picking up the phone, and as an added bonus, she's found herself much more comfortable networking face to face too.

Soon after working with Becky, I'd the opportunity to share the same skills more widely. I was working with one of the Banks on PPI – the industry had emerged out of nowhere, and a lot of our staff had no previous call centre experience. They had to phone customers seeking more information which might help the Bank to defend the customer's claim, so people generally weren't too keen to talk to them. So quite a few of our staff quickly got to putting off those phone calls, impacting productivity. Based on Becky's experience, I rolled out the same skills in some informal coaching sessions, with similar results. Productivity went up and the quality of the conversations themselves improved, contributing to the £56Million saving which my team delivered over the next few months.

Face-to-Face Meetings

When I first worked with her, Louise had recently started her own business teaching Zumba. As she talked about what she does, the passion shone from her – it was clear that she had a great track record and was committed to getting lasting results for her clients, but she was struggling action any of her plans for growing her business.

One of the things she really wanted to do was build partnerships with other local businesses – she knew it would be mutually beneficial, and it was a simple ask; but every time she thought of having the conversation, she got so stressed out that she found a way to put it off. Again..... Like Becky, she'd find anything and everything to do instead, none of which was actually productive.

I asked her to imagine going into one of those businesses, and making her suggestion to the owner, imagining them standing in front of her while she played through the conversation in her mind. She imagined what she'd say, noticing what she was feeling, and noticing the reaction and response of the other person.

Then she imagined stepping out of herself and into the other person, to experience the conversation from their perspective. By looking through their eyes, she immediately realised that she wasn't coming across at all the way she wanted – so she brought that experience back, stepping out of the person and back into herself. She repeated this whole process a couple of times until she'd designed what she was going to say, and how, to be just right.

Then she imagined stepping into the position of a third person, a neutral observer; to witness the conversation from there, and made a few further adjustments. It's an odd technique, because the whole thing's going on in the one person's imagination – but it's amazing what insights looking at it from those different perspectives can bring. The next day, she had the conversation for real, and got exactly the outcome she'd hoped for.

Months of anxiety and procrastination overcome in minutes. Since then, her business has continued from strength to strength. It's a technique I've used in many of the businesses I work with, to overcome silo thinking or entrenched conflict which have been getting in the way of moving the business forwards. It helps to establish common ground, and almost every time, the resulting conversations go completely smoothly.





Effective Feedback Conversations

Carla had lovingly grown her business over nearly 20 years, and employed a small, close-knit team, many of whom were friends as well as employees. One of her team, Sarah, had been a friend for a few years before she'd started working for her. Sarah was making errors, which so far had been picked up and resolved by others, but if they'd gone unnoticed, they could have had quite nasty outcomes. Carla had talked with her several times about what was happening and how to prevent it, but so far nothing had changed. It was coming to a head.

Carla was quite clear about her priorities – if it came to it, her clients were more important than the friendship. She was quite willing to sack Sarah if needed, but saw it as a last resort because of her other valuable skills and the knock-on effects on the rest of the team. So she wanted to handle it in a way that neither had to be sacrificed. We talked through why she felt her previous conversations with Sarah hadn't worked. Based on her observations and a little feedback from others, she thought that Sarah wasn't really listening because in a work context, she was scared of her. Which wasn't at all how she wanted to be coming across. Firm, but not scary....

So we used the different perspectives technique. Carla was already clear in her mind what she wanted to say to Sarah – she'd been mulling it over for weeks and hadn't quite plucked up the courage to go for it, knowing how significant the fall-out could be. She imagined Sarah in front of her, hearing what she had to say. Then in her imagination, she stepped out of herself, and into Sarah. She immediately pulled back, saying 'Crikey, I'm not surprised she's scared of me! That's awful!' I'm not sure what prompted that reaction, but it was very strong!

Then like Louise, Carla alternated between the two positions, imaging the conversation from both her own and Sarah's perspective. The next morning, they had a very constructive discussion, agreeing what needed to change, what support Sarah needed, and how they'd track it and keep the conversation going. The errors stopped, and the friendship remained as strong as ever – so Carla had both retained and energised a key member of her team.

I also supported effective feedback conversations during the Bank PPI project. Another side-effect of the industry growing from nowhere is that many of our team leaders had no previous leadership experience – the department grew so rapidly (from zero to over 650 people in under 4 months) that it wasn't uncommon for someone to go home on a Friday evening as a team member, and come back on the Monday as its leader. With the legacy of friendly peer relationships, many new leaders were putting off potentially challenging feedback conversations, which meant that pockets of bad behaviours and practices were spreading, impacting productivity.

I ran a series of 90 minute Confident Feedback workshops, asking our team leaders to score before and after how comfortable they felt to initiate a challenging conversation – the average confidence levels doubled, and the frequency and quality of feedback conversations improved. It was another contributor to the £56Million productivity increase which we delivered over the next few months.